

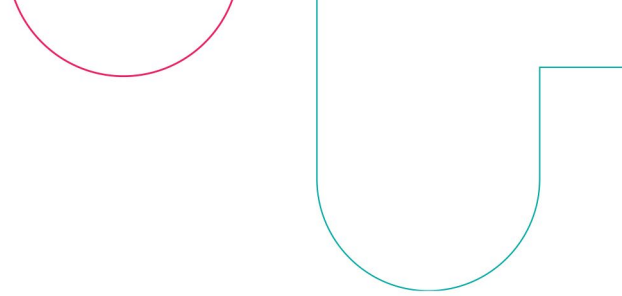
Transcript of Interview with Ed Connors (Part 2)

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[Greeting in traditional language]. Greetings. Ed Connors, [greeting in traditional language]. I am Mohawk/Irish ancestry, come from Kahnawá:ke, Mohawk territory. I am of Irish ancestry on my father's side from the Town of Mount Royal, which is above Montréal, and my mother's side from Kahnawá:ke-, which is across the St. Lawrence from Montréal. And so I'm a psychologist by academic training. I've worked with our Indigenous communities across Canada for over 40 years now, both on and off reserve from coast to coast to coast to border. And in that travels, in my work across the country over the years, I've worked with our Elders, medicine people, healers and teachers. And so I've had an ongoing education that's continued from my graduate degree that has continued to this day, and that ongoing education has centred on health, healing and wellness within our Indigenous communities. And more specifically, because of those years of work that I've done, it's been actually focused on suicide prevention. For many of you, you might know that the rates of suicide, or what we actually now refer to as unnatural early death, is actually much higher than any of the populations, actually, internationally. And when we look specifically at Canada or Turtle Island, those numbers in certain communities are extremely high.

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In other communities, Indigenous communities, they can be extremely low. And so we have quite a range. But we have by and large a much larger loss of life, especially amongst our young people. And so, much of my work has focused on the area of suicide prevention. I've worked over those years for almost, well, for over 25 years, I worked with the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention on their board as a board member. I have also been a member of the First Peoples Wellness Circle for well over 25 years. And actually, it was previously referred to as the Native Mental Health Association of Canada before we rebranded. And then I've also worked with the First Peoples Wellness Circle, who's a sister organization to our First Peoples Wellness Circle, and then with many other national as well as regional organizations. My work in this area with the CFHI came about with this project by and large because of the work that I was doing and have been doing in the area of suicide prevention. In fact, the first invitation that I had to connect with CFHI was at a conference that was developed that was referred to as We Belong, and that conference was developed by CFHI along with First Peoples Wellness Circle and the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. And that was an international conference of Indigenous people speaking to those issues of suicide prevention. My colleagues and I were invited to attend and present at that conference, and we presented the work that we had just initiated at that time, which was the beginnings of work that actually I



had done in years prior when I worked in the area of northwestern Ontario, the area so many of you would know as Kenora or what we refer to as Treaty Three region.

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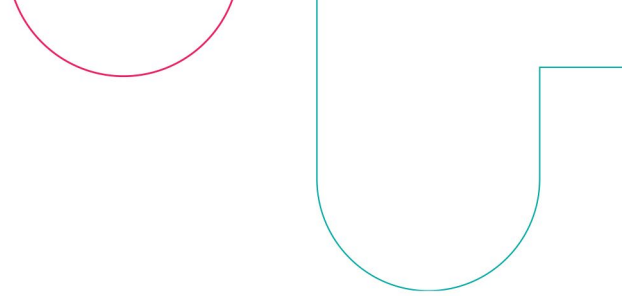
In the time that I worked with the communities, with an organization that was referred to as the Ojibway Tribal Family Services, I had been invited by the chiefs, 13 chiefs from the communities in that region to work with an elder by the name of Alec Skead to address the issues of suicide prevention. And when I came together with Alec, Alec was an individual that had really, not only gone through the journey of life to transform his life experiences from one of what one might refer to as unhealthy illness and addictions and basically a lifestyle that would have ended had he not been found one night when he had passed out in the streets of Kenora.

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Found by the people who were the Friendship Centre outreach people and brought into the Friendship Centre, where he said he had a dream. And that dream was one of his life that went in a circle from the time he was four years of age, and prior to that four years of age, he had actually been raised by his family and knew only his language, Anishinaabe, and was raised in the culture, but then was taken away and put into residential school and that residential school was in his community. He lived in that residential school up to the age of 16, and in that period of time he had relatively few opportunities to be with his family, despite the fact that they lived only a kilometre and a half away. So, he told that story and he told it about how his life journey had gone through the experiences of being lost, not knowing who he was, where he came from, where he belonged, why he was here on Earth, what his purpose in life was and where he was going. And in that experience of his journey, he came to understand that the fundamental needs that he had to live a long and good life were what he learned through his journey. And it came about because of what he did not have for much of his life in his early stages of life. But when he then found in the latter part of his life, when he returned and reconnected to his original cultural teachings, his language, and his, essentially his lifestyle. In that time, when I worked with Alec around the issues of suicide prevention, he helped us to see and understand suicide prevention in a completely new way.

