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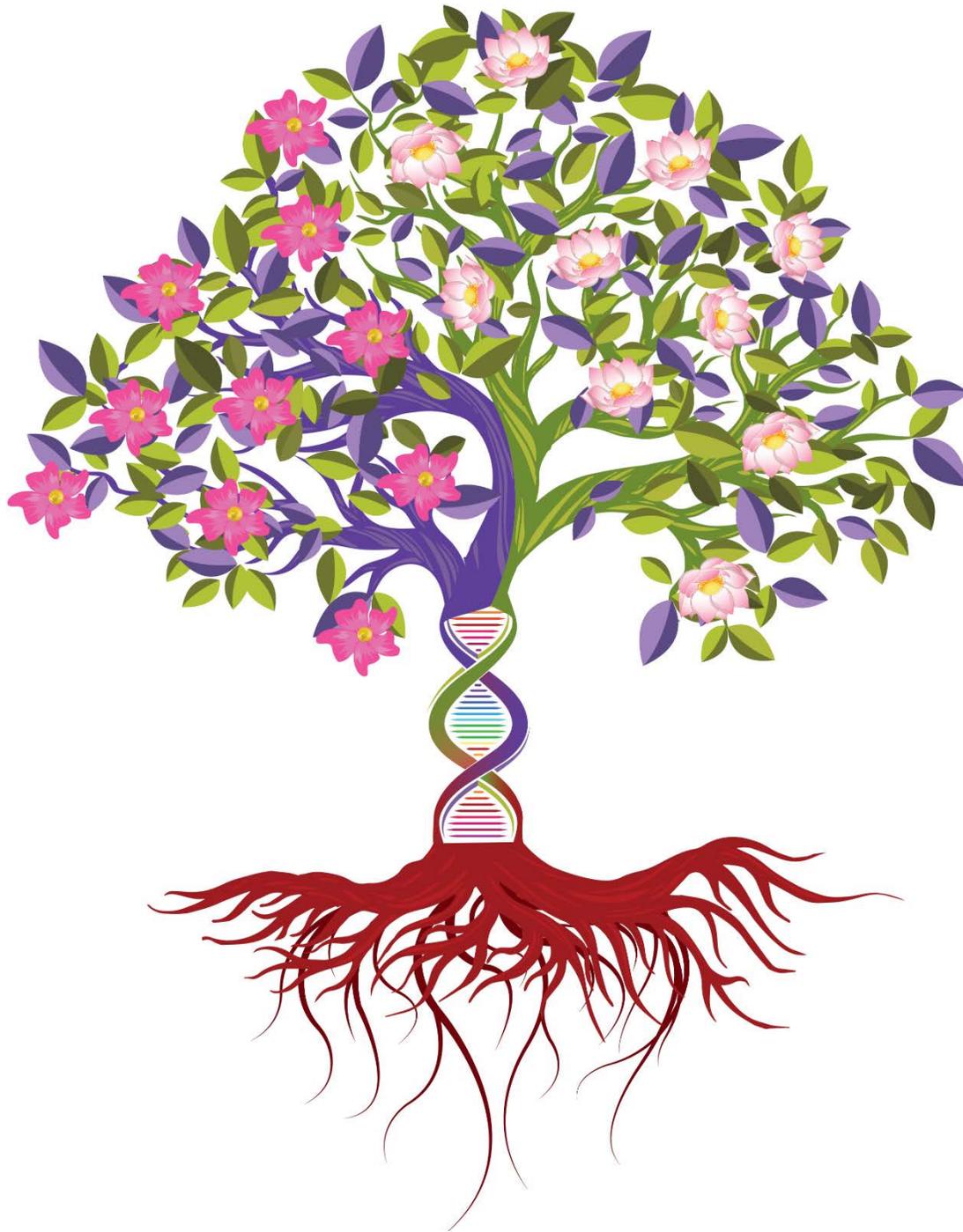
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Let the Fires Unite: Our journey of allyship

Claudette Cardinal, Niloufar Aran



Tree of Life Diagram by Eduardo Caceres. The heart of the tree starts at the root, it's where the heart beats. Through growth, learning, and challenging each other each step of the way, our paths cross and colours intertwine, like the DNA in this image—merging the branches of the wild roses and waterlilies, representing the two authors and their Allyship journey.



