



Aboriginal Y.O.U.T.H. Gathering
(Youth Organized United Together Healing)
“Turning our voices into action”



Aboriginal Y.O.U.T.H. Gathering (Youth Organized United Together Healing) “Turning our voices into action”

This Profile is the result of the commitment to community capacity building that Ma Mawi uses, and their invitation to the Canadian CED Network to join one of their initiatives as an observer in order to tell their story for the purposes of sharing their experience, learning from practice, and inspiring others.

Introduction

The Aboriginal Y.O.U.T.H. (Youth Organized United Together Healing) Gathering, held in Winnipeg’s inner-city in March 2007, gave Aboriginal youth the opportunity to “turn their voices into action.” With the guidance of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre (Ma Mawi), seven youth were teamed up with experienced mentors to plan and host a conference that sought to foster a sense of Aboriginal identity, act as a forum for Aboriginal youth to express their ideas and needs, synthesize these needs into a policy plan for government and other decision makers, and enable Aboriginal youth to advocate and act for change.

The gathering was innovative and instructive in its design and execution as an empowerment tool for urban Aboriginal youth. Following the same model as Ma Mawi’s many other *Learning Conferences*, it approached community development “from-the-inside-out;” Aboriginal youth adopted a leading role in organizing and hosting the event. Since there is so much more involved in these models than simply conferring and providing a forum for education, the conferences are more often described as “gatherings.” Most sessions of the gathering, for example, emphasized interaction through interpersonal activities and small group discussion, rather than the lecture style of many conferences.

The result of this approach is that the participants gained opportunities to express themselves, network and have fun together with discussions, meals, music and dancing gained employable skills and experience while reflecting on their own growth as individuals and as young and leading members of the Aboriginal community. As a model for community development, this gathering

represents a grass-roots approach to consultation, communication, and capacity building that is more likely to meet people's needs than the consultation process normally employed by policy-makers. Ultimately, the Aboriginal Y.O.U.T.H. gathering offered all Aboriginal youth in Winnipeg the opportunity to begin creating an urban social, cultural, and economic climate that works for them.

Context

Aboriginal youth in Winnipeg – Aboriginal youth are among those who are most marginalized in society and they face particular challenges in bringing about change in their own lives. According to the 2001 Statistics Canada census, there were approximately 9,610 Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 and 24 living in Winnipeg. These youth are directly or indirectly affected by particular social and economic problems related to systemic racism (the ways the underlying assumptions upon which social institutions are based favour middle-class, white men), including poverty, unemployment, mental illness, poor health, family violence, suicide, addictions and alcoholism, assault and sexual assault, police brutality, incarceration, sexual exploitation, and a lack of formal education. All of these are linked to embedded forms of structural racism and compounded by sexism and ageism.

Yet Aboriginal youth are acting together toward creating the

change they seek. The often overlooked strengths of Aboriginal youth lie in their continued pride in their Aboriginal identities and the cultural knowledge that comes from those identities. Their strengths as youth lie in their willingness to take risks, their resilience, their energy, their creative minds, their knowledge of youth cultures and ability to engage other youth, their capacity to learn and try new ideas, their proficiency with new technology, and their strong social networks.

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre – One of the key mandates of Ma Mawi is to build the Aboriginal community's capacity upon the strength of existing social networks. This means that they take their direction from the communities they serve and take on the responsibility of responding appropriately. Careful effort is made to identify the particular needs of specific groups such as women or men, young mothers or fathers, youth, families, children in care, sexually-exploited youth, people in crisis, or people who are underemployed or seeking employment. Ma Mawi invites these specific groups to meet in *Learning Conferences*, (often with the relevant government decision-makers also present) to discuss the barriers they face, the support they need to create community development opportunities, and the ways people can support themselves and each other. People gain self-confidence and an awareness of their common experiences, and community networks grow stronger. As a result of this unique approach and their leadership position in the urban Aboriginal community in Winnipeg, Ma Mawi was

invited by Heritage Canada to submit a proposal for the Aboriginal Y.O.U.T.H. gathering. The purpose was to build on a similar youth forum held by Heritage Canada, Justice Canada, and the Aboriginal Youth Advisory Committee in January of 2003 that followed the more traditional seminar model.



experienced in leadership and event organization, were assigned to act as guides for the project. Ma Mawi's special projects coordinator, Jenna Leskiw, became the conference coordinator. Diedre Garson, a Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) intern at Thunderbird House (an Aboriginal cultural centre in downtown Winnipeg) and two Aboriginal youth representatives from Heritage Canada rounded out the conference team. It led to some interesting and productive dialogue between government representatives and the community. This provided the civil servants and their employer with a relationship-based insight into the needs, ideas, priorities and capacity of youth living in the inner-city. A non-Aboriginal youth researcher from CCEDNet was also involved as a participant-observer, making contributions where appropriate.

