

## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: MOVING THROUGH TRAILS AND TRIALS TOWARD COMMUNITY WELLNESS

**Shanne McCaffrey**

**Abstract:** The Child and Youth Care in Action VI Conference — Moving Through Trails and Trials Toward Community Wellness took place April 25–27, 2019 at the University of Victoria in Victoria, British Columbia. Working from the position of trying to inhabit the space of a good relative, all conference preparations and work, all details, protocols, and calls to community were guided by the desire to achieve optimal and positive outcomes. From this location we are very grateful to provide this special conference edition of the *International Journal of Child, Youth and Families Studies*.

**Shanne McCaffrey** is from rural Northwest Saskatchewan and has Metis, Cree, Blackfoot, and Irish ancestry. Shanne has roots to Beardy’s Okemasis community, Batoche, and Duck Lake in Saskatchewan, as well as the Flathead Community in Montana. Her Irish ancestry is from the north of Ireland in the region of Ulster and village of Larne. Shanne moved to Vancouver Island in 1996 and has worked at the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria since 2004. Email: [smccaffr@uvic.ca](mailto:smccaffr@uvic.ca)

We open this conference journal with a land acknowledgement to the Coast and Strait Salish peoples on whose land we work, live, and play. Our privilege and power on these lands continue to create an ongoing dispossession that is a deep loss to the peoples of this territory and places the burden of dispossession on Indigenous children, youth, and families every day. In that spirit, I acknowledge that we are occupiers on the stolen ancestral and traditional lands of the Coast and Strait Salish. We know that the land on which we gather, on which the University of Victoria stands, is the unceded traditional territory of the WSÁNEĆ, Lekwungen, and Wyomilth peoples. Their relationship with the land — all that is, all that was, and all that will ever be — remains strong and unbroken despite the ongoing dispossession that continues on these lands.

The Child and Youth Care in Action VI Conference — Moving Through Trails and Trials Toward Community Wellness took place April 25–27, 2019 at the University of Victoria in Victoria, British Columbia. Among our inspirations, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the good work, wisdom, and guidance provided by Dr. Martin Brokenleg. Dr. Brokenleg is a member of the Rosebud Sioux people and co-author of the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*. He is also a co-developer of the Circle of Courage model, and provides training worldwide for individuals who work with youth at risk. He has worked tirelessly in the field of child and youth care to provide pathways to wellness for children, youth, and families. He has also mentored generations of learners with positivity, good spirit, and care. Dr. Martin Brokenleg is an adjunct professor in the School of Child and Youth Care and part of our family and circle. We sincerely raise our hands in thanking him for helping in the development, guidance, and co-hosting of the conference.

Working from the position of trying to inhabit the space of a good relative, all conference preparations and work, all details, protocols, and calls to community were guided by the desire to achieve optimal and positive outcomes. From this location we are very grateful to provide this special conference edition of the *International Journal of Child, Youth and Families Studies*.

In this issue you will find articles from conference attendees that extend the work they are developing in the field. The work is innovative and spans a large breadth of content within the framework of good child and youth care praxis. On the second morning of the conference, we witnessed with the Community Wellness drum a strong plenary from our relatives that furnished the basis for the first two articles, on African-centred solidarity and on re-imagining child and youth care practice with African Canadian youth. The authors of the next article grapple with the discourse of reckoning with privilege and how we are implicated and accountable. The fourth article looks at queering child and youth care, and wrestles with the dynamics of intersectional identity, theory, sexuality, and politics, and with how these elements are taken up in child and youth care. The next article takes up the recent and evolving phenomenon of “gender reveals” and examines how this practice connects to parenting and reifying gender under capitalism. Our final

article is reflective of the interest among conference participants in de-settling ourselves, and of how our ways of knowing, doing, and being emerge when we come together in this way.

It is important to consider the process that occurred prior to the conference and how that created pathways for what was to come. It was good fortune, suggestions, and encouragement that steered four of us together to work on the conference. Our organizing committee consisted of wisdom keeper Dr. Martin Brokenleg, conference guru extraordinaire; Tracy Underwood, School of Child and Youth Care alumna, academic advisor in the Indigenous Student Support Centre, and a valued local community member of the WSÁNEĆ peoples; Caroline Green, the all-knowing and indomitable graduate program assistant in the School of Child and Youth Care; and myself, Shanne McCaffrey.