Tansi (Hello). My name is Wâpakwaniy. This wild rose flower reminds me of who I am and where I come from. My ancestry is from the central Plains Cree of Alberta. I have been away for over twenty-five years. I would like to acknowledge that we live on the traditional unceded territories of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səlílwətał Tsleil-Waututh and xʷməθkwəy̓əm Musqueam peoples. We thank you for allowing us to live and learn and to be a long-time resident who holds this beautiful country in my heart as I reconnect with my roots—I am from the Maskwa (Bear) clan. I am a Mother, Grandmother, Daughter, Sister, Niece, and an Auntie.



My name is Niloufar, which means water lily in Farsi. I am an immigrant settler from Iran and have been on Turtle Island since 2003. I am privileged to live, learn, and grow on the unceded Coast Salish Territories; the traditional lands of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.



We would like to acknowledge the ancestral and unceded Coast Salish Territories; the traditional lands of the x̣m̄əθkwəỵəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

INTRODUCTION

This narrative of how we, Claudette and Nilou, found true allyship and practice the results of the allyship continually in all that we do. This piece is a reflection on both of our lives, and the important decisions that have led our paths to cross. The narratives of the past few months will be presented from both of our points of view, one after the other in text. Like the DNA strands embedded within the Tree of Life diagram above, our perspectives will weave back and forth throughout the text. Our narratives can be read side by side to bring to light the stories that have filled our months together and how these events and interactions—learning and teachings—have impacted us profoundly and led us to allyship in the domains of Indigeneity and HIV storytellers.

Each author will tell their story of what has happened and how allyship has been found, embraced, and impacted us in meaningful ways—mere months of being in each other’s company. We will be using the term ‘herstory’ instead of ‘history’ and ‘story’ as an Elder has taught us that all stories are real and true and are therefore histories. We recognize that there are also ‘hisstories’, ‘theirstories’, and as many personalized titles for stories as there are genders. In light of us both identifying with the pronoun her, we will refer to our narratives as herstories henceforth. Claudette’s herstory begins below, and her voice is held high in this piece. Niloufar’s narrative which follows, shows that a traditional journey of allyship can indeed take a “non-traditional” spin, for the better. We hope, just as life beautifully does, that this story of allyship will be read and learned from so that others can find their roots and their ways to embrace what it means to be an ally.

CLAUDETTE: HERSTORIES WITH HEARING INNER VISIONS (HIV)

I will begin my herstory with honesty, truth, and love. I have not told this story elsewhere, and so I ask that you read with a kind heart.

The day my diagnosis was given to me at a walk-in clinic, I found out it took them six days to track me down so they could deliver the news. I was told to ask for a nurse at the University of Alberta, where I was to be a participant in a research project. I remember well that day, going for a train ride over the North Saskatchewan river, over to the University of Alberta. The Qualitative interview was supposed to be two hours long—it ended up being four and a half, where the nurse had to switch batteries to continue recording. Thinking back, this was the first person I talked to after my diagnosis.

Initially—in the early stages, I was not taking my medications properly and not caring about myself as I do now. I felt that way because the doctor who diagnosed me said that, with the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS and a CD4 cell count of 250, I was very close to having AIDS, and that I had two years to live. The doctor left a list of numbers in the room where I was left by myself. I knew there was no way I was going to reach out to anyone, especially to any of the Aboriginal agencies listed—what would happen if the one who answers is a relative or maybe someone would recognize my voice and spread the word of my diagnosis through the community.

