

## Transcript of Interview with Kelly Brownbill

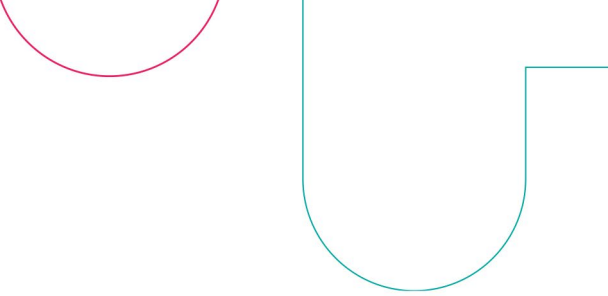
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[Greeting in traditional language]. My name is Kelly Brownbill, I am very proud to be a member of the Flat Bay community of the Mi'kmaq nation situated on the west coast of Newfoundland. And I was a coach for the Promoting Life Together Collaborative. I originally entered the space at the invitation of Dr. Ed Connors to work on the team that was in the Bay St. George area. I was invited to come home and work, which was an incredible privilege for me. And so Ed and I were co-coaches for the team in Newfoundland. I was also incredibly privileged to be able to work with some of the other teams. I travelled to Thompson a few times and worked with the team at Thompson. I travelled to Churchill and worked with the people up in Churchill. And it was so satisfying for me, not just to be immersed in the work, but to see how the work was unfolding in different places, in different communities and in different situations. And I think that's one of the most powerful things about this collaborative is that it was really moulded by the realities of the people on the ground in those teams, and they were so different from place to place. And yet all of those teams with all of their different needs were supported within the overarching collaborative, and that was so empowering and pleasing to be a part of.

[01:50]

One of the things that I found most impactful in the work of the Promoting Life Together Collaborative was the creation of shared ethical space. As Indigenous people and as an Indigenous woman, I certainly have those issues always at the forefront of my work. We can forget sometimes that the work in a collaborative is really a partnership, and that there are two sides, two shores, I guess, over a river that we're building a bridge from. And as Indigenous people, we fought long and hard to have our needs met, our ways of knowing, our ways of being, recognized and honoured. But we also need to make sure that we honoured the place of those teams that were so eager to reach out and, say, teach us what we need to know. And that was an incredibly courageous thing for those mainstream organizations to do. This is hard work, and you know how we know that? Because no one's done it before. This is brand-new, cutting-edge stuff because no one had the wherewithal, no one had the vision, no one had the support, no one had the drive, no one had the passion to really do the work and to enter into work that was maybe a little uncomfortable, that wasn't maybe always as nurturing as it could be. And so it was so important to me to watch the collaborative create space for both partners, for our Indigenous communities to say, "This is what we need," and for our non-Indigenous organizations to say, "We want to meet you there, but maybe we don't understand." Or, "We want to meet you there, but we have no idea how to build the capacity that you need from us."

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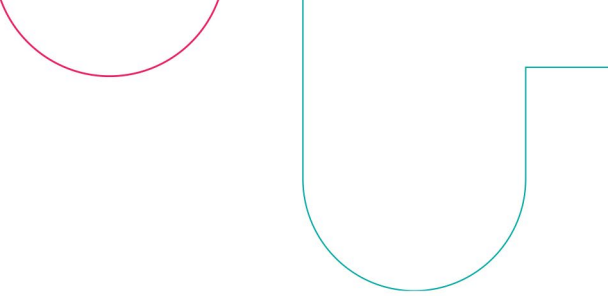
And so, for example, when I went into one of the other teams, for 25 years now, I've been doing cultural competency training. And so I was invited to go and work with the teams, one of the other teams that wasn't the one I was originally supposed to be working with, to do that work for them, to help them prepare themselves to enter into ethical spaces with Indigenous people, with Indigenous communities, with Indigenous organizations. And, you know, we entered into that work in a place of kindness, in a place of compassion, and a place of truly wanting to build capacity, truly wanting to be able to give them the tools that they need to meet us as Indigenous people, where we need to be met. And I think that's all summed up in the name of what we did. It was the Promoting Life *Together* Collaborative. And I really saw that unfold right across the country, and it was very, very honouring and humbling to be a part of that.

