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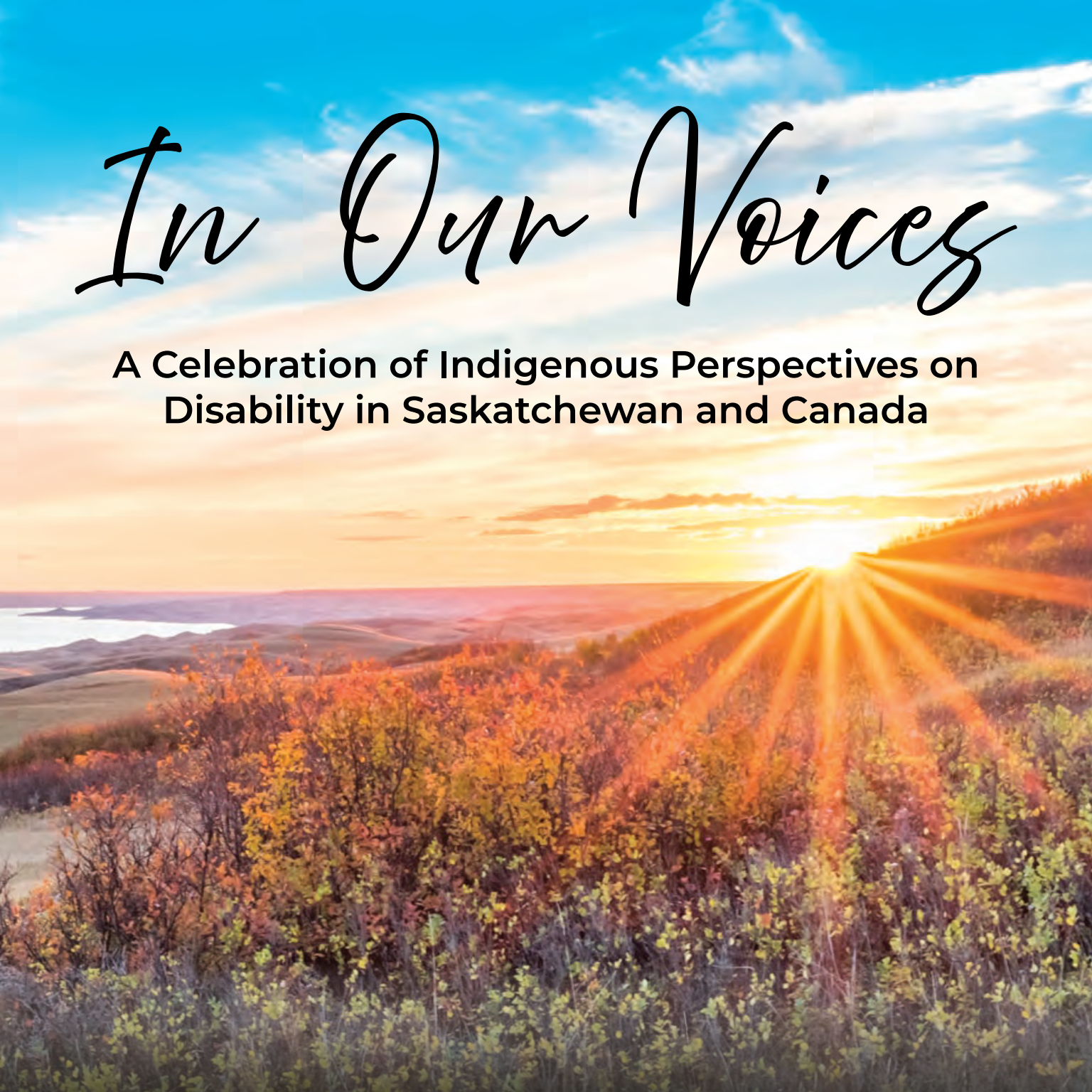
In Our Voices
A Celebration of Indigenous Perspectives on Disability in Saskatchewan and Canada

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A Celebration of Indigenous Perspectives on Disability in Saskatchewan and Canada

Elise Matthews
Jan Gelech
Whitney Ogle
Kate Neufeld

A digital version of In Our Voices is available at www.rrun.ca

Photo Credit: Tourism Saskatchewan/J.F. Bergeron/ENVIRO FOTO

We acknowledge all the Indigenous persons and families whose words and experiences are featured in this book. We thank you for making your journeys public and for making this collection of stories and teachings possible.

RRUN

RECOGNIZING RESILIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING NEED

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Photo Credit: Tourism Saskatchewan/Chris Hendrickson Photography

INTRODUCTION

This book invites us to listen to stories and teachings from Indigenous voices that honour the gifts of people living with disabilities, their families, and their communities.

A Celebration of Resilience and Strength

Photo provided by Whitney Ogle

"In Our Voices" is a heartfelt collection woven with the intention of building a brighter future for our children, particularly those who navigate the world with unique gifts often labeled as disabilities. This book is a gathering of stories and teachings from Indigenous children, families, Elders, and the community. Each story and reflection is a step towards reshaping how we understand and embrace childhood disability within our communities.

Through these words, we hope to offer comfort, strength, and solidarity to families and children who may see pieces of their own journey reflected here.

In many of our Indigenous knowledge systems, storytelling is an honoured tradition. To share one's story is to extend a hand in kinship, to create a connection with one another, and to deepen our relationship with the world around us. Each voice in this book is honoured for its wisdom, resilience, and unique perspective.

Language, at the heart of this book, is vital to who we are as Indigenous people. Our languages are the blueprints of our cultural identities, shaping our understanding of the world. Through Indigenous ways of knowing, these perspectives invite us to see childhood disability not as a shortcoming but as a sacred gift, an offering from the Creator. In a world where differences are often misunderstood or seen as deficits, this book is a gentle invitation to shift that perspective. Our children are gifts from the Creator, bringing knowledge, wisdom, and teachings that bridge the Spirit world and the physical world.