Building the Team

The seven Aboriginal youth leaders – James Hope, A.J. Buchie, Natasha Lavallee, Ashley Gramada, Asia Born, Jeremy Desjarlais, and Shyanne Sinclair (aged 16 to 19) were hired for the duration of the conference as the main creative and organizational force behind planning, directing, and synthesizing the final outcomes of the gathering into policy recommendations. Wally Chartrand and Joanne Clowes, two of Ma Mawi's full-time community training and learning program staff

Weekend Retreat

The team convened for the first time at a team-building weekend retreat designed to enable everyone to develop solid, trusting working relationships. Leaving the city for a remote cultural retreat centre for the weekend removed the group from the distractions of daily life and allowed them to focus on the tasks at hand, including both the gathering as well as the building of relationships with each other. One team member mentioned that being out of cell phone range alone made a big difference to the success of this step.

The first task assigned to each team member was to consider their own place in the team through guided self-reflection. This was led by one of the non-youth support staff who used his characteristic leadership style of leading-by-doing. He talked openly about his personal history, including life-lessons learned as an Aboriginal teenager, and related this to how he saw his role in the team. The youth team members used his example to share their own personal reflections and the ways this related to being a contributing member of the team. The group became more able to identify their commonalities, solidify and confirm their mutual trust and common purpose, and commit to the rest of the planning process.

One of the main functions of the adult support staff was to pay careful attention to the overall group dynamic. If someone's concerns were not being heard or were passed over too quickly, or if someone was not speaking up, one of the support staff would slow things down and dig out specific further discussion. The support staff ensured that all youth team members were continually engaged in their process, all the while respecting it as youth-directed. With strong, positive group dynamics in place, the team then held preliminary meetings, during which they named the conference and established the thematic framework of *Past*, *Present*, and *Future*.



Organizational Structure and Decision-Making

Once back in the city, the team met bi-weekly for six weeks leading up to the weekend of the gathering. At each meeting the conference coordinator set an agenda, chaired the meeting, and kept minutes. Meetings were run on an informal consensus model, where substantial issues were discussed until everyone was heard and an agreeable course of action was decided upon. Team meetings would break off into independent subcommittees, which were each empowered to make the relevant decisions for their section, and the coordinator would circulate to each group to consolidate each committee's plan. This meant that as a larger group the members let go of their need to know what the conference as a whole was going to look like and trusted the decisions of other team members. It is to the team's credit that they were able to relinquish some of their own control over the whole process while taking personal responsibility over their

particular part of the process for the benefit of the team.

Aboriginal Y.O.U.T.H. Gathering - Goals and Objectives

The two-day gathering hosted about 100 Aboriginal youth participants with a diverse range of personal experiences and, therefore, singular insight into youth needs. The seven youth organizers decided to structure the gathering into three sections with the themes of *Past, Present and Future*, offering discussions and activities under each theme. Topics included employment training, economic issues, education, arts and culture, justice, social problems and personal development. It is interesting that the guiding principles established by the youth organizers expressed many of the same guiding principles followed by Ma Mawi. The youth articulated their guiding principles into these four primary goals of the gathering:

1. Youth will gain a better understanding of their identity as Aboriginal youth by being introduced to our Aboriginal culture as a way to gain a sense of togetherness.

2. Youth will be updated on current realities affecting Aboriginal youth so as to gain a sense of hope that our voices are being heard.

3. Youth will be given the opportunity in a safe, supportive environment to voice concerns, thus motivating youth to take responsibility for positive changes in the community.

4. To have fun and build new relationships.

The wider range of objectives implicitly expressed in these four goals include: affirming and creating a sense of cultural identity, taking pride in that identity, providing a safe place to express needs, ensuring that those expressions of needs are heard, building self-confidence by allowing youth to use their skills, building on those skills, self-empowerment, building support networks and community, taking pride in that community, motivating action, and celebrating Aboriginal youth.