Our committee numbered four — an intentional choice. Four is a sacred number in Indigenous cultures, and represents the four directions, the four seasons, and the four quadrants of the medicine wheel, among other important concepts. Our coming together was effortless and we vowed to meet, enjoy our time together, and always affirm our work with companionship, food, and deep belly laughs. The conference opened in ceremony and spirit, and upheld that approach throughout the three days. We ended with a giveaway potlatch, a grand circle of all participants, and a closing prayer of gratefulness. We had decided to open ourselves to all possibilities and to be able to flex when called upon.



Community Wellness drum by Dylan Thomas

We decided to use the Community Wellness drum by Dylan Thomas as our theme for the call for proposals. The drum features four humans in a circle, representing culture, relationships, families, and communities. The centre of the circle holds the space for youth in perfect balance. The Community Wellness drum is a witness, meaning that it shares the sacred space of work and being in the conference as a stoic and sacred witness to all the work that is happening.

As an organizing committee, we particularly wanted to invite voices and people that sometimes remain relatively hidden and silent in our larger child and youth care community. Our call-out to community offered broad themes that people could align with, and share their innovative work and thoughts. The proposals rolled in quickly, and our two-day conference expanded to include a third day. Our organizing committee felt that this new structure was evolving as it was meant to.

Near the school we have a stunning transformation pole that stands in the entrance of the Human and Social Development Building (HSD) at the University of Victoria, greeting everyone that comes in. The pole was carved from red cedar in 1993 by artist and carver Don Smith *Quw'utsun* (Cowichan) to commemorate the school's 20th anniversary. It depicts the Salish Thunderbird as half eagle and half human. Between the wings of the Thunderbird nestles a child or youth. The Thunderbird is there to protect and embrace this youth as its own, enclosing the youth in the spirit of contentment. From an Indigenous perspective, both the drum and the transformation pole are animate and alive; they are keepers of memories, stories, and responsibilities.

With this animate spirit, which we feel in all our relations, our conference developed an approach of starting all together with a land acknowledgement, and gradually moving into ceremony. We also acknowledged two local Indigenous scholars who had recently been hired by the School of Child and Youth Care, and welcomed a group of local tribal school children who came to dance and sing on the land. We had decided that we would ask local Elders and wisdom keepers to come and provide a blessing for the transformation pole and for the Community Wellness drum. Elders May and Skip Sam also blessed our conference and the work of the attendees.

In the opening gathering, the pole was blessed by the Elders and witnessed by the gathering. We blanketed the carver, publicly acknowledging and honouring him and his wife. The pole was also blanketed and a kerchief was tied to the head of the Thunderbird. The Community Wellness drum was next to receive the blessing and wear a kerchief. We felt very grateful for the children and youth from the local tribal school who filled the air with positivity, good spirits, and togetherness.

The spirits and ancestors move in closer when children dance and sing on the land. We had a great gathering in the courtyard, inside the entrance of HSD and people moved in to dance with the children and youth and celebrate the blessing of the drum and pole, the honouring of the maker and his wife, and the blessing of the conference and people attending. It felt good to be able to

move from ceremony into the sessions and work that we were there for, and to do this with the medicine of the pole, drum, land, and children — a perfect recipe for spirit to be amongst us throughout the three days.

The menu was carefully selected and organized by Caroline, who understood that food would play a starring role in the conference. Food is vitally important in Indigenous communities, and it is part of our protocols to make sure that there is enough. We opened registration with a huge breakfast that fed and nourished all of us, including the Indigenous vendors that we had invited to be part of the opening, and to showcase and sell their wares. At a sit-down meal at the University club, shells, pebbles, and pieces from the land decorated the tables to remind us of this beautiful territory. It felt right to share food, laughter, and friendship with each other in this territory that we all have all come to love.

At the end of the conference we gathered for a community potlatch giveaway, and to recognize community members with handshakes and Indigenous gifts. As part of the potlatch giveaway, attendees were asked to write a message to the pole, the drum, or the conference. These messages were gathered up in the ceremonial room of the First Peoples House. It was heartening to read people's accounts of how they engaged in the conference and in ceremony from their own locations and perspectives, summing up and processing the conference in their own extraordinary ways. I would like to convey the thanks of the four committee members to all those who came and shared with us in the conference. We thank the writers who contributed to this special edition. Finally, we wish you all wellness and caring trails.

All My Relations,

Shanne McCaffrey