This book is dedicated to every child, from every Nation and every walk of life, who has a story to tell. "In Our Voices" is a journey into the lives of Indigenous people who are honouring the unique challenges and gifts that the Creator has placed in their paths. Through their voices, we remember that every story is sacred, and each one holds a place in the circle of life.

Whitney Ogle/Winyan Wašté (Good Woman),
Wood Mountain Lakota First Nation


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PART 1:
STORIES OF RESILIENCE

This section tells stories of how children, youth, and families meet challenges with courage, creativity, and hope.

Photo provided by Kirby Constant

KEATON CONSTANT'S STORY

Eight-year-old Keaton from Wahpeton Dakota First Nation lives with proximal femoral focal deficiency, yet his love for powwow dancing continues to shine. His father, Kirby Constant, described the moment Keaton first joined the circle:

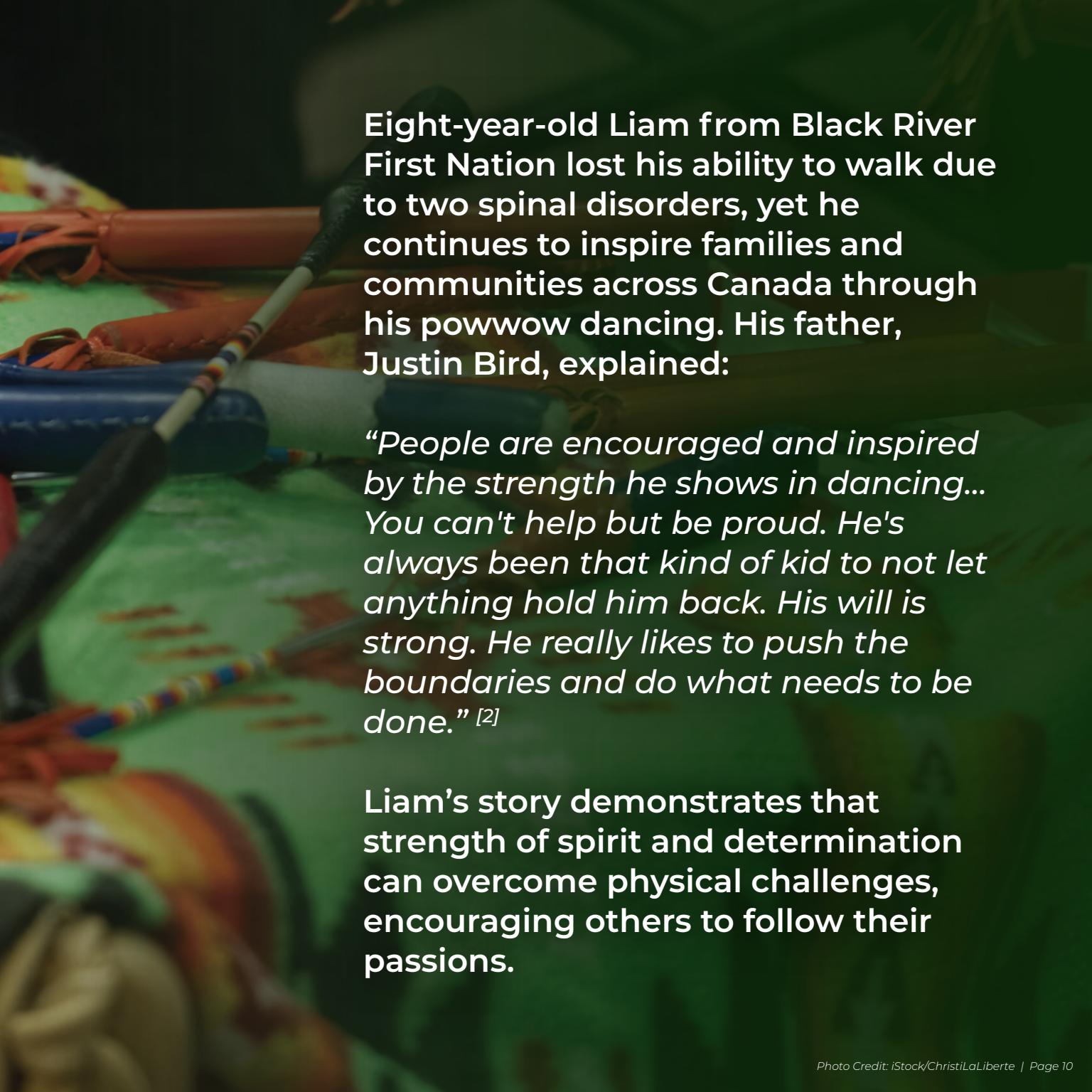
"He was always drumming and singing, his aunt and uncle gifted him some bead work, some regalia, some cuffs for him to dance. . . So we suited him up that day and after that day we just took off." [1]

Drummer Stephen Wood of the Northern Cree shared how Keaton's presence inspires others:

"He added to the energy of the circle and [he's] just a very special person...especially people who might have a [disability], knowing that [they] can do anything and anything is possible." [1]

Keaton's story shows how cultural traditions like powwow dancing can nurture confidence, belonging, and hope for children living with disabilities.

LIAM BUNN-BIRD'S STORY



Eight-year-old Liam from Black River First Nation lost his ability to walk due to two spinal disorders, yet he continues to inspire families and communities across Canada through his powwow dancing. His father, Justin Bird, explained:

“People are encouraged and inspired by the strength he shows in dancing... You can't help but be proud. He's always been that kind of kid to not let anything hold him back. His will is strong. He really likes to push the boundaries and do what needs to be done.” [2]

Liam’s story demonstrates that strength of spirit and determination can overcome physical challenges, encouraging others to follow their passions.