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And what he did was to help us to see through an Indigenous lens, to see from an Indigenous form of knowledge that what we really needed to be doing if we were really going to help people to live long and good lives was to focus on life and not to focus on death or trying to prevent death. That in actual fact, we could not prevent death, but we can help people and support people to live longer and healthier lives. And he then told us that what we were doing, and he



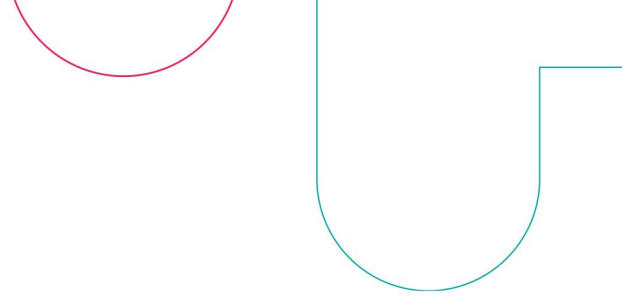
named it in Anishinaabe and translated it into English, and he named it as the Sacred Circle, providing a way of life. Approximately, it would be about 20 years after that, after I'd moved down to southern Ontario, where I now live in Orillia, I began working with friends of mine that live and work in this region who also have been raised in the culture and have the language. And with our conversations again about suicide prevention, bringing together the knowledge we had, we came to understand that again, what we had to do was move into the direction of life promotion and focus on life promotion. So I was beginning to do that work, when we came together for this conference, we shared those ideas at the conference and then carried on to do then develop that work, which has evolved into what we call Feather Carriers Leadership for Life Promotion. And we're now sharing that out across the country. The importance of the connection then with CFHI came about because when CFHI began to do the, develop the PLT or the Promoting Life Together Collaborative, they were initially thinking about suicide prevention.

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We began to share with them as we shared out at the conference and then had a little bit of difficulty getting our relationship underway. They realized that we needed to reform the relationship in order to carry the work forward that they had intended to do with the collaborative, or through the collaborative. So my first involvement with them was at the conference and then followed up with the development of the relationship with the staff from CFHI. And that came about, interestingly enough, because in our first attempt to develop the relationship to work together, we encountered some difficulties, and I think what we realized and what I've learned since is that the difficulties that we encountered came about because we did not actually premise or to put the emphasis and the work necessary into developing the good working relationship that was necessary for us to be able to work together and be successful in the collaborative that they were visioning. They had only begun to vision it, and they began to realize that it needed, we needed to vision it together. But we realized that in order to vision it together and to share the knowledge that we have about life promotion, that we had to establish a good working relationship. And that was really I think what for me has come out of this collaborative as the most important teaching or learning, is that if we're going to succeed in the work together, we have to start at the beginning with developing the relationship.

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So that's what we began to do. And in the very early stages after we reconnected with one another, as they, I think, were brave in reaching out to us again to attempt to develop the relationship again, they did so, and we began to talk about why it was that our relationship had struggled initially. And what we recognized as the reasons why we had not begun our relationship well was because we had not taken the time to look at what was important for both of us in establishing a safe relationship that met our needs from both their side as well as our



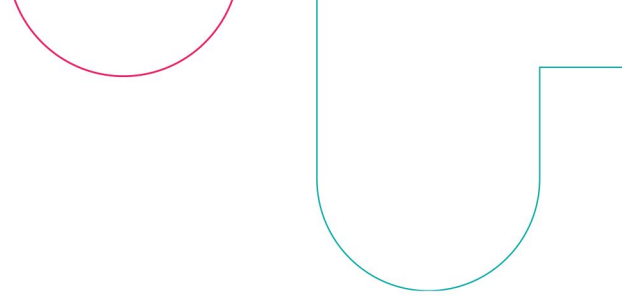
side. So one of the things that happened right off the bat, I remember when we had carried on our first phone conversations about re-establishing the relationship was that we began to speak about what those needs were from our perspective, and they did so as well. And the first things we talked about was about, first of all, beginning with an acknowledgement, actually, of the spirit of the work and where that, everything that we have in fact initiates or originates from. Which is, we began to talk about the understanding of spirit within the work in the form of recognizing and giving thanks to Creator and however everyone recognized that relationship, whatever it might be, that we could in fact give thanks together and express in some form of ceremony, that we could express with our gratitude for the life that we have, and then recognize the relationships that we have with all of creation. And then ultimately, you know, acknowledge then our relationships with each other.