In the coming years, I found out first-hand the side-effects with the initial HIV Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) that was prescribed for me. At this time, I decided that the side-effects were interrupting with my way of dealing with life at that time. I was drinking excessively to try and

deal with this disease by consuming alcohol. This continued until one morning when I had to stop on the side of the road to vomit—that was just one of the side-effects I endured with my first regimen. When I took my pills late, they made me feel dizzy, I had ringing in my ears, and I was feeling overall quite unwell.

I then ended up leaving my home province and moving to British Columbia. I took the ART's only to suffer major side effects that were making me sick. I promised myself that I would go see a doctor when I got to BC. I settled, got myself involved in school, told my parents about my status, and worked hard to keep busy. I went to school five days a week and had a part time job on the weekend.

I have been through a tremendous amount of grief, and I have found someone to help me through 20 years of being without a counsellor. I am still under their profound guidance.

CLAUDETTE: MY CIRCULAR PATH OF DISCOVERY

You know when they say: faith works in mysterious ways. This is most definitely one of those times: I remember an important day in my life—the day I attended workshops at a Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network event. That morning, I circled the titles of the presentations I was interested in to make sure not to miss them. After lunch, I was helping arrange the chairs in a circle for the next presenter and put my jacket on a seat to save my spot. As I was getting ready for the workshop to begin, a lady sat beside me and we made room for each other. It turns out she was the presenter. We started with introductions to the circle; she introduced herself as a nurse at the University of Alberta—yes, the same one I had only one meeting with—and there I was sitting beside her, eight years later.

It was now my turn to introduce myself. I was in tears of happiness, to let her know that the person in the data and papers she published and that she was presenting on that day was sitting next to her. The spark to learn more about the ways of HIV and HIV/AIDS research was ignited in that room that day.

At that point in my life, the busier I was, the better I felt, and it kept me from the doom and gloom that is associated with this disease. Only after completing my schooling did I come out to the community and start this journey of getting involved and learning about those three little letters (HIV). My body knew long before I was called that day from the clinic. Everything I am doing now, I never anticipated. It all happened at the right time. These were things that I needed to do and needed to find at the times I found them.

CLAUDETTE: RELEARNING PRACTICES AND CEREMONIES

Some of the cultural teachings I practice come from my Kokum (Grandma). From her, I learned many things I hold dear today, along with the values that I carry with me in all my work. She taught me to help wherever I can, and to pray for the sick. She said prayer helps people to be strong. She told me of her traditional beliefs that her father shared, the medicines and stories of long ago. As a young girl, I went to many ceremonies and powwows, as well as to the sweat

lodge. My Kokum taught us to be educated, and that education would help us for a better way of life. She taught us self-reliance, and strength.

I realize that ceremony is so important, at all stages of life, and is and continues to be a crucial component of our work every day. **I have been doing nothing other than continuously learning since my diagnosis.**

My experiences have given me a wealth of wisdom and knowledge that I can use to create connections with the community. We find that different approaches to life teachings is critical in this day and age, to find our ways of being. We all hear of the saying “Nothing About Us Without Us”. I have been involved in this important movement at various stages. Our experiences have brought us self-awareness—we know how important this saying is.

We cannot express how crucial it is for us to recognize that now is the time to teach and learn; for all persons who have been cut off from their cultural teachings due to the devastating effects of residential schools, the intergenerational impacts on the children of parents who attended these schools, and things like the sixties scoop and the child and foster care welfare systems that are still in place today.

In my own personal experience, teachings and practicing culture are invaluable to Indigenous peoples who have lost ties to their communities and been cut off from their culture and spirituality. The results of the actions of the oppressors—those who ran the residential schools—play a huge part in why I have suffered the loss of my culture and teachings from my Ancestors. At this point in my life, I have chosen a healing journey—a path that my generations can follow to heal, to find themselves as they reconnect with culture and spirituality, and to be proud of their identity—of their Indigeneity. One ceremony I celebrate is from the teachings of the Plains Cree to be mindful of the medicines that I am familiar with: sweetgrass, sage, tobacco and cedar. I have a constant yearning for teachings. A sense of curiosity and love for my roots, not to mention the desire to learn and teach others.