MATTHEW MONIAS' STORY

Matthew Monias (MattMac), a 20-year-old Oji-Cree musician from Garden Hill First Nation, was born blind but found empowerment in music. As he explained:

“I obviously have a disability. I'm blind, but I've never let that stop me.” [3]

He grew up singing in his community’s choir and taught himself guitar, piano, drums, music writing and production. When a mobile studio visited his high school, he recorded his first song and discovered a gift for sharing his story through music. A fellow musician described this gift:

“MattMac's talent is out of this world. I didn't know what to expect but when I first heard his voice and his beat, knowing that he made the beat himself and mixed the track himself, along with the way his voice sounded, it blew me away.” [3]

Matthew’s journey shows how creativity and resilience can transform barriers into gifts that help others to see possibility in their own lives.

Photo provided by Tom Sinclair

TOM SINCLAIR'S STORY

Tom Sinclair, born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Tourette Syndrome, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, found belonging through basketball in the Special Olympics and later landed a role in the feature film Champions. He reflected:

"There's a lot of things out there that people with disabilities 'can't do this' or 'can't do that,' but we are normal people too. We can do whatever you guys can do too." [4]

Tom shared his pride in representing Indigenous people on screen:

"I'm honoured to represent the Aboriginal community on the big screen. If you dream it, you can make it happen...that won't stop me from making my dreams come true." [4]

His story shows how determination and representation can break stereotypes and motivate others to dream big.

SHANE YELLOWBIRD'S STORY

As a child, Shane Yellowbird of Maskwacis Cree Nation lived with epilepsy and had a stutter. Through singing in speech therapy, he discovered his voice and went on to win a Canadian Country Music Award and three Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards. Fellow First Nations musician, Crystal Shawanda, reflected:

"What he accomplished was huge. No male Indigenous country music artist has yet to do what he has done. That kind of shows the magnitude of what he accomplished. He was the first one to get through that door...He was a trailblazer. He opened doors...He made the dreams that we dreamed a little bit more possible." [5]

Shane's story highlights how personal challenges can lead to unexpected gifts and pave the way for others in the community.

Photo Credit: Heather ("Kashmera") / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 2.0

THE LITTLECROW FAMILY'S STORY

The Littlecrow family of Whitecap Dakota First Nation faced significant barriers to medical care when their son, diagnosed with cerebral palsy and epilepsy, needed urgent services. They relocated to the city so he could receive timely care. Whitecap Chief Darcy Bear applied for Jordan's Principle to support the family and other children in their community. They learned they would be receiving a wheelchair accessible home in their community. Brenda Littlecrow, the boy's mother, emphasized the importance of advocacy:

"Nothing is ridiculous or stupid when it comes to accessing better services and supports for our children." [6]

The Littlecrow family's experience shows the importance of persistence, advocacy, and community leadership in securing better care for children.

Photo provided by Kim Bayer

KIM BAYER'S STORY

Kim Bayer, a Métis woman, shared how bipolar disorder does not take away her inspiration, especially the strength she draws from her culture:

"Nothing – not even bipolar disorder – can take away the things that inspire me. One of these sources of inspiration is being Métis. I can always draw on this. We have a beautifully vibrant culture, filled with stories of resilience and the teachings of Elders and people of all ages." [7]

Kim's story illustrates how cultural identity can be a grounding force for resilience and wellbeing.

COREY GUY'S STORY

Corey Guy of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan shared how he rediscovered his Indigenous identity while living with substance use disorder. Through ceremony, he found healing:

"I think these [ceremonies] are going to break down some of the barriers that we have. We've got to kind of end that generational trauma...That's the kind of thing that can be done with any kind of ceremony and prayer, learning language, anything like that, learning songs. These all help break that cycle." [8]

Corey's story highlights the role of ceremony, language, and cultural teachings in breaking cycles of trauma and restoring wellbeing.

NIALL SCHOFIELD'S STORY

Niall Schofield, who was adopted during the Sixties Scoop and living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), experienced discrimination and depression but eventually turned to creativity. He launched his own clothing line, explaining:

"I took the trauma and all the things I have overcome and then I put the message into my clothing...My last word would be to not give up hope and to always focus on your dreams." [9]

Niall's story shows how embracing identity and creativity can turn hardship into empowerment and opportunity.

DR. ALIKA LAFONTAINE'S STORY

Dr. Alika Lafontaine, born and raised in Treaty 4 Territory, was labeled as having a learning disability and lived with a stutter. He was told he would never graduate high school. He later became an anesthesiologist and the first Indigenous president of the Canadian Medical Association. Reflecting on his childhood, he said:

"I definitely had learning challenges...People were quick, I think, as a kid, to label me as somebody who just couldn't achieve because of this." [10]

Dr. Lafontaine's journey demonstrates how those living with a disability can overcome challenges and have a strong leadership role in their communities.