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So that's where we began, and then that evolved into, and I recall vividly these conversations that we had about then establishing a trusting relationship, that how could we actually come to a place of trusting one another. And our needs at that time that we recognized and we articulated was the need to ensure that what we shared in the knowledge that we would share within the collaborative would be respected and that it would always be shared in such a way that those who received it would understand that it would not be used without recognition of where it's come from and permission to share it. And we actually went into then a process of identifying how we could ensure each other that this would happen. And the way we did that was actually by involving, initially, interestingly enough, our lawyer and the lawyer from the CFHI to establish an agreement, a legal agreement, about how we would actually proceed to ensure the safety of our knowledge as we share it through the collaborative. That was one of the first steps that we took. And then from there, once we had that understanding, then we began to establish then who would actually be involved in the relationships. And we began to identify those people. And then in the early stages of bringing those people together, we began to share some of the fundamental teachings and knowledge that we have that I think became very much the background of the understanding of how we can then establish a good working relationship that would lead to the success that I believe that this collaborative actually has demonstrated.

[14:21]

And that— so when we began to share that knowledge, myself and others shared their understandings of what our teachings from an Indigenous perspective, an Indigenous lens, informs us or tells us about what a good relationship is. And so I share with you that initially, I'm holding here in my hand a replica of what we call the Guswenta. It's the two-row wampum. And this is one of the understandings that was shared in the early formation of our relationship. And I told this story and this teaching for the purpose of helping us to develop a frame from which we could then begin to imagine or to vision our relationship as a good working relationship going



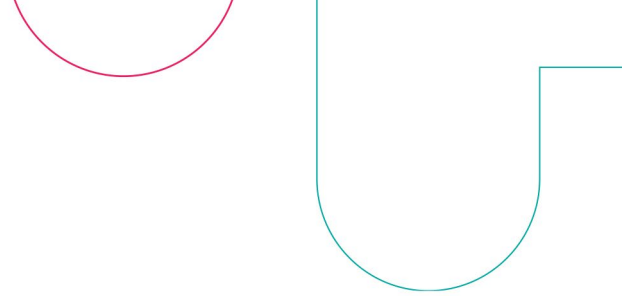
forward. This belt, which we refer to as a wampum belt, the two -row wampum, is a replica of the wampum belt that was presented by my ancestors, the Mohawk people that were in the region of New York State, what we now call New York State, which was our territories at the time when the Dutch settlers came to that region. And when we first encountered them in 1613, we presented this treaty belt to them in an effort to create a good, peaceful relationship with them. This belt actually has within it a symbolic representation of this teaching. All of the belts are different. Treaty belts were used, by our people, even before contact. We knew that this was a way that we could actually, and we had experienced developing good working relationships, peaceful relationships.

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So when we shared this, this one was created with this teaching in it. It said, of the two purple rows, it said, you are in your ship going down the white, representing the river of life. And we are in our canoe. We are going to go down side by side, and as long as we continue down the river of life parallel to one another and don't cross into each other's path, we can share this land in peace. That's a simplification of what it was because there's many more teachings within this. Those other teachings, you know, spoke in this way to the fact that we knew, you know, and our ancestors knew very clearly that the people who came here, the settlers who came here, came with a very different, what we would call a worldview, a way of thinking, a different understanding of themselves, creation, Creator. They understood differently from us because we knew that they had different beliefs, different values, different languages, different clothing. All of these things were differences that we recognized. But this is what the two row then spoke to. It said, we have to begin our relationship with what we share in common. We begin that relationship by recognizing what we both have in common. And then once we acknowledge what makes us human, because we have the same— we breathe the same air, we drink the same water, we eat the same foods. These are all things that are necessary. We breathe the same air, right. So there's our commonality. But then once we know that, we understand that and accept that, then we also can recognize the differences. But as we recognize the differences, we see them with respect.

