

Canada

Aboriginal young women taking charge to shape their community



Unifor
**Social
Justice
Fund**

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The Social Justice Fund supports projects in Canada and around the globe that build leadership and skills among youth, particularly those facing marginalization and challenges due to poverty, racism, sexism and a lack of opportunity.

Young Aboriginal women, especially those living on-reserve, face a number of challenges not faced by their non-Aboriginal peers, putting them at greater risk of sexual and physical assaults and abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, bullying, problems at school, lack of job readiness, unemployment and mental health challenges.



Thoughtful programming at the community level can make a great difference in the lives of these young women and girls.

That's why the Unifor Social Justice Fund gave its support to Walking with Wisdom: Leaders Now. Led by the girls themselves, the 18-month program empowered teens from the traditional territories of Lil'wat First Nation (Mt. Currie and Pemberton) and N'Quatqua First Nation (D'Arcy), both in a remote area of British Columbia. The program was set up by the Victoria International Development Education Association (VIDEA), a recognized leader in participatory gender analysis and training in schools and community groups across B.C. VIDEA takes a rights-based approach to its work, with gender as a central component of all its programming.

The roots of the Walking with Wisdom program can be found in VIDEA's Zambian internship program, which sent 10 Aboriginal youth to Zambia on a four-month internship. One of the participants came home urging VIDEA to give girls from her community access to the same opportunities.

Walking with Wisdom was set up to help girls develop greater confidence and learn new skills, including important leadership skills.

The young women explored traditional Aboriginal culture, learned about their human and gender rights, effective advocacy, media literacy, photography, online skills, writing, community engagement and how they can become involved in shaping their communities.



“The young women who have participated in this group, bring what they have learned to their friends and family and have become positive role models in their communities.”

Lisa Fisher,
T’Zil Learning Centre
Blog excerpt written during her field trip to Victoria

The activities were led by other strong, successful Aboriginal young women to whom the girls relate and regard as role models, having shared similar experiences and confronted the same barriers. Sessions also included meeting female community leaders, politicians and others making change in their communities so they could identify themselves as powerful change-makers, now and in the future.

The program involved trips to Victoria, home of the B.C. legislature and the University of Victoria, and to Whistler, where the girls learned more about local Aboriginal culture. The trips allowed the girls to explore the possibilities for their education and employment, opportunities they were not aware of previously.

The program began with a participatory needs assessment, in which the girls explored their lives and community and identified issues they wanted to work on, such as a lack of access to educational opportunities, early involvement in drugs and alcohol and teen pregnancy. This allowed the young women to take on difficult issues in a supportive learning environment and see themselves as making a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. The girls also hosted a blog and developed a newsletter that was sent out to their communities. This enabled them to communicate with other teens, family members and leaders about the positive influence the program was having in their lives, while learning practical skills they could apply later.

The success of the program was in the girl-led programming and consistency – 95 meetings over a year and a half with high levels of participation. This included outreach events in the community, where the young women talked about their experiences in the program and the benefits. Family members, Aboriginal leaders, friends, classmates and others were invited to a community dinner hosted by the girls. They were responsible for all elements of the dinner, from sending invitations to preparation and cooking – making it an important milestone in demonstrating the maturity, confidence and abilities that the program gave them, and the value that it brought the community as a whole.

The SJF provided some of the funding, making the sessions and field trips possible.

The program allowed the girls to see themselves as making a difference in their own lives and the lives of others.





“This project has had a ripple effect in these communities and with these girls that is bigger than you will think. It gave the girls people who cared about them. It gave them links to other supports and the confidence to reach out.”

Tashayna Peters,
Local Program Co-ordinator & Former VIDEA intern in Zambia
Blog excerpt written during her field trip to Victoria