CLAUDETTE: MY PATH TO RESEARCH

I get emotional writing this. This is a success story for me, it took lots of work, effort, and the right kind of people in my corner. I started my involvement in research with the wonderful Canadian HIV Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Health Cohort Study (CHIWOS) project. The CHIWOS study gathers qualitative health data with the goal of helping women living with HIV achieve optimal health and wellbeing. It was my involvement in this project that led me to a few peers in Ontario who were part of the Community Investigator (CI) program with the Canadian HIV Observational Cohort Collaboration (CANOC)—a longitudinal observational cohort study. I applied for the CI position in May of 2017. They contacted me for an interview, and in September I was offered a position. I am the first Indigenous Community Investigator on the team. I remember reaching out to my Elder to join me on this journey of research. I have self-learned a lot. Creating a CIHR Canadian Common CV (CCV) was a hurdle (for researchers also) and a large learning curve, yet I can now maintain and update my CCV for research grant applications.

Initially being involved in research, there were many difficulties and hurdles that I thought were out of my capability to overcome. I learned through time that with perseverance and dedication to the task at hand, all things are possible. I want people to know that if they initially think that they can't attain anything, it all starts with that drive from within. All the self-doubt that goes on in everyone's head that discourages us from trying to attain those goals is only momentary and that with dedication, all can be achieved. For me, I was unable to finish school, had children at a young age, and back then saw a different path than pursuing education. This has all led me to the experiences that I carry today.

While I worked from home for my first term, it took some time to learn all the complicated scientific language, and it was a huge learning curve. Initially, I was overwhelmed by all I had to learn and didn't want to ask or bother anybody, even though the CANOC staff provided the necessary support, and included me in certain events and travel to conferences. I learned a lot by actively observing and taking many, many pictures and notes of the events and conferences I have attended during my CI position. During this time, and using the notes that I had gathered, is where I developed my research question. My supervisor helped me submit my research question with a Data Analysis Request before she had moved into her new role. Soon the new research coordinator was hired—my little cub bear, Nilou. Through her, I have learned a multitude of lessons understanding the technology of this era.

The experiences and knowledge that I have developed through the course of my life, along with my engagement in research and community outreach organizations, has allowed me to share and teach my learnings and to ensure that research is done mindfully, and in a good way. When I involve myself in research, it is from the different modes of cultural teachings that I draw my strengths and my perseverance to keep learning of culture, and to share what I have learned and encourage curiosity and love. Familiarity with and embracing culture truly does save lives.

NILOU: HERSTORY AS AN IMMIGRANT SETTLER

My name is Nilou, and I am an immigrant settler here on Turtle Island. I have been gifted allyship by an Indigenous Elder, a colleague, and a dear friend. The gift of allyship has profoundly changed the way I carry myself every day, in the large decisions and small actions I perform.

As a student with a science and epidemiology degree, we are taught to be openminded and accepting, with ethics courses and rules about how information is to be presented. We are taught these rules, and yet we have never been reminded that the statistics are people—that every number in the study population has a narrative, a truly different experience from all the other numbers in the sample. The statistics have voices, these are our voices, and research without the narratives and insight of our voices is simply not good enough. Good research is not just considering what is best for community, it's involving community in all decision-making processes and inviting community to sit at the table. It is not just collecting data, it's also hearing what questions are important to community, how data should be used and analyzed, and how to meaningfully bring this back to community. This is where allyship is formed. This is how good

research is done. And it begins with listening, with an open mind and heart, and embracing the relationships we are so lucky to find.

OUR PATH TO ALLYSHIP

Claudette

My time with Nilou has been a special one. One of bonding heart, body, mind, and spirit. This bonding was only solidified by all the forums, retreats, and events we attended. Our relationship has evolved over the months. Nilou and Alison (who is the CANOC project coordinator) have truly boosted my insight to the gifts I can share with my Oral tradition of storytelling and by teaching me the analytical parts of things like a Data Analysis Request and other scientific components of my work as a CI.