Lessons Learned

The team met their goals and objectives through the design and execution of the gathering in diverse ways, learning many lessons in the process. Described below are aspects of the gathering that made it a successful model of community development, capacity building, community engagement, and youth leadership development.

Capacity building and youth Empowerment

Each member of the youth team already possessed leadership skills, but the Y.O.U.T.H. gathering created opportunities to further develop and use

these skills and build self-confidence. And since building on existing strengths is a foundational component of building capacity, responsibility for particular tasks were assumed, or even created, based on the youth leaders interests and aptitudes. For example, one youth leader who was not as outspoken or comfortable with public speaking was instead asked to sing the closing song of the gathering with her drum group. Speaking notes for each team member were written and practiced well in advance, so that everyone felt confident for their turn at the podium and a full rehearsal allowed for feedback to be given to each speaker. The results of this skill and confidence building approach were noticeable at the gathering as each youth leader spoke well and nervousness minimized. Everyone in the team was set up to succeed.

Most of the conference organizing was done by individual team members who were held accountable for accomplishing their organizational tasks by themselves and by each other (rather than by the conference coordinator). Being given responsibilities and being presumed capable of handling responsibility is a type of empowerment that youth do not often experience. Some examples of this empowerment included youth writing all of their own speaking notes, the respect and careful consideration that were afforded all concerns raised during meetings, and the fact that the booking of everyone from the speakers to caterers was entirely handled by the youth team. One interesting illustration of the advantage of allowing the youth to make decisions was seen in a debate that

arose over the choice of caterer. The adults on the team favoured a local restaurant as the caterer while the youth were unanimously in favour of a restaurant chain. The youth made the final decision and the words “free Subway sandwiches” proved to be a valuable way to entice other youth to attend the conference, in a way that “free Alicia’s perogies” could not. The youth knew what they were doing.

The youth did things their own way, which was important. For example, there were routinely phones ringing during planning meetings. The accepted protocol in this situation would be for the culprit to apologize quickly and turn it off, flustered and embarrassed. However, at these meetings, the youth answered their phones and talked, while still at the table! Shocking audacity, but the results were surprising. The meeting was not disrupted and often the meeting’s business was conducted instantly – someone would suggest a DJ and within minutes they were booked and the meeting moved on. This was possible because “outsiders’ rules” were not imposed on a youth-lead process. The youth made the decisions, big and small, and they were given the space to take responsibility for their decisions and do so in their own way.

Building pride in cultural identity and reaching youth

The seven youth leaders hired were selected in a way that attempted to maximize diversity within the team, ensuring that a full range of youth needs are heard and ensuring that the 100-plus gathering participants also reflected a diverse cross-section of

Aboriginal youth as they were directly and actively recruited by these seven youth leaders through their existing community networks, community organizations associated with Ma Mawi, and from various schools in the inner city. This was an event for and by Aboriginal youth, and it was evident from beginning to end. Participants felt they were part of something significant, and Aboriginal youth used technology and culturally-significant ideas in creative ways, making them their own in the process.

The Y.O.U.T.H gathering was completely Aboriginal. The venue was the Indian and Métis friendship centre, the speakers were Aboriginal, the entertainment, the sound man, and the sponsors were Aboriginal. The opening ceremony of the gathering incorporated Aboriginal cultural signifiers and practices that were also appealing to youth, affirming and creating a sense of cultural identity and pride. One of the adult support staff had encouraged the team to come up with an opening that created a sense of wonder, and the result was magic. They began with a story that set the tone for the gathering. The gathering began with a story emphasizing strength in unity that was created by members of the team. The story was concluded with the lighting of the sacred fire, which burned for the duration of the gathering. A drum group then began to sing, and dancers of various styles and of all ages entered and circulated throughout the room. As the dancers exited and the song ended, a video introducing the youth team began that included each youth team member's wishes for the gathering's

participants. This was followed by an opening prayer and a cleansing smudge customary of many Aboriginal gatherings, particularly on the prairies. The master of ceremonies, one of the team members, then took the podium and spoke with a casual and upbeat demeanor, to which the crowd readily responded. Through the video introduction, the rapport between the master of ceremonies and her audience, and the game with an MP3 player as the prize, it was clear that the ceremony was distinctly led by and for youth.