[05:00]

I think that one of the most powerful tools that we used during the work of the collaborative was the use of ceremony in relationship-building. It's sometimes difficult for non-Indigenous people to enter into a circle, to enter into ceremonies, particularly since a lot of the non-Indigenous people that were part of this process maybe didn't have a faith community of their own. Maybe they weren't used to ceremony or ritual within their lives. One of the things I tried to do in my part when I was bringing ceremony into our work was to talk about the fact that no one has to be confined by anyone else's idea of faith or spirit or ceremony, that you can come to a place in safety and participate in ways that are meaningful to you. So rather than say this is only for non-Indigenous people, and this is only for Indigenous people, this is only for people of my lodge and people who don't belong to my lodge can't be part of it, we entered into a place where everyone was welcome, everyone was able to experience it in the way that was meaningful to them. Part of our medicine wheel teachings as an Anishinaabekwe is about the four pieces of self, right? Mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. Many people have a block in accessing that spiritual self because they don't belong to a faith community, because they don't practice. And I tell them that spirituality doesn't have to be defined in that way. Spirituality is the belief in something that you can't prove. It's how you feel much calmer if you go and sit by the water. It's how a walk in the woods will lower your blood pressure. Those are ceremony and ritual and spirituality.

[07:04]

And so as we brought those pieces, whether they were on the individual groups when we were visiting communities, and I brought my bundle, and I opened with water songs, or whether it was in the end gathering that we had at Maniwaki, where we entered into very serious ceremony about the gifting of that bundle. We tried to do that in a way that was inclusive, that was empowering, and was really about everybody, regardless of how they defined themselves, being able to access all parts of themselves and bring everything into the work of the collaborative. And I think that there were lessons learned, certainly for me as an Indigenous



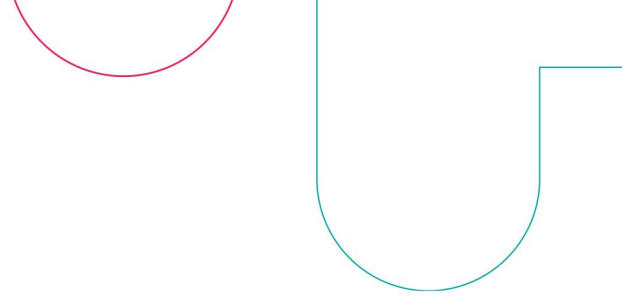
woman, there were lessons learned for me about how to make people more comfortable in a circle. There were lessons for me about how to make Indigenous people who have not made ceremony and spirituality a part of their life comfortable in that circle. And that when we talk about promoting life, what could be more empowering than having all parts of ourselves celebrated, being in touch with all parts of ourselves, and being able to recognize that and celebrate that in ceremony. So I was incredibly grateful to be part of the ceremony, part of the ceremony making, and part of the ceremony learning.

[08:37]

Two of the challenges that I thought were very apparent in the work that we did within the collaborative were the incorporation of Indigenous ways of being or Indigenous ways of knowing, and sustainability. It's very difficult. It's a whole new paradigm for non-Indigenous entities, whether they be health care organizations or any kind of entity, to come to a relational place with Indigenous people, with Indigenous communities and with Indigenous nations. We have a different way of entering into those conversations. And so we expect our mainstream organizations to automatically be aware of how to do that and how that can work. And what we saw, I think, during the time of the collaborative, was the need for organizations to be gifted the time to adjust to this work. They couldn't do things the same way that they used to do them and still incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing because we're built on relationship as Indigenous people. One of the examples I talk about all the time when I'm in front of people is the one conference call that we had with the collaborative, where we had Elders from across the country, literally from coast to coast, and we wanted them to come and talk to us for a couple of hours. I think it was part of the planning for the wrap-up celebration at Maniwaki, and we had a two-hour teleconference scheduled, and we had a whole list of agenda items. And as we opened up that phone call, not a single item on that agenda got accomplished, because the Elders took over. They needed to be relational with one another. They needed to share what they were doing, where they come from, where their traditional territory was, and what their concerns were. And then they had to listen to all of the other Elders do the same thing.