CANOC team from left to right, Claudette, Nilou, Alison

They have guided me on my journey, encouraged me to apply and submit several applications and abstracts, to host an ancillary event at the Canadian Association for HIV Research (CAHR) 2020 conference, to sit with me and apply for scholarships, to look into new places and ways to share our his/herstories and teachings with the public. Nilou and I have intertwined our cultures and carry mutual understanding of, respect for, and interest in each other's voices and cultures.

Nilou

As Claudette beautifully says, **“Allyship is a blending of ways. We have to be open and learn.”** We approach each learning opportunity with genuine curiosity and desire to learn as much as we can from one another. A beautiful relationship has developed, one that lay the foundation of the work we do and ensure that the work is done in a good way. The importance is

not only to listen and implement—asking questions and involving the people that matter at the beginning stages of projects. Claudette has also led the writing of her abstracts, her submissions to several conferences, ancillary events, and workshops—all of which were informed by her passions and her desire to share what she has learned with the community.

Claudette

I feel like I'm the first yearling who has left the den. I'm on my own, teaching Nilou who has left her own den to be guided by the older bear CeeCee, who sees teaching as the duty of a mother bear, helping her little cub Nilou learn the ways of being. They begin to form a new bond of togetherness—one leads the way, showing the littler bear how to do things, while the spirit of the little cub brings her own teachings to the story. These two bears go through time and space together learning, teaching, and growing. This is a companionship that will last a millennium, the reciprocal teachings immensely valuable for both bears.



CeeCee bear cub



Nilou bear cub

Slow, steady, maintaining my pace—I almost thought I was going to give up as a CI because I felt like I wasn't doing anything, like I was like the young bear and having to look for things that are foreign to CeeCee bear cub. After the switchover of the staff, it was difficult making connections and familiarizing myself with the new staff. Soon after, I began to understand what I was being asked to do with my research question. Now I am incredibly active and passionate and

want to do so much more—teaching all the little cubs about new opportunities and platforms for change with the research I continue to do.

Nilou

I constantly think of Claudette’s wise teachings and how she is able to so eloquently communicate with me. It’s a gift, really, to be able to communicate so well. There exists a continual and reciprocal teaching between us both. She actively ensures that the way she teaches is in no way condescending or makes one feel inferior. Rather, she takes pride in the way she teaches and encourages questions and laughs; I have come to realize this is truly the way of teaching that harvests passion and delight. Only when I began to listen with an open heart did I realize her gift and begin to embrace her teachings. As she says, **“I understand it, the Gemini craziness, so I get you”**.

She understands me at the fundamental, basic level. This is what allyship means to me: listening with an open mind and heart, celebrating each other’s successes, simultaneously learning from changes in trajectory, and fighting for each other’s voices to be heard while sacrificing our own. Allyship is trust in a person or peoples, that whatever her/their/his stories and perspectives are, they are true, and immensely powerful.

Claudette



Claudette's Heart Memories

Culture is an important part of health and wellbeing for Indigenous peoples. As I told Nilou, when I have a crown on and am in regalia, the smile I wear is like no other. I regained strength after being reintroduced to my culture in Saskatoon, in 2019 when I attended the Building More Bridges gathering. The time away from the city and being on the land reminded me of my childhood when I used to go to the sweat lodge for many, many years with my Mom. We travelled in the darkness, in the early hours of the morning to get to the lodge— usually down south of Edmonton. I later lost contact with ceremony and went on a different path than the others. My time in the Prairies in 2019 helped put things into perspective and helped me recognize that culture truly is what continues to heal

me. The importance of the beaded heart barrette, pictured above, is that it symbolizes my heart coming home. Participating in ceremony completes my heart, it becomes whole—I was Reborn in Ceremony.

