



# Indspire

Indigenous education, | L'éducation des autochtones.  
Canada's future. | L'avenir du Canada.

## INSPIRING CHANGE

HELPING STUDENTS REALIZE THEIR DREAMS

Spring 2025

### A message from Mike DeGagné

When you support Indspire, have you ever wondered what happens to students once they complete their studies? Since 1996, thanks to donors like you, Indspire has awarded over \$248 million to more than 75,000 students. Many of these students have gone on to incredible careers and accolades.

This Spring edition of Inspiring Change features stories from students who have graduated with Indspire's support and are now into their careers helping others. Each one shares the story of how Indspire changed their lives; some, for the first time, felt that someone believed in them. Many are still pursuing post-secondary today because they know education helps them strive for even bigger dreams.

All of our past newsletters have featured students currently in school. I wanted you to see the impact your gifts have had for people well into their careers.

They never forget what Indspire did to help them change their lives – and what you did to help them change their trajectory. This newsletter is a testament to the long-term impact you have with your support. You really are changing lives, families, and communities across Canada.

I hope you enjoy reading the stories of what is possible when you donate to Indspire.

Wishing you a wonderful Spring.

Sincerely,

Mike DeGagné  
President & CEO





## Financial Expert Creating a Future of Success

**Clio Straram**  
Head, Indigenous Banking,  
BMO Financial Group

**T**oday, Clio Straram is the Head of Indigenous Banking at BMO, but her journey wasn't easy. "My family was not wealthy and there were no funds available for education. All First Nation communities have some funding for education, but it's limited and I was never able to get approved for it. At 22, I was the first in my family to graduate with a university degree."

Thankfully, Indspire was there to help. "They supported my undergrad studies in music at the University of British Columbia. The impact of their support is beyond words – I can't express what it meant for me and my future. Indspire was there again when I pursued a master's in finance at London Business School in England. When I was approved for support, I finally felt like I had a real chance to succeed. I became part of something bigger than myself – I had found people who truly cared about my future."

Clio acknowledges the historical challenges Indigenous people have faced in Canada. "The impacts of residential schools were deeply felt in my mom's family and, consequently, ours. They experienced incredibly tough times."

Clio believes in challenging stereotypes and building understanding. "So many still live below the poverty line and the funding discrepancy between First Nations students and other students is real. There is an education gap, and the need is urgent for your support."

She emphasizes how Indspire's impact extends beyond financial assistance. "Students don't just gain an

education, they 'learn how to learn' and develop critical thinking skills. Education is one of the most important things we can offer. It's a leg up on the ladder in a world with varied generational support, fewer role models, and obstacles that present so many barriers."

"What changes in the world with your investment? When you give to Indspire you also create a foundation of strength that helps students apply for jobs and open opportunities in the world. Knowledge, combined with strength and confidence, empowers us to step into the world with a greater perspective and a deeper understanding."

"My education and experience in business and finance has allowed me to champion economic self-determination in Indigenous communities. This work is critical for the future. I would say to donors and potential donors that your support is truly having a real impact on the lives of so many people. Today and for generations to come. I am just one example. As a child, the outlook for me was uncertain. Many people supported my path, but Indspire has played a big role. Their support and care for our community gave me confidence and ability to go for aspirations that felt out of reach."

"I am very proud of the fact that BMO has long supported opportunities with Indspire, through programs like Building Brighter Futures. I want donors to know that education increases earning potential and economic mobility. We have seen that Indigenous graduates often reinvest in their communities, creating jobs and stimulating local economies today and for the future. That kind of impact is priceless!" •

## Changing the Stars for Students Impacts Us All

**Brandon Meawasige**  
Vice President, Communications and Marketing,  
Indspire



**B**randon Meawasige starts the conversation by saying, “I received funding help from Indspire’s Building Brighter Futures program at the end of my undergraduate degree in Indigenous studies at McMaster University. The award was vital to help me complete my studies. But beyond the much-needed practical help, to have someone believe in you was a profound experience for me. When Indspire said yes to me, it was the first time that I had felt seen. It was the first time in my life that I was fully able to articulate my life and goals.

“Indspire helped me focus on what I was going to do with this big opportunity in my career. I wanted to pay it forward. After graduation, I went on to get a Graduate Certificate in Digital Marketing from St. Lawrence College and started work in marketing, communications and media. I held various leadership positions within established technology companies and numerous start-ups. Through it all I knew I wanted to do much more and to make a bigger impact on the Indigenous community.”

One day, an opportunity presented itself to Brandon. “Several years after graduation I saw a job posting for Indspire – and I knew immediately that this was something that I absolutely wanted. I have never had the experience where something spoke to me, so fast, the very second I saw it. I knew in my heart that my aspiration now was to work in a role that ensured that Indspire could move more kids into school, like they helped me.