PART 2:

INDIGENOUS VOICES ON DISABILITY

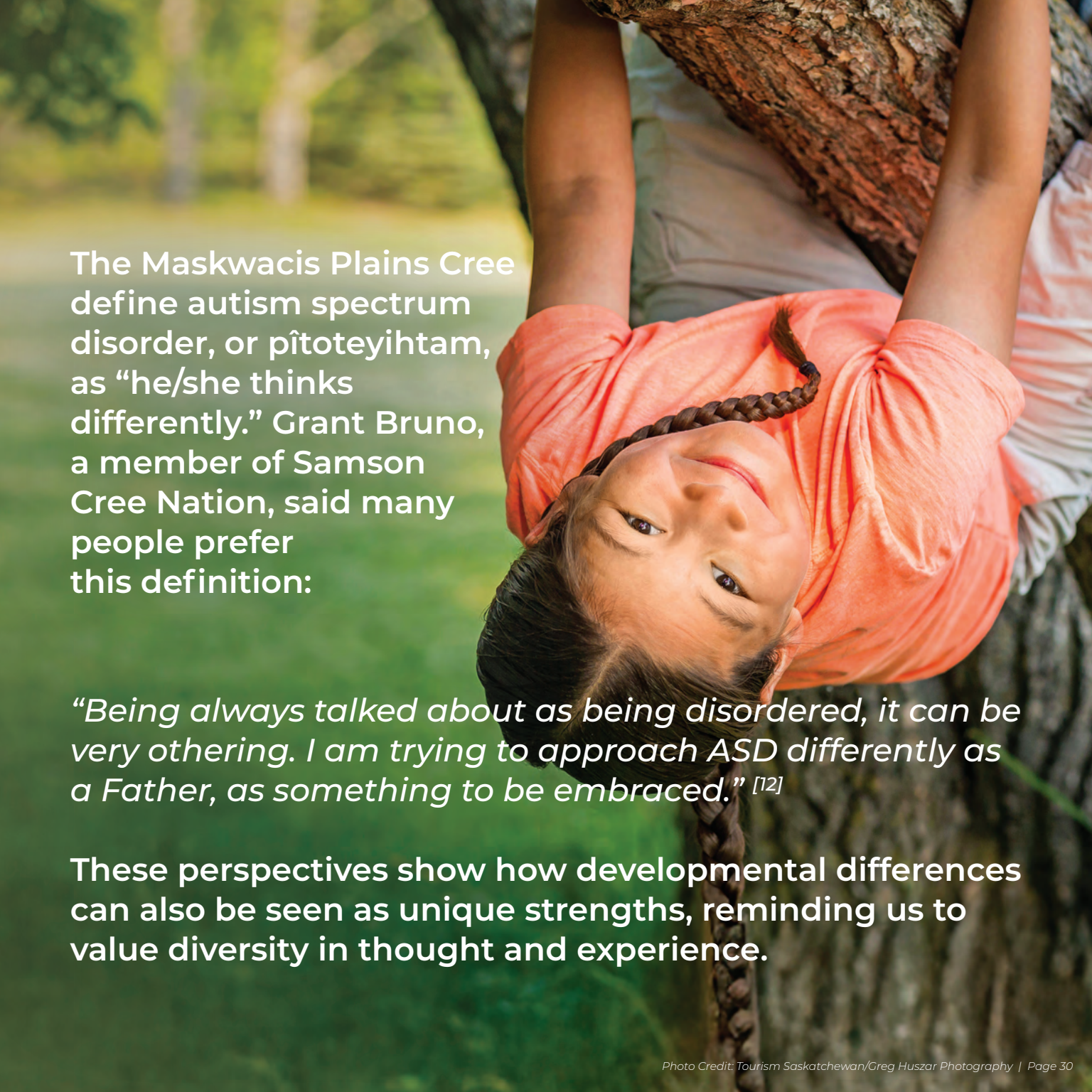
This section offers experiences and teachings about disability and difference from many perspectives.

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES

Developmental disabilities are conditions that start in childhood and affect how the brain grows and works. They can make it harder for a person to learn, communicate, behave, or manage daily life at home, school, or work. One example is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Cadmus Delorme, who was Chief of Cowessess First Nation, shared his understanding of autism:

"When children have those special gifts (ASD), they actually have a unique relationship with the Creator, with the spiritual world. . . A child who has a very unique perspective on the world, we can actually learn a lot from them." [11]



The Maskwacis Plains Cree define autism spectrum disorder, or pîtoteyihtam, as "he/she thinks differently." Grant Bruno, a member of Samson Cree Nation, said many people prefer this definition:

"Being always talked about as being disordered, it can be very othering. I am trying to approach ASD differently as a Father, as something to be embraced." [12]

These perspectives show how developmental differences can also be seen as unique strengths, reminding us to value diversity in thought and experience.

PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES

Physical disabilities are conditions that affect a person's body, movement, or overall health. They can influence daily activities and self-care. One example is arthritis.

An Indigenous woman living with arthritis explained how incorporating traditional foods has become an important part of her healing and wellbeing:

"Food is a medicine...My kids...they just try and share the different foods or what is naturally available that is an anti-inflammatory... They worked in ancient times and...we're just not aware of these foods as medicine." [13]

Her story shows how physical differences can be supported through traditional knowledge and practices that strengthen health and resilience.

SENSORY DIFFERENCES

Sensory disabilities are when a person has difficulty with one of their senses—such as seeing, hearing, or both. This affects how they experience and interact with the world. One example is hearing impairment.

Marsha and Max Ireland, married for 40 years, have five Deaf children and twelve Deaf grandchildren. In 2016, they began developing Oneida Sign Language (OSL), inspired by the environment, geography, language, and culture of their home Nation.

Marsha Ireland, of the Oneida Nation, who developed Oneida Sign Language, shared:

"Many of us, Indigenous Deaf people, feel rejected from that very dominant white culture within the Deaf community. So, for me, I really focused on learning my own traditions, my own culture, and that's where I felt connection and understanding and acceptance." [14]

Their story shows how sensory differences can be a source of strength, fostering language, identity, and belonging within community and culture.

HEALTH DIFFERENCES

Chronic illnesses are health problems that last a long time and usually need regular care. They can affect a person's daily life and wellbeing. One example is diabetes.