GETTING BACK TO WHAT CULTURALLY BROUGHT US TOGETHER



Nilou's First Rattle



Claudette's Rattle



Claudette's Medicine Pouch



Tea Teachings

During the Building More Bridges gathering in Saskatoon, 2019, Nilou and I made medicine pouches and our own rattles with traditional teachings and medicines. Connecting us through ceremony and different teachings—going out on the land at Wanuskewin with WoW and learning about all the medicines and the history of the site—was incredible. Being around ceremony and the traditional foods is where my heart, mind, body, and spirit were reborn over those 9-days in Saskatoon.

The WOW Gathering is an experience that I really needed at that point in my life. Reflecting on my time away from Alberta—from home—to be welcomed to Treaty Six territory as a visitor in October 2019 was an incredible experience. I went back for two research events, though instead of research, it felt like it was a “Welcome Home Ceremony”. I felt totally supported by all those in attendance for both research gatherings. The teachings were something that my spirit was missing, living on the West Coast for over 25 years.



The Fire



Claudette with a Friend before the Sweat

The morning of the sweat I brought a towel just in case someone forgot one. Really, I was anxious as I had not been in a sweat for many, many years. I was afraid that I could not participate because I did not believe in myself. I was also thinking of my COPD and wondering if I would be able to breathe once inside. When we finally arrived, there were sweat skirts for those that didn't have any and I was given one. The long drive to the ceremony site that day brought up memories of how I would travel with my Mom all those years ago.

I was nervous as they were preparing the sweat and bringing in the Grandfather rocks. I was taking in the sound and smell of the fire, all the while trying to convince myself that I was going to sweat. There were many things for people to help with that day: sage picking, help with cooking the meal, being on the land with the horses, the dogs and the gophers. Being out on the prairie with all that is familiar with my upbringing; the long drive with birch trees lining the road, the peace and quiet. My spirit came home.

It was almost time and the hostess asked if there were any questions. I expressed my concerns—that it had been many, many years, that I was scared to go in and unsure I could make it all four rounds. They said that if you only want to sweat one round or two, it is up to you. I was quite

emotional when I asked if an individual could be part of the ceremony that day, even if they had missed out on so many, such as the Coming of Age and Naming ceremonies, to name a few. These are some of the ceremonies I have missed out on because of living in an urban setting and finding my way in life.



The Meal Part 1



The Meal Part 2

Once the sweat was finished, we all headed up to the house to share a meal. The meal was amazing, the tastes of things I had tasted before. My heart, mind, body and spirit are in balance now—my heart is over the moon for being reborn in ceremony.

Culture is within me, culture is me, I am Culture. I am always looking for guidance and balance in my walk today. My spirit was awakened, and I now believe in my abilities and in my power. Those opportunities to practice my culture made me realize that my gifts will soon present themselves if I continue believing and practicing my culture through ceremony. Also, I now know to include others who want to join. I welcomed Nilou into my culture and the ceremonial activities.

Nilou



Saskatoon Airport

I learned so much during the four days we spent with the team in Saskatoon. I often think of the plains, and how I felt this very strange connectedness with the land and with the people. I have read Indigenous stories about how we are connected to land, and how there is this feeling—an overt sensation—of belonging. I had never physically felt such a thing before. To have given my spirit and set it free to really feel the heart of the earth beating, to understand what it means to build that beautiful connection, was something I will never forget. I felt empowered making the medicine pouches and the rattles, and when others asked for my help. I saw Claudette assisting others with their pouches and sewing of the rattles and how she has this incredible energy she carries—it's quite contagious. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have met Claudette, and to have been deemed worthy enough to be gifted allyship. My promise to all Indigenous persons and individuals living with HIV that I will ever meet—and my promise to myself—is to practice allyship every day, in all that I do. To listen with all my heart and forget fear of emotions. If I'm happy, I will smile and hug and send tons of exclamation points in my emails even if 'unprofessional'. If I am feeling down and upset, I will be true to my heart and voice this concern, because I now know that the response will be comfort and non-judgement. I have learned from my mistakes, though I never embraced them. What I learned in Saskatoon has changed me. My time with my true and dear friend, Claudette, will never be forgotten.