“Today, I can see that when you invest in Indspire you are not just providing funds for school, you are changing the stars for a person, a family, and an entire

community. You create a chain reaction where big dreams become possible.

“The students you support will often go on to be the first person in their family to earn a credential. I truly believe that it's much more than lifting individuals—it's about creating the positive systemic changes that ripple out to benefit everyone and that can change the trajectory of this country.”

Indspire recipients consistently demonstrate that supporting students in any discipline creates transformative changes that extend far beyond the individual. Brandon says, “As we check back with recipients many years later, they frequently tell us that your gifts have helped uplift families and communities – as dynamic and successful young Indigenous people go on to address critical needs, help foster resilience and grow into leadership roles.”

He continues, “It sounds hyperbolic, but it really isn’t. Your gift fights the absence of dreams, the tightening of what is possible. We are all so much more than we realize. One student, with encouragement, can think that now anything is possible – and make it happen. And who knows? They could be the person who changes the stars for us all.”

To further refine his skills, Brandon is currently pursuing a Master of Design in Strategic Foresight and Innovation at the Ontario College of Art and Design. “What energizes me every day is seeing all of the many ways something good and amazing can come from just a little bit of help with the education of an Indigenous student.” •



## Educator for the Future

**Jarita Greyeyes**  
**Professor at McMaster University**  
**- Teaching Indigenous Research Methods**

**A**ccomplished international scholar and community builder Dr. Jarita Greyeyes says, “I first contacted Indspire when I was in high school, over 20 years ago. At the time I needed help to attend a program. Later when I was preparing to attend university, my on-reserve post-secondary counsellor shared with us the ways that Indspire might be able to help.”

Professor Greyeyes continues, “I knew that an education was a very important pathway to success. I had a clear vision for my education and the support from my family and community but not the financial resources. I started working at 15 because I needed the money to make university possible for me, and I eventually attended the University of Winnipeg for my undergraduate degree.”

“Indspire came back into my life again when I was accepted into Stanford University in California. No matter how accomplished your academic track record is, you still need funds to live in California. At the time I was also a student parent.”

*Professor Greyeyes says: “When I received help from Indspire the impact on my life and career was truly transformative. I knew that with a wide network of support I would be successful, and I saw Indspire as being a part of that larger extended family that helped me to reach my goals. Indigenous people have the drive, the ambition and the desire to succeed – not just to transform their own lives but to contribute to their communities. They may just need a bit of help with the cost.”*

She points out that, “It is almost a statistical impossibility that I could get a Ph.D. from an elite university like Stanford. It is totally unheard of, particularly when less than 1% of Stanford doctoral students identify as Indigenous.

It’s only because of that vital network of support made possible by donors that I could attend. It takes so much to make an academic career a reality and Indspire is a key pillar to help Indigenous students achieve their goals.

“When I think back on my own learning journey and those of my Indigenous peers, it seems clear that opportunity and ability, when combined with critical financial resources, can have huge impacts,” she says. “Indspire is centered around excellence. It is led by incredible Indigenous leaders who are committed to the transformative power of education. Thousands of students are getting support for their exciting futures and moving along their own learning journeys.”

Professor Greyeyes knows how support can touch generations of people by addressing barriers and injustices that have limited Indigenous access to education. She adds, “There are longstanding inequities in the academic field where Indigenous peoples remain persistently underrepresented as academic faculty members. That is because we are only one or two generations away from policies that forced those pursuing a university degree to relinquish their Indian Status. No one should be forced to choose between their education and being a part of their community. While that may no longer be the case, we are still just at the start of this education journey.”

She concludes by reminding us that, “When we reflect on the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it’s not just about the harms that impacted Indigenous learners, but how all people are disadvantaged when a schooling system is not reflective of Indigenous approaches to knowledge and education. As a professor, I want to support the education of all those who want to learn and I hope that Indigenous students can find the financial resources they need. I am excited when I think about what could be possible for us all when we commit to transforming education and reducing barriers.” •



## Physician, Caring for Communities

**Dr. Lana Potts BScN MD CCFP  
Saahwaahpiim,  
Director Indigenous Health,  
Deloitte Consulting + Public Speaker**



**D**r. Lana Potts is a Blackfoot family physician who specializes in First Nations Health. She is also a renowned speaker and is an authority in Indigenous health and Indigenous ways of knowing. She is also currently working as an advisor with Deloitte Canada.

Throughout medical school and in her current roles, she works as a liaison with various boards on how to improve healthcare delivery in First Nations and rural communities.