Creating a safe and supportive environment

The team took steps to ensure a safe, supportive environment for the participants to express their needs, ideas, and visions at the gathering, creating the space for personal and sensitive information being shared in the small discussion groups. The team took the preliminary step of specifying some ground rules in registration forms, which confirmed that by registering, participants were agreeing to be present and punctual for the two-day gathering, to actively participate, and to demonstrate respect for self and others. Each session was also introduced by a team member who introduced him or herself and relayed a relevant personal anecdote. By sharing personal stories, team leaders demonstrated that others could feel safe to do the same.

Community networking

Youth leaders established and strengthened their community ties – building ties with schools, community organizations, speakers, venues, entertainers, technicians, and sponsors in the process of organizing the gathering. Those who were not as social found themselves in a crash course in

networking. Every aspect of the gathering was consciously designed to encourage people to meet and talk, in recognition of the value of informal discussion. Games and social events provided opportunities for interaction and seating arrangements were changed on the second day to encourage people to sit with new people.

The youth team identified the importance of making the gathering fun and celebrating Aboriginal youth. This encouraged participation and allowed for networking, but it also recognized that youth and their cultures are themselves important and worth celebrating. Eating together, dancing, talking, supporting their artist peers, and just hanging out together were acknowledged as essential parts of working together. This event avoided the mistake that too many conferences make in over-scheduling everyone's time. The value of "hang-out" time is recognized by these youth.

Influencing policy from the bottom-up

Through the Y.O.U.T.H. gathering, young Aboriginal people determined their own policy agenda and priorities. As well, the youth leaders were empowered and given the resources they need to synthesize the results of the gathering into a policy document and, along with Heritage Canada, to disseminate this information. Enabling the priorities of youth to be interpreted and communicated by their peers is empowering, builds capacity, and is less likely to distort the messages being conveyed by participants. A report compiled by a top-down approach is of little use to community organizations like Ma Mawi, since these outsider approaches cannot reliably connect with

or reflect the priorities of the communities that they are not a part of.

The gathering did, however, draw a smaller number of participants than expected. To work optimally, this model requires not only integration in the community, but also substantial time. The short time frame available to bring this gathering together was a result of the funding procedures in place. More youth could have participated in the gathering if there had been more time to recruit volunteers, to advertise, and to build up to the gathering to give participants more of a sense that it was *theirs*. With reliable core funding, this gathering could happen more regularly, meeting youth needs more effectively.

Reflections

There is no question that the returns on the funding invested in this endeavour are substantial. The gathering employed seven youth, making them more employable in the process. It reached over 100 additional youth, not only hearing their needs, but giving them a shared sense of who they are and the power they have. The fact that the team members were paid for their time was crucial. It means that their *singular expertise as Aboriginal youth* was valued. Some members of the team would not have been able to invest the time and energy this gathering required if they had needed to find other income. The particular perspective they bring would have been lost as a result.

Despite time constraints, steps often overlooked in similar organizational processes were included, making the gathering innovative in its design. These included building a functioning team and team members with a retreat, providing intergenerational support and mentorship at strategic moments, valuing the unique leadership skills and risk-taking organizational styles of youth, enabling an open and sharing atmosphere, emphasizing the contributions of diverse participants in the gathering, and ultimately ensuring that the gathering, as an active and practical process, was led by and for youth. While gaining skills and experience, youth were engaged in articulating and creating a vision for change. This fits with Ma Mawi's way of building an enabled and empowered community: *participants entered the gathering with their diverse past experiences and left with a path established for future action.*

Published by

Canadian CED Network
211-620 View Street
Victoria, BC V8W 1J6
Telephone: 250-386-9980
Toll Free: 1-877-202-2268
Fax: 250-386-9984

CCEDNet – Manitoba Region
Brendan Reimer
breimer@ccednet-rcdec.ca

An electronic copy of this document is available on the CCEDNet website:
www.ccednet-rcdec.ca

Copyright © 2007
Canadian CED Network

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre

Administrative Site:

94 McGregor Street
Winnipeg, MB R2W 4V5
Tel: (204) 925-0300
Fax: (204) 946-5042
info@mamawi.com
[website: www.mamawi.com](http://www.mamawi.com)