Carol Cochrane, a cookbook author from Fisher River Cree Nation, emphasizes the importance of respecting traditional food and healing in managing diabetes:

"Our food is sacred. Our food is our medicine. Our food is part of our culture and our identity. We can't allow that to be lost." [15]

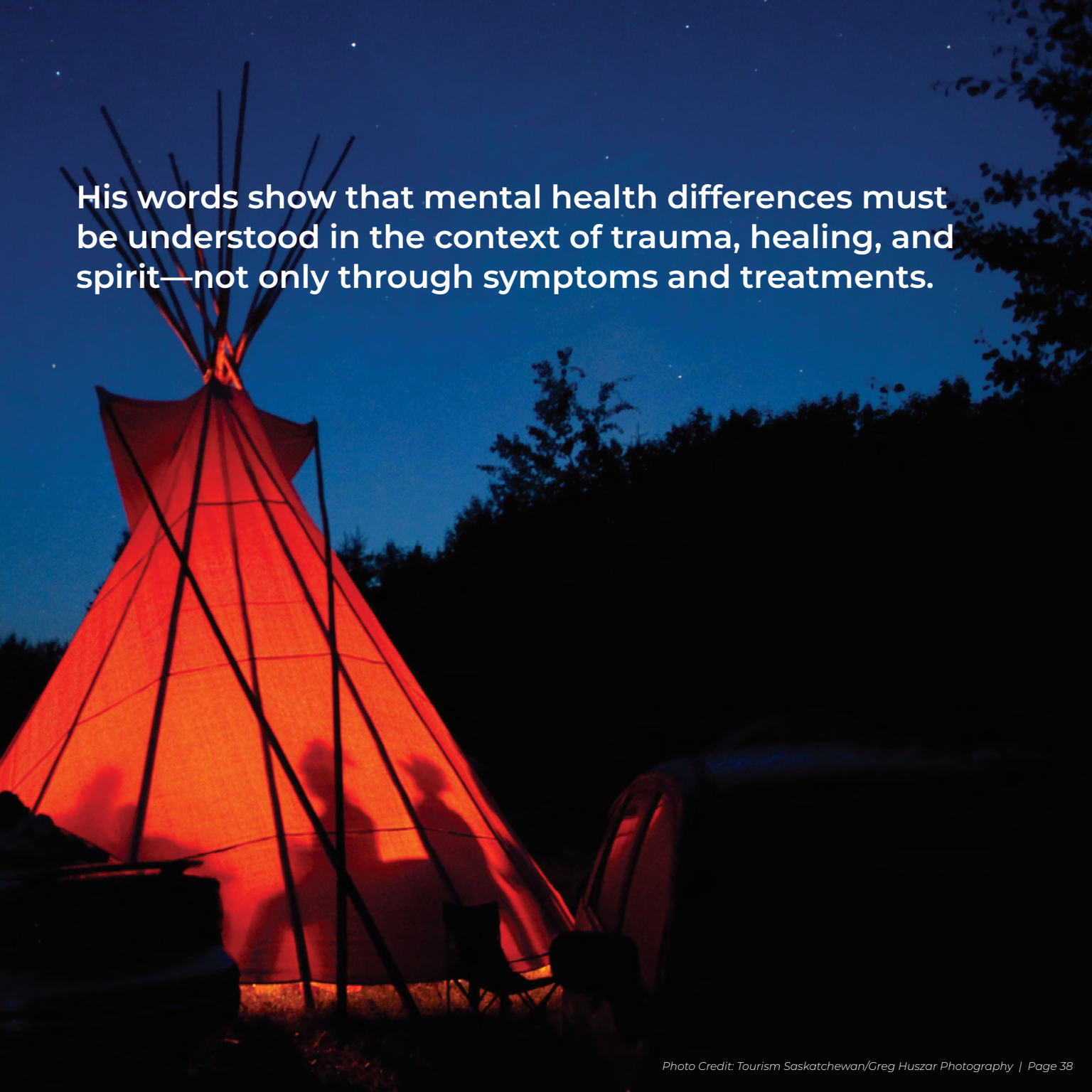
Her words highlight how health differences are managed not only through medical treatment, but also by honouring cultural identity and traditional ways of living well.

MENTAL HEALTH DIFFERENCES

Mental health disorders are conditions that affect a person's thoughts, feelings, or behaviours. They can influence wellbeing, relationships, and daily life. One example is anxiety.

Elder Little Brown Bear explains how he uses sacred medicines—sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar, and lavender—to support community members through smudging and easing anxiety. He shared:

"Mainstream medical treatments focus too much on addictions and mental health and don't take into account the trauma that might be influencing these factors for Indigenous people... A lot a people don't understand that big grief in somebody's heart means big anger outwardly. So helping to deal with that grief and understanding that grief. Also it's not your fault. This is a result of intergenerational impacts...Once you start dealing with trauma issues, a lot of this other stuff starts to go away." [16]



His words show that mental health differences must be understood in the context of trauma, healing, and spirit—not only through symptoms and treatments.

Photo Credit: Tourism Saskatchewan/Greg Huszar Photography |

PART 3:
SUPPORTING OUR FAMILIES

This section shares teachings of care and belonging that guide us in supporting children with special gifts and needs, and their families.