Dr. Potts starts by saying, “I always had a passion to save the world. I wanted to become a nurse to help young people and to help my community. Not having any money for school meant it was a constant struggle to stay in class. I never really knew how to navigate the school system until Indspire helped me.”

She continues, “Almost overnight, I pivoted my life in the most positive way. Indspire provided the resources that I needed to succeed in my nursing training and then later when I was accepted into medical school. I can now live out my dreams!

“Indspire made me feel safe to apply. They listened to me; they understood my life and circumstances and heard my story. The pathway to an education can be intimidating, especially for a student from the reserve.

“What changed with Indspire’s help? It was a miracle – Indspire truly changed my future. I would not be a physician today without their help.” When asked what changes in the world when people donate to Indspire, she says, “Donors are betting on the fact that when young people

attain an education, no matter if it is in the trades or the academic world, it all leads to the larger community thriving.”

*Dr. Potts continues, “I am a Blackfoot person; we have a belief in the power of living to 100 years of age. All young people deserve the chance to see 100 years of life. When you invest in a single individual you invest in the lifetimes of so many. It creates a much bigger outcome. Indigenous Peoples deserve and want your investment, and I know it comes back 1000-fold.”*

For Indigenous students considering a career in health-care, the need is urgent to address shortages of healthcare providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. There is a lack of trust between Indigenous Peoples and the health care system,” Dr. Potts says. “People feel safer with an Indigenous-led entry point into the system. A friendly face is so important because it is very hard to walk through the door and ask for help. People can build trust and allyship with their peers. Our health outcome statistics are so poor – but it all changes when Indigenous professionals are there.”

Seeing Indigenous health care workers in leadership and medical roles also inspires younger generations to pursue similar careers, breaking cycles of poverty and underrepresentation.

Dr. Potts knows how important donors are to this transformation. “Thank you to Indspire! With your support, anything is possible. You are changing the system. I want to express my gratitude for all the help that I received to finish my training. Thank you for believing.” •



## Auntie-in-Training, M.Ed. Candidate

Tracie Léost  
Student Mentorship and Wellness Advocate,  
Indspire

**T**his dynamic 2018 Indspire Award Métis Youth Laureate and 2022 CBC Future 40 Recipient has sometimes been described as an activist or an advocate, yet Tracie has said in the past that, “I see myself first and foremost as a community member. Being present in the community and being a person that our young people can look up to also redefines what it is that society can expect of Indigenous young people – and redefines the stereotypes they set for us.”

Tracie Léost has a strong passion for social justice initiatives and has gained international attention and prestigious awards for her work. She now works for Indspire on the Rivers to Success Team with a focus on student mentorship and wellness.

“I started receiving help from Indspire during my Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Regina. At that time, I was also working in schools supporting Indigenous students with extensive needs including trauma and who were not having success in the mainstream system. I found these kids to be incredibly resilient once we put supports around them and got them back on track.”

With her experiences came a shift in thinking. “My philosophy challenged the academic system and opened life altering possibilities for me. I now see the world differently. I am not projecting a solution on someone. You need to get on the same level as the kids you wish to support. You need to meet people where they are at. Not from where you are coming from. You need to feel that however kids show up is good enough, and that we can figure out the rest of it together.

“Often for Indigenous kids, people just walk in and walk out of their lives. But a stable person builds relationships and never loses sight of how they make people feel. I am a free thinker. And I wanted the kids to feel like, ‘she’s like an Auntie to us’. That is the highest compliment to me because it means that I am not above them, I am one of them. It sounds simple, but it’s a profound shift in energy and understanding.”

Tracie was also a 2020 Gabriel Dumont inductee, the highest honour for a Métis civilian. “There is a new paradigm happening. There is power and motivation and protest, but there also needs to be a positive space to connect everyone together. And then to rise as one.”

She points out that, “I hope the takeaway is that the world will know the power that’s in our communities and among our youth. That is what I hope people can see, the power in the many good things that are happening. Healing is happening. People are feeling stronger. There is an Indigenous youth movement brewing. Profound things are happening. And we need aunties, teachers, community members, allies, and Indspire like never before.

“Indspire changed my life. I was able to become one of Canada’s most decorated Indigenous young people. I went to the United Nations in New York as the Métis Youth representative that led the Canadian Delegation, to represent this work on a global platform. That’s why I say that any amount of donor support to Indspire changes people’s lives. It sets Indigenous students on a trajectory where anything becomes possible.” •

## Caring for the Planet, Researcher, Educator

**Taylor Tabobondung**  
Consultant, KPMG + Research and Teaching Assistant,  
U of T



**E**nvironmental Science Ph.D. candidate Taylor Tabobondung tells us that “Indspire has been part of my education journey from the very beginning. Before Indspire, I was the first in my family to pursue graduate studies.” He continues: “The award was valuable well beyond the funds. As an Indigenous person, Indspire meant having people who really understood my life. They were comfortable with me and understood the nuances. There was never a question of my situation, they totally got it. And I know it sounds easy to say – but I could not have gotten this far without Indspire’s support.

