



Indigenous culture and urban agriculture tour **October 17, 2016**
by Rhonda Teitel-Payne



Context

This tour was organized by Toronto Urban Growers and Greenest City in response to an increased interest in learning about Indigenous culture and history in Toronto. There is much in Indigenous traditions that resonates with urban growers, whether they are focused on food production or using gardens to promote health, well-being and strong communities. Many of us wanted to learn more and talk about how to build better connections between Indigenous, settler and recent immigrant peoples.

The almost unanimous feedback from the tour group was great appreciation for hearing stories from our tour hosts. This document doesn't do justice to Kelly and Vivian's voices, passion and humour but we hope it will give you a taste.



Native Child and Family Services of Toronto

Kelly Hashemi

30 College St.

<http://www.nativechild.org/>

The design of the NCFST building is intended to reflect the world view of many First Nations. Here Kelly explained how the Welcome Wall highlights the fact that there are many Indigenous peoples, with distinct languages, customs and governance systems.

Acknowledging the past, adapting to the present, taking care of the future



The Anishnaabeg Gamig, or People's House is a longhouse inspired by a teaching lodge in Curve Lake. It can be configured for traditional circles or modern boardroom meetings. Lights are repurposed from recycled fluorescent tubing, referencing the role of stewards of the Earth.

Four medicines

As we entered the longhouse, Kelly explained we might smell some of the four medicines used for healing and purification. Every Wednesday the staff gather for a smudging circle to help them in their challenging work. All of the medicines grow locally.

Cedar is used for protection and purification. It's often hung over a doorway as in this photo of the longhouse entrance.



White sage is traditionally a women's medicine, used for smudging or washing over the body with smoke. It's passed over the eyes, ears & mouth to remind us to see, hear and say kind things. Smudging over the legs reminds us to walk in a good way and tread lightly on the Earth





Four medicines

Sweet Grass brings us a teaching of kindness. The braid symbolizes body mind and spirit - when braided together and treated equally, it's stronger than single blades of grass.



Tobacco - When asked why tobacco is sacred, Kelly said it was the first medicine given to us. When giving tobacco to someone, you hold it in your left hand by your heart and pray or focus on your intentions.



Other teachings

Kelly said that, even when their programs aren't visibly about traditional Indigenous crafts or practices, they are all guided by principles such as the Seven Grandfather teachings: humility, bravery, honesty, wisdom, truth, respect and love. They are meant to help people as they are "transitioning to a different walk."

Rooftop garden

The garden on top of 30 College St is designed to balance usage with structural needs. They needed to consider weight restrictions, so recycled rubber tiles are used and containers for plants are different depths depending on the load-bearing capacity of the specific spot.





Sweat lodge

Although it isn't traditional to have a sweat lodge on top of an urban rooftop, it was important to NCFST to bring the sweat lodge ceremony to people who can't go far out of the city.

Traditionally, grandfather rocks are heated in a fire, brought to the sweat lodge and soaked in water to produce steam. There is a ceremonial aspect to opening the doors and bringing in the rocks, but then the doors are closed and the sweat continues in darkness, symbolic of returning to the womb of Mother Earth.



Here, the lodge is heated like a sauna so the stones aren't brought in in the same way, but they still maintain a ceremonial aspect. There used to be a door that unlocked with a fob, until someone said the clicking sound reminded them of jail. Staff found another way to secure the space.

The roof is populated by medicines and plants native to this area, aside from what the birds bring! Coming from Manitoba, Kelly is particularly excited about Saskatoon berries.





Three Sisters

The Three Sisters story isn't part of Kelly's tradition - "we're hunter-gatherers" - but the story made sense to her. "It's science within a story, so that it sticks."

As Kelly tells it: The three sisters came from sky to feed people. Tall corn provides support to delicate beans, squash with spreading leaves covers the ground (mulch) and beans provide nutrients to heavy feeders like corn and squash. The story refers to a system of planting as well as a means of cultural transmission. It's a reminder that we all need to be like the Three Sisters. We all have different gifts and all are important.

Seeds for the Three Sisters garden came from Six Nations.



Honour what we have

Kelly emphasizes the deep environmental impact that a small rooftop can have, such as diverting 300,000 litres of water from sewers. Impacts like this inspire stewardship. Use what you have, don't take everything, think of those who come next.

Four Winds Indigenous Health and Well-being program at Central Toronto Community Health Centre

Vivian Recollet

<http://ctchc.org/programs-services/wellness/four-winds-aboriginal-health-wellness-program/>



Vivian is from the Turtle clan. Under the Turtle Clan, The Giishkizhigwan group was charged with teaching and healing. This Clan has a responsibility to the Earth Mother and must take the time to appreciate her for all she has provided. They must remind others of the bountiful things she provides to life itself. Vivian's nishnaabe name is the "gatherer." Vivian said she didn't grow up with medicines, but finding them later saved her life and it was important for her to raise her son with that knowledge.

The health centre had a garden space for some time. When Vivian asked to use one container to grow medicines, they suggested she run the whole garden. It creates an opportunity to share teachings about Mother Earth with other staff.

Healing from trauma and addictions

Four Winds is unique as an Indigenous program housed in a non-Indigenous organization. While other organizations don't allow intoxicated people in their programs, Four Winds welcomes people in and uses a harm reduction approach. You have to see the spirit of the user, not the drug. Elders say they need to learn how to deal with addictions as well, to avoid criticizing people and accept them as they are. Vivian has built a trusting relationship with people and it pays off in dedication to the program and the garden.



In the program, Indigenous people make the rules themselves. They mostly serve men and some women. People who come are looking for more teachings. Some believe that trauma happened in this area, that's why many people who need healing come here. A peer in the program suggested going around the whole area with a wheelbarrow full of burning sage to smudge the area. They're looking into that, but there's a process.



Vivian talked extensively about the importance of developing a relationship with the four medicines and frequently reached out to touch the medicines placed in front of her in the four-colour medicine wheel. She noted that tobacco made with toxins isn't spiritual.

"Sweet grass is known as the hair of Mother Earth. When braided into the three strands, it stands for mind, body & spirit. It is used for smudging and purification and it calms us when we're in circle. The sweet aroma reminds of the gentleness, love and kindness of Mother Earth."



When asked how she looks after herself when dealing with so much pain, Vivian said she uses the four medicines and goes to a sweat lodge four times per year, once per season.

As an “outside person,” Vivian finds it important to seek out nature even in the city and feels very connected to the area she works in through her ancestors. “Why go to Ripley’s aquarium? You can teach kids to find fun outside.”

Vivian also talked about the practice of using cedar to bathe babies at birth and bodies after death. Typically done by families, Vivian is organizing a group of women to do this for people who don’t have families here.

Where can non-Indigenous people go for teachings and more resources?

OISE <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ien/Services.html>

Dodem Kanonhsa' <http://dodemkanonhsa.ca/>

Native Canadian Centre of Toronto <http://ncct.on.ca/>

First Story <https://firststoryblog.wordpress.com/>

For more tips and stories from urban growers in Toronto, see www.torontourbangrowers.org/grower2grower

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