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And we spent that two hours developing relationship, and that to an old-fashioned corporate way of being: well, how come you didn't get anything accomplished on the phone call? From a new paradigm of creating better collaborative work: what an amazingly successful call that was. So in order for mainstream organizations to be better equipped and to build their capacity in allowing Indigenous ways of being in, we need to give them time, not just the time that we need, but the time that they need to learn how to adjust their understanding of workflow, their understanding of partnership, their understanding of relationship. And we also need to remember that there isn't one Indigenous voice, that I might be very passionate and very forthcoming about what I believe and how I feel about something—I'm one voice. I don't even



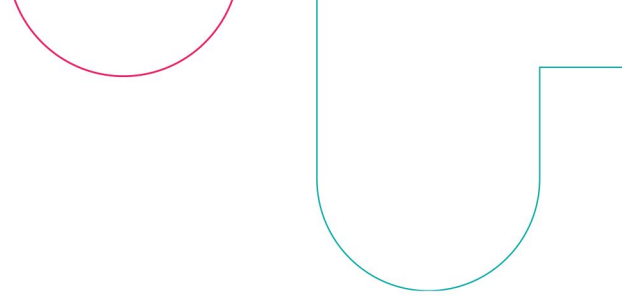
represent the rights-holders like the Assembly of First Nations. I don't represent them. They represent the rights-holders across the country, but I can't speak for them. So we need also to remember that sometimes incorporating an Indigenous perspective takes a lot of people. It takes people like me who are trainers and communicators, educators. It takes people who are ceremony makers. It takes those representatives of those rights-holders to stand up and say, "This is what the group that has asked me to come and represent them really needs," and understand there is no pan-Aboriginal approach, that we need to make sure we listen to everyone and can adjust to everyone's specific needs. So incorporating that Indigenous way of being is challenging, there's no roadmap, and it takes a significant investment in time, which is why it hasn't been done before.

[12:36]

Sustainability, one of the other challenges, is how do we keep the momentum going? Incredible amounts of work were done on all sides of these collaboratives, particularly those mainstream agencies that said, "We're ready to make a change." They put their heart and soul into hearing what they've been doing wrong, what they could do better. They invested so much humility in saying, "We might be experts in doing this work, but we certainly aren't experts on doing that work with Indigenous communities." And they needed to humble themselves to listen to what they needed to do to do that. But the sustainability is being able to grow from that. We had a year, we had 18 months. There is 500 years of crap that we have to overcome, there's 500 years of creating paradigms and policies and procedures that minimized Indigenous voices, so we need to make sure that we have the ability to support the sustainability moving forward. Part of the process in the collaborative was asking them, okay, we're going to leave eventually. The coaches are going to withdraw, the support of the funding agency is going to withdraw. What can we do right now to help you build a process that will keep this momentum going? I'm not sure, to be honest, if we were successful with all of the teams. Some of the teams are more successful within that sustainability than others, but I know that all of them are trying as hard as they possibly can to create that forward momentum. And I often use the expression, we're pushing a boulder up a hill, right? And every inch that boulder gets higher up the hill is a success. It's a celebration. It's amazing.

[14:28]

So, as we think about what we've learned throughout the collaborative and what learnings we can take into our next pieces of work, wherever they might be, it's helping that boulder getting an inch up the hill when we leave. What can we do to put in place that they can push it up without us?



[14:54]

One of the key takeaways for me and the work that I did within the Promoting Life Together Collaborative is the need for us to continue to be relational. The need for us to say, “The old way doesn’t work anymore.” We need to empower both our Indigenous partners and our non-Indigenous partners to have the strength and the power to say, “I want to do things differently this time.” I’ve often mentioned that CFHI is the first contract I ever signed that had the protection of Indigenous knowledge embedded in my contract. No one had ever done that before. Those are the things that we need to do, whether it’s with the PLT Collaborative, whether we’re working with a mainstream corporate organization, or whether we’re working with a government agency, we need to continue to listen to Indigenous ways of being and knowing, we need to continue to look for ways to incorporate that within the bigger picture. We need to continue to find ways to support people who have been entrenched within government policy and corporate procedures, to support them to really want to change or to consider change. It’s very vulnerable for them. So it’s so important that we continue to look for ways that we can support them to want to go into this work, because that’s when the collaborative is the pebble in the pond, right, and the ripples spread out farther and farther and farther. We’re creating not just a thing, we’re creating a better way of being relational. Miigwech.