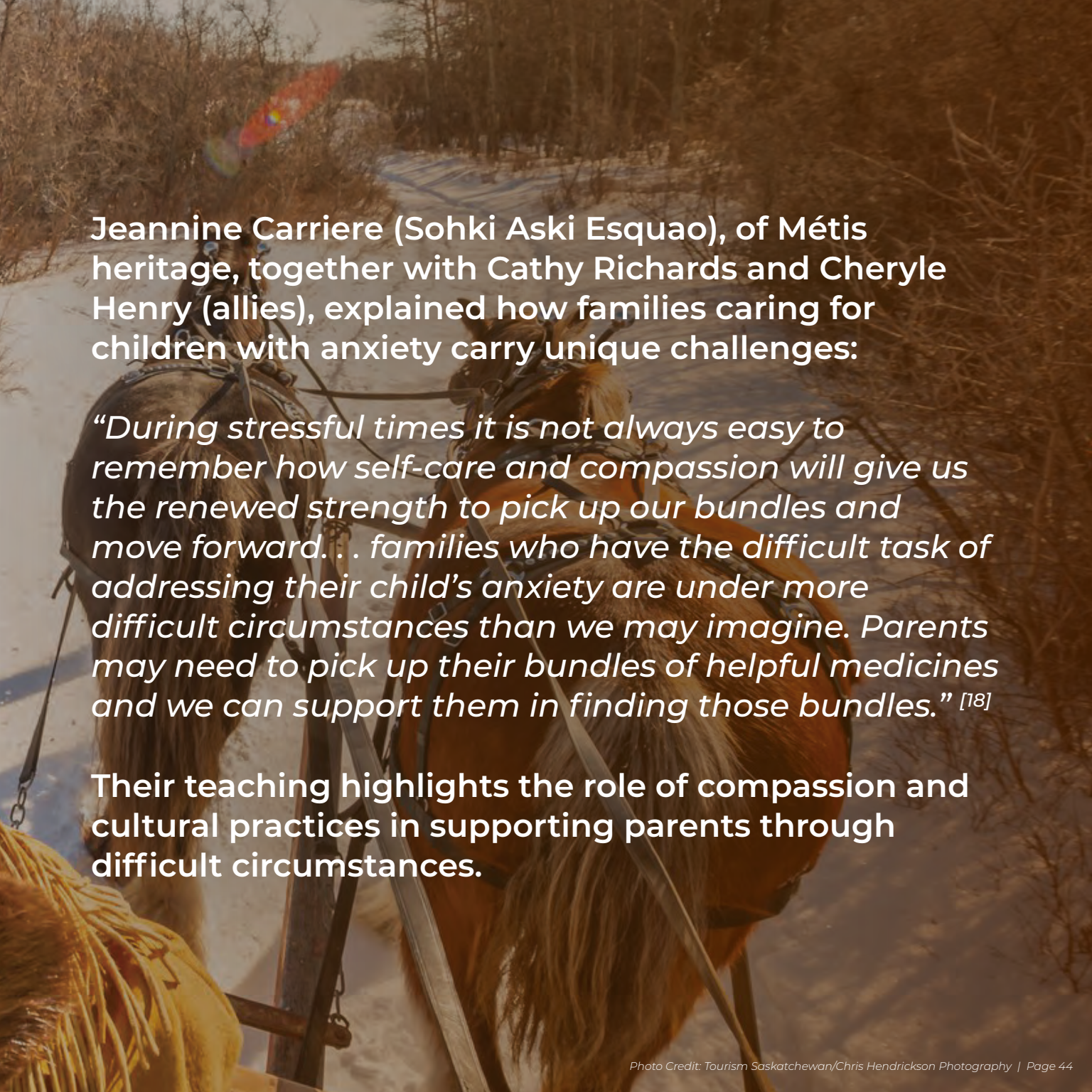
KATHY ABSOLON'S TEACHING

Kathy Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe/Shining Day Woman), an Anishinaabe scholar, speaks about the importance of "picking up our bundles" to guide families in their journeys of care:

"Picking up our bundles means to relearn, reclaim, pick up and own the teachings and practices that emanate from holistic theory and knowledge. It means to live and practice minobimaadsiwin (a good life)." [17]

Her words remind us that reclaiming cultural teachings supports both families and communities in living well.

JEANNINE CARRIERE AND ALLIES



Jeannine Carriere (Sohki Aski Esquao), of Métis heritage, together with Cathy Richards and Cheryle Henry (allies), explained how families caring for children with anxiety carry unique challenges:

"During stressful times it is not always easy to remember how self-care and compassion will give us the renewed strength to pick up our bundles and move forward. . . families who have the difficult task of addressing their child's anxiety are under more difficult circumstances than we may imagine. Parents may need to pick up their bundles of helpful medicines and we can support them in finding those bundles." [18]

