



Photo by Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot

# The art of the matter

**A University of Regina research project is taking art-based workshops on the road and researchers are discovering amazing examples of creativity and courage among Aboriginal youth. The Acting Out project is building confidence and self-esteem – and it's even saving lives.**

**By Judy Bird BA'93, BJ'97**

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**F**or the past 10 years, researchers with the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre (IPHRC) at the University of Regina have been running a project that uses the arts to impact the well-being and save the lives of First Nations youth.

Acting Out – But in a Good Way brings arts-based practices to Indigenous youth attending schools in the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC), the community partner for the project. Researchers and assistants conduct workshops using theatre games, visual arts, music, creative writing and other art forms to promote leadership, holistic health, wellness and suicide prevention with Indigenous youth.

The project's roots go back to using theatre to promote anti-bullying and anti-racism in the Regina public school system. Those workshops were facilitated by former professor Warren Linds (now at Concordia University) and First Nations University of Canada (FNU) professor Linda Goulet MEd'85, PhD'05 among others.

"Kids would tell stories of their experiences with racism by creating images of what happened to them. This work was very

successful in helping the kids recognize and deal with racism in a more positive way that didn't escalate the situation so it endangered them in some way," says Goulet. "We also noticed how youth came out of those retreats just on a high. They just felt so good about themselves and the connections they made with other students," she adds.

Goulet and Linds learned of an opportunity for research funding and collaborated with Jo-Ann Episkenew BA'91, BAHC'92, MA'94, a faculty member at FNU and the director of IPHRC since 2010. A community partner was found with FHQTC through Karen Schmidt, who worked for the tribal council at the time.

The researchers conducted two to three day workshops at First Nation schools on Carry the Kettle, Little Black Bear, Muscowpetung, Nekaneet, Okanese, Pasqua, Peepeekisis, Piapot, Standing Buffalo, Star Blanket and Wood Mountain First Nations. Initially the project was to develop Aboriginal youth leaders through theatre games.

"We used the arts as a means of data collection but we also discovered that participation improved youth well-being," says Episkenew. "We had kids with big teary eyes saying, 'This is the best week of my life,' parents saying, 'What have you done to my son? He's talking in class now; he was always too shy and withdrawn', and teachers seeing a difference in behaviour."

"We had to look at what was there in the arts that supported that sense of well-being. These games were about theatre but they were also about trust-building and collaboration; some were for focusing, some were energizers. Indigenous research is relational. The whole foundation is building relationships, and Indigenous cultures are about making relatives," Episkenew says.

Once, a puppeteer from England joined the workshop and suggested that the team utilize the collective skills in the room to offer the students a variety of activities. They made puppets, did theatre, created a play, created visual art collages, did creative writing, and wrote a song and performed it. "They were over the moon," says Episkenew. "Everyone had a place and a form to tell their story that just resonated with them, and we went 'Aha!'"

The exercise brought more information than what could have been obtained through interviews. "When we sit and interview youth, we get a bit. When they express themselves and their story through art, we get a lot. There's a sense of pride in their creation and stretching their limits, but that objective art is a mediator that gives them something to talk about," adds Episkenew.

Erin Goodpipe was a Grade 9 student attending Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation School when she took part in a week of workshops. "It was fantastic," she says. "It tends to break down a lot of barriers that you don't actually realize are there."

Goodpipe excelled at academics, and her fellow students looked to her to lead them in the theatre games. One game, Follow the Leader, surprised her. "I was put on the spot and I couldn't do it. I realized that leadership isn't exactly what I thought it was. Ever since then, my whole perception of facilitation and being a leader has changed because of that one exercise."

Now a student at the University of Regina in the Faculty of Arts and a member of the IPHRC research team, Goodpipe recognizes how the experience from the theatre games continues to affect her. "The workshops impacted my choices for areas of study and deeply affected me."