Claudette



The Power of the Drum and Rattle

We attended the Women's March together this year (2020). The morning of the march, I asked the group of incredible Indigenous women if they would be comfortable with Nilou joining our breakfast before the march. The women agreed and we all went to breakfast together. We had a nice, healthy breakfast to start the day, and Nilou connected with everyone and heard stories, told stories, and even offered one of the women contact information for the coordinator of a project at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) which she thought would provide my friend an opportunity to have her voice captured and heard. One of the most outstanding moments for me was bringing Nilou along for the Women's Memorial March because it showed the unity of all Nations coming together for one purpose—standing and marching for the Missing and Murdered Women. One of the most beautiful moments during the march was when one of the Indigenous women we were marching with offered to switch her drum with Nilou for the rattle that Nilou had made in Saskatoon. Women

embraced women that day, reminding us of how we are all connected. I remember what Nilou said about the rhythm and that she felt the power of the drumming, and how it touched her heart. I brought her along with the drummers, even when she only had her rattle. And she found her warrior cry! I gifted her a pin at the end of the march.

Nilou

I have learned so much from our experiences together. The Missing and Murdered Women's March in Vancouver on February 14th was an experience like no other. I had the rattle we had made together in Saskatoon, no drum or regalia at all. Claudette took my hand and let me walk with the drummers. I was a little intimidated at first—soon after I began to feel welcomed by all the incredible people marching. A kind lady even offered me her drum, which her sister had made for her, that bore a beautiful bear paw. I traded my rattle with her drum and the few minutes of drumming, feeling the rhythm of the march, the singing, I felt an incomprehensible feeling—a sense of unity, passion, and strength. All the timidity and fear quickly melted away and I marched with all my heart that day.



Getting Pinned

Claudette

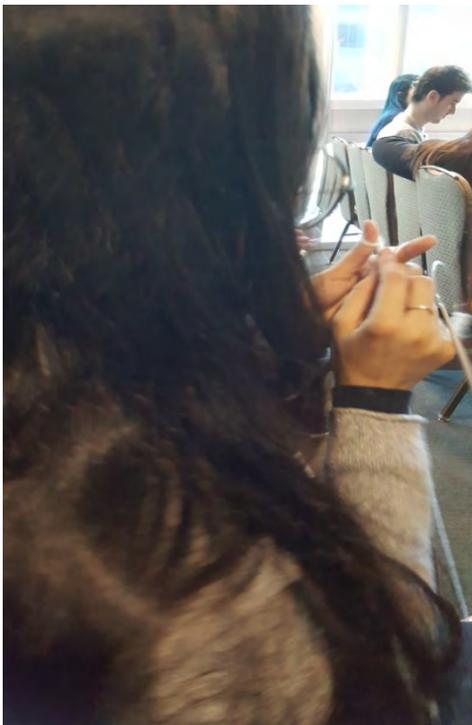
We also attended an educator's forum together. We heard updates on the most recent data surrounding HIV and were grounded with traditional stories and the bone games, which Nilou loved. The various workshops asked us to consider our goals and reflect on the past. The forum also provided us an opportunity to network and make connections with people across Canada related to the work we do at the BC-CfE. We brought the teachings back to our team and presented what we learned. I appreciated how there were many activities to keep our hands busy—it was a very interesting and interactive way to learn.



Claudette Hiding the Bones



Smiles After Winning the Bone Games



Nilou in Deep Concentration



Claudette and Her Masterful Skills



Nilou's Fun with Playdough

Nilou is an artist and was making me flowers and feathers and other animals with playdough and the pipe cleaner bookmark I braided for her. All these things to keep your hands busy and creating were available on the tables. I always encourage her to make her art and to make her voice heard in all that she does.