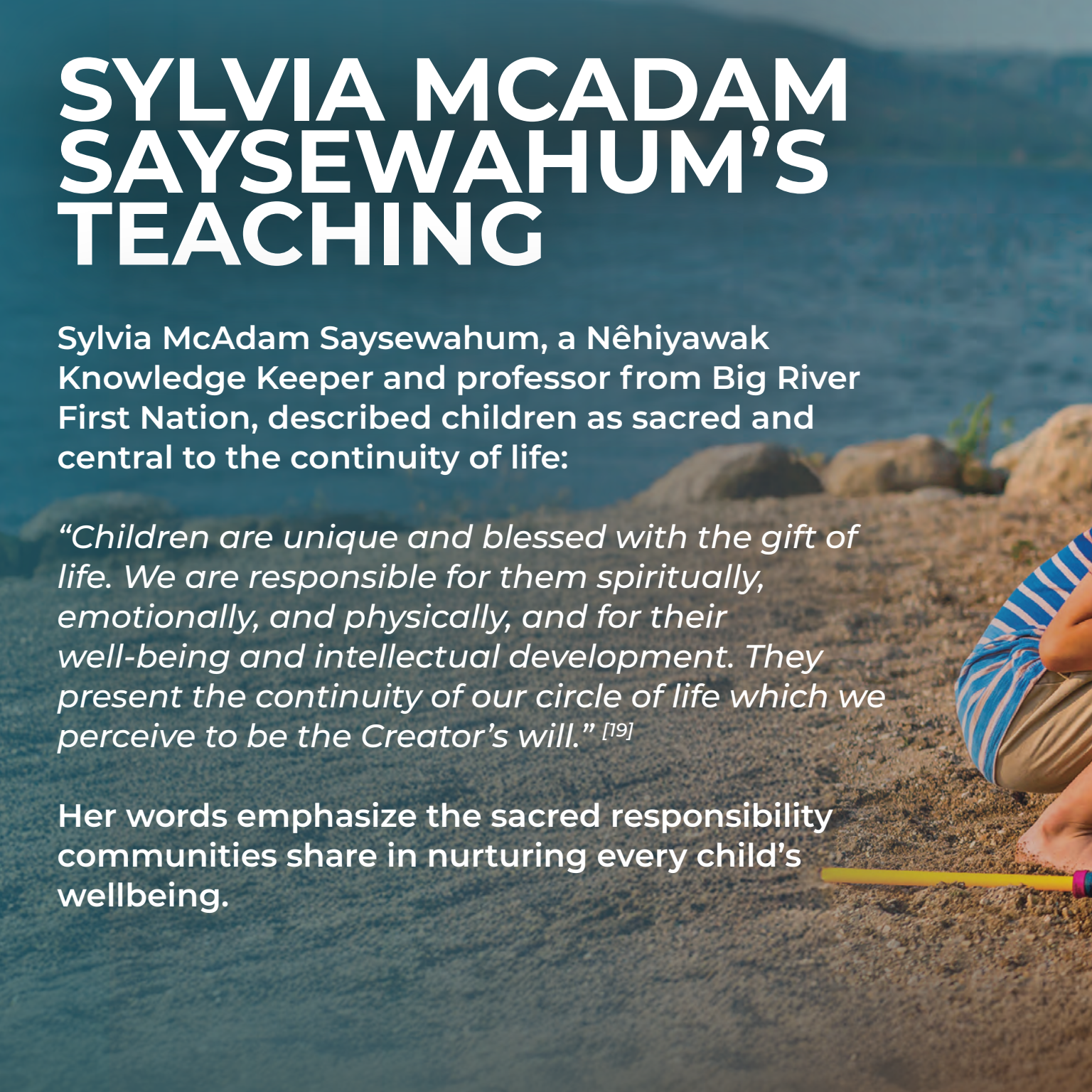
Their teaching highlights the role of compassion and cultural practices in supporting parents through difficult circumstances.

SYLVIA MCADAM SAYSEWAHUM'S TEACHING

Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum, a Nêhiyawak Knowledge Keeper and professor from Big River First Nation, described children as sacred and central to the continuity of life:

"Children are unique and blessed with the gift of life. We are responsible for them spiritually, emotionally, and physically, and for their well-being and intellectual development. They present the continuity of our circle of life which we perceive to be the Creator's will." [19]

Her words emphasize the sacred responsibility communities share in nurturing every child's wellbeing.