The project hasn't been without its challenges and changes. Funds were scarce, and Episkenew, Goulet and Linds were conducting the workshops on top of their regular duties. In 2009, they were awarded an operating grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to study healthy decision-



**Opposite page: Researchers and youth gather at last summer's arts-based tipi camp. Above: At the time of this 2010 photo, Jo-Ann Episkenew (right) had recently been named director of the Indigenous People's Health Research Centre. She is shown here with First Nations University of Canada faculty member Linda Goulet.**

making. In 2013, they were awarded a second CIHR operating grant to focus the project on suicide prevention. Additional grants allowed them to hire more research staff and secure funding for the project through 2017. The stability has led to the art activities being expanded with the focus now on wellness and suicide prevention.

Leaders in FHQTC supported the program but were concerned about the academic impact of taking students out of class to attend the workshops. Research associate David Benjoe BA'04, BEAD'06 spent one summer reviewing curricula to relate Acting Out workshops to school studies. "I related it to what the chiefs and leaders needed to see. I think the biggest sell was on math and sciences," says Benjoe, who is also a visual arts and native studies teacher.

"Some people don't relate the math to the arts, but for me it's automatic. When I think of gradation of colour, different uses of things, the way physics works with colour pigment and objects reflecting light. This is something people don't take into consideration, and I think it has a First Nations value too. It's a holistic thought; it's just within us," explains Benjoe.

"We do research to offer youth a different view of the world. Arts can be leading into the connection to what First Nations youth find valuable," he says.

A fundamental concept of the project is to let the students guide the researchers in the activities. Community research associate Dustin Brass BEAD'o8 and research assistant Ben Ironstand can see the benefits of this approach in the weekly cultural arts workshops they conduct on Carry the Kettle First Nation with students in grades 10 through 12.

"They're excited to have us out there and are receptive to our ideas. They want to learn and listen alongside us and they've been very open to sharing and just being themselves," says Brass.

"We are showing them different mediums of expression, talking to them and teaching them to convey story through those art pieces. Through those art pieces and through story, we find that we are looking at how we can reduce the risk of suicide by promoting that well-being," he adds.

The project activities are also impacting the researchers beyond seeing the benefits it has for the students.

"The first word that comes to mind is direction. It helped me realize how big the world is and it made me see a part of it that I never knew existed and where I'd like to go," says Ironstand, who is also a University of Regina student in the Arts Education program.

"One thing I say about working with youth is the ripple effect of where it ends and where it reverberates out to. Yes, these are the ones in front of us, but what about the other people attached to that person, and how does that learning and knowledge and sharing translate over to the people in their life?" says Brass.

From a community perspective, both the partnership between FHQTC and IPHRC and the project itself are building strength.

"It's been a great partnership through the years. It's been a really positive experience every time," says Karen Schmidt. Though she retired last fall, she remains a community liaison with the project.

With individual and community impacts as proof positive, the research project has the potential to effect change on a larger scale.

"We want to start showing that the arts are not just fluff. They're the last thing funded, the first thing let go. If we can find evidence to show that they actually have a benefit, then I think we can make a pretty good recommendation to policy makers about this. Arts programming isn't expensive and it's effective," says Episkewew.



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**Acting Out is a research project that offers workshops that use theatre and other arts-based practices to Indigenous youth in the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council area. The workshops use theatre games to examine the choices that affect health and wellness. The games provide youth with an opportunity to practice leadership and to test different behaviours and develop self-esteem.**

"Education for Aboriginal people should not just focus on skills and training. Residential schools were about skills and training with a goal of creating an underclass of farm labourers and domestic servants. Now it's oil sands workers. What kind of society will we have if we don't have artists? The residential school system really did suppress the imagination. We need a community with a vibrant imagination if we want to address all of these historical issues that are still affecting people," she adds.

Find out more about the project by visiting: [actingout.iphrc.ca](http://actingout.iphrc.ca) **D**

*Judy Bird is a naturally curious freelance writer in Regina with degrees in arts and journalism from the University of Regina. Her combined love for writing and learning have enabled her to share stories and build bridges of understanding, particularly with topics about First Nations and Métis health and culture.*



Photo by Jeanelle Mandes

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Left: Research associate Erin Goodpipe. Centre: David Benjoe, IPHRC research associate. Right: Dustin Brass, research associate.