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We see them with respect, and further to that, we understand, and this is probably the most important part, that our differences are important not only for ourselves but for each other, because it's the differences that also enhance each other's knowledge. And we see each knowledge as not greater than or less than, but equal to. And on that basis, we can then establish what is called good friendship or good relationship. So, in this, we often refer to it is that that knowledge about how to develop that good relationship, you know, this came out of our own teachings that come out of the Haudenosaunee teachings of the Great Law of Peace, which established the relationships of peace between our five nations when we had for many,



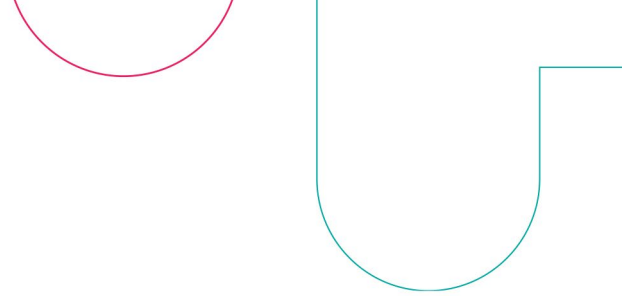
many years and generations prior, fought with one another. But we found peaceful relationship through the teachings of the Great Law of Peace, which is then embedded here within that, what I've just shared with you of the two row, which we offered in 1613, right? That was our perspective about how do we develop a good relationship to the Dutch. But interestingly enough, when you look at what the Dutch wrote within their written understanding of the agreement of the relationship in their treaty, they use the terms and they reference that such things as we are your fathers, you are our children, we'll essentially take care of you. It was not a relationship of equality. It was a relationship of inequality because that was the worldview that they carried and that we did not understand.

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So the two different worldviews were presented at that time without an understanding that they were indeed that different. But what we then also know about this treaty belt is that it is said, it is said that when it was shared that the words were said, "This shall stand for as long as the grass shall grow, as long as the trees, as long as the trees shall grow, as long as the grass shall grow, as long as the sun shall shine, as long as the rivers shall flow." So we know and we believe that this understanding still exists. But we haven't, obviously, we know what happened and what the history has brought us to. That it— there was the ship passing into the path of the canoe. So what is it that this tells us? It tells us that we can have those good relationships. We do believe we have the knowledge to do so. But we have to establish those principles of relationship to be able to have that peaceful relationship, that good relationship.

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There's also concepts in here that also speak to, in a way, to some of the things we even know now that have come from other nations, other First Nations. You've heard reference to the two-eyed seeing, right? Two-eyed seeing is, can be said to be the representation of the ways that each of these ways know how they see things, what their knowledge is. But we also know within the two-eyed seeing, right, that again, there can also be understood that we're on that common river of life. And that common river of life actually can be understood, you know, as a place of what some of our other Elders have spoken to, which is the common ethical space, or the place where we can come to know and how we can use both eyes, right, and both knowledges in a good way. But what do we need? We need to have that equal relationship to be able to do that. What I believe happened in our relationship, in the work with CFHI, is that we came to the place of coming to understand some of these basic understandings of good relationship and how to do that, how to create it and work on it in such a way that we could not only learn to do that with one another, but then to share it with others, as we did through the collaborative with the communities that we worked with. You know, as we went out into the communities after we had first established those relationships with one another, we did so with individuals from CFHI who came to share with us the experiences of sharing our knowledge, Indigenous knowledge with



the communities that we worked with through the understanding of life promotion. And they not only witnessed what we were doing, but they participated in that sharing of the knowledge.

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I recall vividly one of the first experiences we had when we went to Western Health, Newfoundland, how we one morning as we began, at the beginning, the first thing we did the morning of the first gathering with that group was we gathered on the shore of the ocean and we conducted what we call a sunrise ceremony. And the people who participated in that sunrise ceremony were the people from CFHI, ourselves, and the community members who were participating, as well as the people who came from the Western Health organization. And that morning when we conducted that ceremony, I think you could, you know, speak to any one of those people, and they could tell you vividly their recollection of how when we lit the fire on the shore and we began the ceremony, how the sun came up, and as it was rising it hit the face of a cliff, and that cliff just turned golden. And as that happened, we heard— some people who were facing out to the ocean actually saw two seals pop their heads up and sit there and watch and listen as we were participating in that ceremony. Those kinds of experiences were what in fact built those relationships in the way that I have just shared with you, that our ancestors imagined could happen, many, many years ago, you know, 1613. And here we are, after many, many generations, I believe now we're coming to that time that they envisioned could happen.

[25:57]

Perhaps as we talk about it, and we call it reconciliation, perhaps this is what we have now experienced as we journey together in developing this collaborative and working together to envision how could we build this good relationship, so that we can now bring about the health and the healing that is necessary. Yes, within our Indigenous communities, but also for the non--Indigenous communities, because we've been part of this journey, all of us, and we are all needing again to come back to this place of good relationship. And I believe that this is part of what's happened in this collaborative. It's an important part of the process of reconciliation, and what we would refer to as healing, and what we also speak of, when we, in our work, in the Anishinaabe language, they refer to it as bizaani-bimaadiziwin, living the good life or living a long and good life. So that's been my experience with this collaborative and the way I understand it. And so hopefully that may help to enhance the understanding of what this has been about.