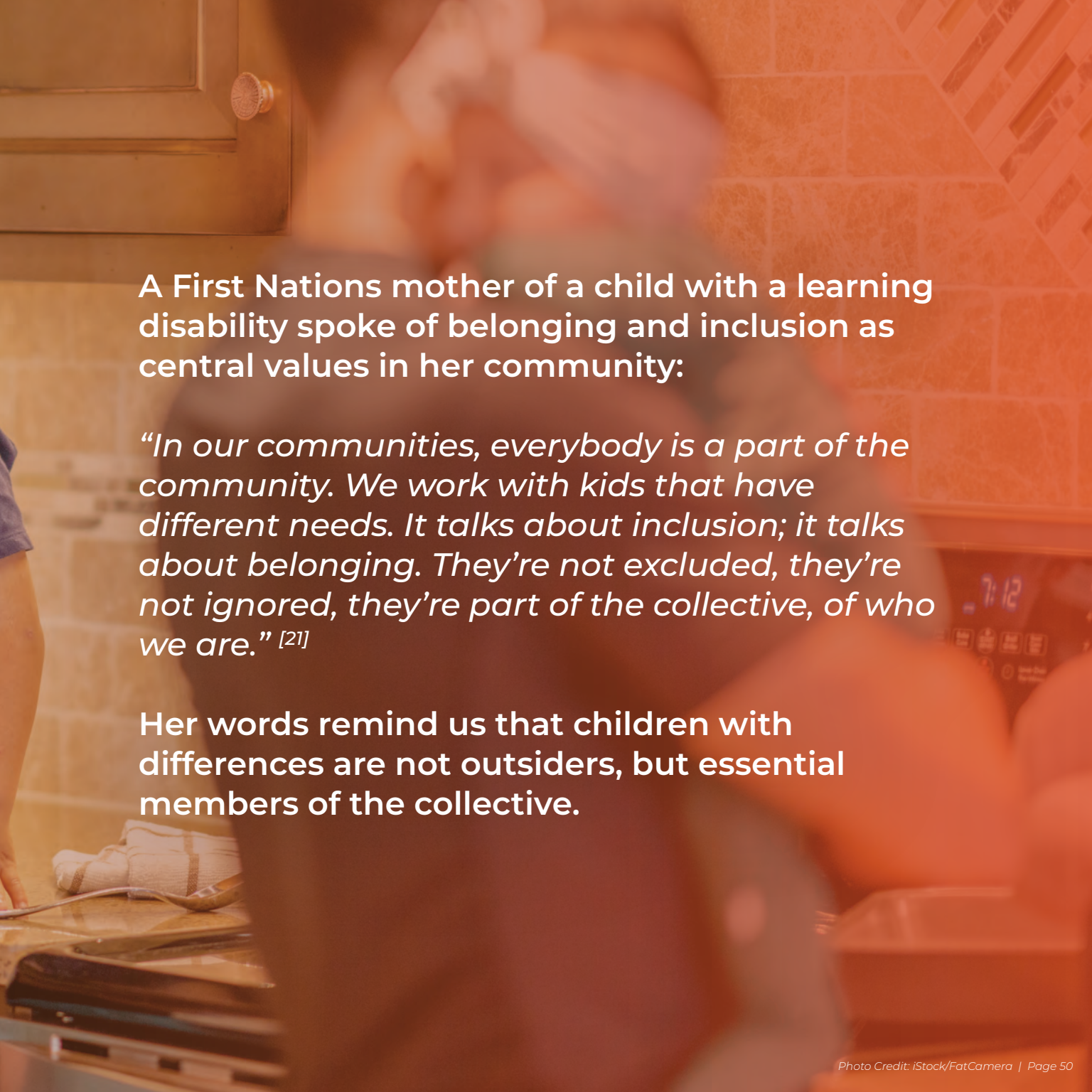
A FIRST NATIONS FATHER'S STORY

An Indigenous father of an adult child with a disability compared his child's presence to the humble muskrat in creation stories, who helped save the world:

"The lowly muskrat saved the world by being able to dive down in the waters and bring back some sediments that saved the world and restored Mother Earth. We're all meant to be who we are and it's no accident. . . The extended family is the community and we're all within the circle and it's inclusive." [20]

His story teaches us that every child is part of the circle and contributes to the collective strength of the community.

A FIRST NATIONS MOTHER'S STORY



A First Nations mother of a child with a learning disability spoke of belonging and inclusion as central values in her community:

"In our communities, everybody is a part of the community. We work with kids that have different needs. It talks about inclusion; it talks about belonging. They're not excluded, they're not ignored, they're part of the collective, of who we are." [21]

Her words remind us that children with differences are not outsiders, but essential members of the collective.

ELDER JIM DUMONT'S TEACHING

Elder Jim Dumont described how culture is a gift that guides people to live a good life:

"It is said that what the Great Spirit gave to his/her children to live in this physical world in a good way, was given forever." [22]

The Culture for Life team adds that culture helps us live fully and in balance:

"Each and every one of us is born with spirit. One's spirit desires to live life to the fullest. Culture is the facilitator of spiritual expression. It is the foundation of a 'good life'...Indigenous traditions, ceremonies and practices connect us to our culture. They help us create wellness in our lives by balancing the spirit, heart, mind and body. We know that when culture is present in our lives, we experience higher levels of wellbeing." [22]

Together, their words remind us that cultural traditions are everyday guides that nurture wellbeing and strengthen families.

Photo Credit: Tourism Saskatchewan/Greg Huszar Photography |

TERRELLYN FEARN'S TEACHING

Terrellyn Fearn of Glooscap First Nation (Mi'kma'ki), Snake Clan, described the sacred responsibility of raising children:

"Aboriginal people believe that children do not belong to us but are gifts sent from the Creator. It is our job to nurture and guide children throughout their childhood so they will grow to fulfill their purpose while on this earth. Because children are so sacred it is everyone's responsibility to nurture them and keep them safe, to provide them with unconditional love and attention so they will know they are wanted and hold a special place in the circle. Every child, regardless of age or disability, has gifts and teaches us lessons. They are all unique and should be respected." [23]

Her teaching shows how raising children, including those with disabilities, is a sacred collective responsibility.

FIRST NATIONS MOTHERS' REFLECTIONS

A mother from Lil'wat Nation shared how her community helped her family when raising a child with a developmental disability:

"When I was coming home you know there was support from the community that made a world of difference." [24]

Another mother explained:

"Our community has a sense of taking care of our children regardless of whose children they are ... everybody takes care of everybody's children." [24]

Their experiences show how strong family and community ties can transform the journey of caring for children with differences and reflects the Lil'wat Nation worldview of child rearing as a "circle of caring." [24]

PEARL YELLOW OLD WOMAN'S STORY

Pearl Yellow Old Woman, a Siksika (Blackfoot) parent, and Oji-Cree from Red Sucker Lake Nation, shared how her community views children with differences:

"As a community, we were taught that these children were special and that we need to learn all the good things about life, compassion. We were not to look at them as different, not to exclude them. There is so much humbleness in our community. We understood that these are people, despite their challenges. My mother said, 'Your eyes, hands, feet, that they don't have, you give them...give them your heart'...We were told to be kind no matter who they are, do not make fun, and accept them. . . We call them 'Pissatsipokiaayawa' (special kids) and human." [25]

Her words affirm a worldview of deep compassion, inclusion, and shared humanity.

LEROY WOLF COLLAR'S TEACHING

Leroy Wolf Collar of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation described how extended families traditionally share the responsibility of raising children:

"In our culture, there are certain terms that we use to describe our kinship relationship and ties to our community...It was the extended family that also did the rearing of the children in the community. The approach from the cultural perspective and traditions are key to the raising of our children whether it's disabled children or children in the community." [25]

His teaching reminds us that raising children has always been a collective practice, rooted in kinship and cultural traditions.


new york


CONCLUSION

The stories and teachings in this book invite us to see disability and difference through Indigenous perspectives and lived experience. Children, families, Elders, and community members remind us that every child is a sacred gift, carrying unique strengths and lessons for us all. These voices show that resilience is found in relationships, language, ceremony, and everyday acts of care and advocacy. When we listen closely, we learn that disability is not a deficit but part of life's journey. Our differences bring knowledge, identity, and belonging. Together, these voices call us to honour diversity, nurture inclusion, and walk alongside one another with respect and understanding.

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