

Transcript of Interview with Denise McCuaig

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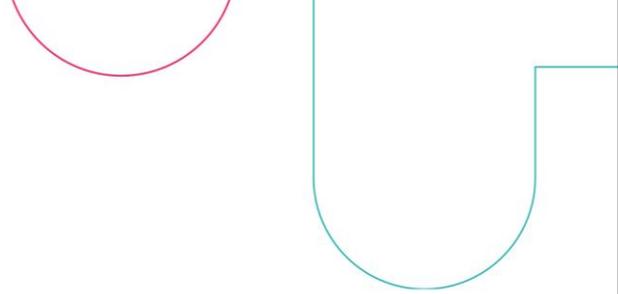
Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Denise McCuaig, and I'm a Métis Elder residing in Kamloops, British Columbia, in the unceded territory of the Secwepemcúlecw. I joined the Promoting Life Together Collaborative as a coach two years ago. And when I was first contacted, it was described to me that I would be a coach for one or two teams somewhere in northern Canada that were looking at doing a suicide prevention project with youth, and that they were partnering with non-Indigenous partners, mostly health authorities, and that I would be available by phone to coach and mentor for about an hour every two weeks. That was the original description that I received, but it very quickly became much more than that. So, as a coach and a mentor, I think one of the things that I brought to the table was not only my understanding and knowledge as an Indigenous woman, but was the fact that I had worked within the health care system in Canada as a director of Aboriginal health. And so I brought forward sort of a double-edged sword, if you will, in that I had a moccasin in both worlds: my ancestry and my lived experience as a Métis and my lived experience of working in the mainstream health care system, attempting to get them to respond in a more appropriate way to the needs of Indigenous patients.

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So the very first experience I think I had with CFHI at the time, the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement, looking at entering into this space was that we, as Indigenous participants and partners, provided them feedback that suicide prevention was not terminology that we wanted to use, that we wanted it to be strengths-based, positive-focused, and that really, prevention is about promoting life. And they received that really well and embraced it.

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In addition to that, they took us as coaches, who were originally designed to be supporting the projects across Turtle Island, and they embedded us into their guidance group. So already sitting at the guidance table were their Indigenous partners, the First Peoples Wellness Circle, the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and the Aboriginal Advisory Committee to the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention, or what we call CASP. And then we joined as coaches. And so that was the first time that I think I saw that model where the front-line work was directly linked into the guiding body. And it became so much more rich for that, I think, because we were able to share the experiences on the front line in real time. And then the guidance group members were able to dialogue about the impact of that and give feedback that would directly support the challenges or further build on the strengths that were happening at a community level. So it was almost like you were cutting out the risk of misinterpretation by a middleman. You were creating an environment where things could happen in real time. And I



think that that speaks very much to an Indigenous way of knowing and doing. You know, we don't often differentiate between the individual, the family and the community. We see them as all-encompassing, as being all parts of those things. And so, I think that that's the way it resonated at the guidance group level.

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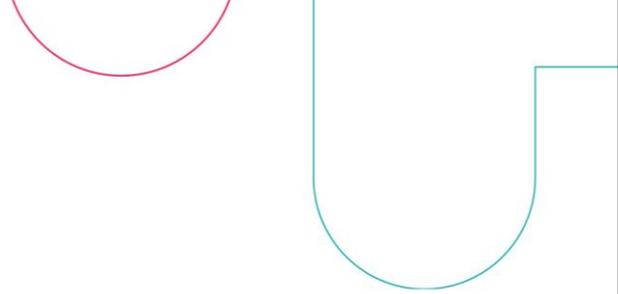
I also think that quite often when we focus on ceremony, people only think about things like smudging and prayer, and we certainly did that at every gathering or meeting that we had, including teleconferences. But for me, ceremony is much more than that. It's about being relational, it's about being vulnerable. It's about breaking bread and feasting together. And so we also had a mainstream organization, CFHI, who was willing to invest in those opportunities to eat together, to have sharing circles where we could talk about our ancestries, our children, our grandchildren, our values and things that were important to us in our daily lives. And it required our non-Indigenous participants who maybe don't normally come to a meeting at work and engage in that kind of conversation, it required them to be vulnerable and to work through their fear and create a sense of trust with us that they could share about their personal well-being and about their personal values and ideas at our table with some safety. And so as coaches and mentors, we took that same principle to the community level.

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Where I think it worked really well from a coaching perspective is that we as coaches were able to meet with non-Indigenous staff, often from health authorities, and they could practice with us doing a land acknowledgement. Or they could ask questions about how to offer an Elder in the community tobacco, or about what was expected of them when they arrived in the community to dialogue with the Indigenous people who lived there. And I hadn't seen that model happen before, where non-Indigenous health care providers could have the opportunity to get coaching and mentoring, to practice these new ways of communicating and these new ways of engaging with their Indigenous partners. So I think it worked really beautifully, and it allowed them to build their capacity and to grow. And so I think as a coach, I also took the time to often challenge them to think about their unconscious bias, to think about their perception of First Nations and Métis and Inuit people based on where they learned their information, and to break down some of those barriers that existed, because a lot of information received as Canadians is coming from the media, and it's often slanted or skewed in one way or another. And so this was a chance for them to actually have discussion with us as coaches about what our true lived experience was, and how we felt history would potentially impact the ongoing communications or the goals that they were trying to reach.

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So it was a really beautiful model that was created, and it really required, I think, our non-Indigenous partners to sit in places of discomfort and to walk through the fear with us



about— and not fear to get to know the communities they were working with, but really that fear that they would say something wrong, that they might offend us, that they might not pronounce something right. And I think when you have those unspoken fears, they can become barriers to moving agendas forward. And so we saw some incredibly beautiful growth in the partnerships that were created, not just with us as a guidance group of coaches with the Canadian Foundation for Health Improvement, but some incredible relationships and growth between health authorities and the Indigenous communities who were looking to engage in promoting life activity.

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The biggest teaching from this collaborative is that individuals who've participated have had to put their whole selves into the process. That you can't just wear your social worker hat or your community member hat and expect to build relationship. And so the biggest journey, I think, for the collaborative participants has been the one from head to heart and recognizing that they need to make that journey and bring it to the table. I think if I was to approach the work differently, I would spend a little bit more time with the non-Indigenous people at the table, talking to them about what to expect when they come into the community, to have those two ears for listening and one mouth for speaking, to not jump to solution, but to really allow that organic process of the community coming together to define their own solutions. I think when you look to the future, it's important to maintain the spirit of the work. And in doing that, you have your sacred bundle. You have your eagle feather. And to bring it out from time to time to reflect on the spirit that went into the creation of those items and the spirit that they represent as you're moving forward. Sustainable work is going to be about sustaining relationship. Projects will come and go. But the relationships will be what can make for a brighter future.