Nilou

In an interesting and important way, Claudette is my ally. She continually shows—incredibly thoughtfully—interest in my culture and ways of knowing.

She listens to my herstories about life as an immigrant settler on Turtle island. Of the subjective struggles of being an introvert and terribly shy. The intersectionality of the troubles of being a woman. She encourages me to speak and goes through great efforts to ensure my voice is heard.

She challenges me and asks me to open meetings with land acknowledgements, despite my fear, and encourages mistakes as teaching moments. Her passion has impassioned me to learn and educate myself and others—with permission and guidance—on several important notions of culture and the Indigenous ways of knowing.

Ultimately, we have found that there are several steps in successful allyship for all parties involved. The organization and larger team that one works with must foster dedication to community-based research, and to continuously find ways to prioritize community voices in the research. You have to carry an open mind and heart, and be ready to listen with no judgement, no fear, and a clear mind. Many times, the assumptions we make from conversations are not exactly the way our conversation partner intended the meaning to be derived. We must continually ask questions, be open to making—several, in my case—mistakes. We must also be open to accepting and learning from our mistakes. This wholehearted desire to learn and to listen will be met with a wholehearted desire to teach and to deliver, and receptiveness in the conversations that are held.

There lies great meaning in hugs, in the sharing of food, in the gifting of teachings, and in the quiet minutes and hours and days of contemplation. Allyship takes a comment such as “Stigma around HIV is bad and should be stopped” and turns it into a question like: “What sorts of intersectional components of life are entangled in HIV stigma for Indigenous persons?”

Indigenous women?” and “What systematic problems do peers and the community identify with at the healthcare level that we can look to changing?” Fruitful insights blossom out of conversations where the perspectives of the community are heard. To carry this gifted knowledge to the work that I do, and to support is my goal. To actively give platforms, wherever I am able, to Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons with HIV histories and living experience so that researchers and the scientific community continue to embrace putting peers first in all that they do. I am very lucky to be working for an organization, working for and with research scientists, coordinators and peers, who have made community voices a priority in the projects we lead. I have been blessed with the opportunity and given the means to explore and find my passion for community-based research and empowering the voice of the statistics we gather—our voices, all our voices. I am also blessed to have been cheered on every step of this journey.

Claudette

While completing my ethics course at the BC-CfE, I came upon this quote on one of the pages: “research is a natural extension of this desire to understand and to improve the world in which we live.” This desire should fuel our passion for the work we do. If you want change in your community, think about ways of mobilizing this change by involving peers and community members at each step, and engaging with researchers to get things done in a good and meaningful way. In this century, we are now more than willing to share the data with communities. We are trying to bring this back in a respectful, meaningful and good way. The important thing is to embrace community with each step and learn together. Walking together, side by side is the way to learn and ensure the most benefit for all involved.

Nilou

Claudette has said this very eloquently, and I will quote her here: “Things can get complicated when a squirrel attempts to bury and hide his friend the bird’s seeds for next winter. Just because the squirrel hides and buries his nuts, he assumes that his friend, the bird, will also need help burying his seeds. The bird, with no seeds and no use for seeds underground, will suffer through the winter.

Thinking you’re doing something to help without communicating with your partners can damage their wellbeing. One size does not fit all, and not everyone is on the same page. In the same way, we could all benefit from conversations about how we could best support one another. Just like the birds and the squirrels, not every bird or squirrel likes the same seeds or nuts, nor hides or eats them the same way. This is the importance of the conversations at every stage of what we do.”

One of the very first things Claudette said to me when we tried to define allyship was that **“we’re from the stars, the cosmos, allyship is so pure and simple, it brings the right people together.”** Fundamentally, that is what we believe allyship is—a pure and simple, mutual understanding of what’s important, trusting that the world brings people together for a reason.



Tree of Life with Photos: We would like to acknowledge Eduardo Caceres' amazing work on the first and second DNA trees and bringing Claudette's beautiful vision to paper.