“Many Indigenous students know about Indspire, it comes up a lot at the university. For us, to receive this kind of support from outside of the university is a very big thing – it really opens people’s minds to new possibilities.”

He continues, “As an academic, I wear two hats. First as a recipient, and then as a person who helps with outreach. Why is outreach important? There is a larger historical context to how important Indspire is to students. I think of my dad, one of the smartest people I have ever met. He was completely self-taught, because he had no other options. Navigating the world is a challenge for many of us – therefore, donor support is monumental to help us enter the mainstream and to build success.”

Taylor also works as a consultant with KPMG Canada and says, “There are so many brilliant minds, so much potential, and strong aspiration, but they don’t always have the pathways that are made possible by your support of Indspire. What if we are missing the next Einstein or Isaac Newton or Marie Curie – incredible people passed over but for a little bit of encouragement and funds to start their journey.

“Supporting Indspire brings so many benefits to both the Indigenous community and to Canada. Preserving and promoting Indigenous knowledge in fields like environmental science can blend traditional knowledge with contemporary practices. The world benefits from these perspectives in solving modern challenges like climate change.”

Taylor says the issues are urgent: “We need all hands-on deck to meet any number of new crises – we need people to help us adapt and to learn from the changes all around us. There are so many lessons, let’s not lose them. We need a clear understanding of how to move forward together.

“In the academic world, there are few Indigenous scholars to provide the full story of Canada. As a climate scientist, when I can bring my full self into my work it’s a much better story. A Canadian story. Indigenous people are waiting for people who understand us. That’s why I want to teach – to speak about our Indigenous culture and make connections for the next generation.”

Taylor says the choice to support Indspire should be an easy decision. “Your investment helps create a fuller picture of life; the good, the bad, the happiness, there is so much to share. Give students the chance to succeed. I am passionate about this. We are all life-long learners and there is a valuable Indigenous perspective to that idea.”

Taylor concludes, “The Indigenous lens is always to be experiencing because life provides your lessons. We can learn in every aspect of our life. Indspire knows that we are a knowledge people with complex and valuable understandings of the world.” •

# Making Dreams Come True

## Dorothy Washbern Legacy Donor to Indspire



**W**e have seen a few of the countless stories of extraordinary success made possible by funding from Indspire. But who are some of the people that make these dreams of success possible? Visionary donors like Dorothy Washbern are the profoundly important dream catalysts, the people who help to make aspirations a reality for Indigenous students.

A fourth generation Torontonians, Dorothy is a long-retired teacher and librarian, an active community volunteer, and a lifelong learner in many fields including study of depth psychology. She is dedicated to supporting the development of young people and has many decades of experience helping to expand their horizons in life.

She tells us, “Long before I trained as a teacher, I was always interested in children and young people. And my interest in the stories of Indigenous people has always been part of my life. When I was very young, I remember being drawn to books about buffalo hunting on the Prairies. When I was a teacher, I had worked in inner city schools in Toronto, which gave me a direct experience of many cultures and their stories.”

When thinking about her legacy, Dorothy says, “I have come to learn that I was not really a teacher after all. I was a learner who shares. This is an important insight for me because my own process of learning new things has helped to keep me active, and I wish for others to also have this benefit.”

She continues, “All of my careers and personal interests have been about learning, and I know how important it is for individuals.” Her passion for learning “has kept me alive and despite the experience of many tribulations – ultimately content with my life.”

It is this extraordinary legacy of learning that she is passing on to future generations of young Indigenous students with her legacy gift to Indspire. Dorothy says:

*“I know that your contribution, large or small, wherever you are coming from, will be deeply meaningful to the young recipient. Help Indspire, lend a hand, and change the world.”*

Indspire believes that with support, a self-sustaining cycle of aspiration and achievement emerges, breaking generational barriers and fostering long-term progress. Dorothy Washbern confirms this and says, “I’ve seen how Indigenous students bring unique perspectives to fields, address gaps and identify opportunities that others might overlook. I’ve seen how Indspire does quite wonderful work. And I have seen directly where it is helping.”

As a legacy donor, Dorothy believes “in supporting organizations that work to help, particularly young people to expand their horizons, believe in themselves and abilities, and to share their stories. Sharing stories helps us recognize our kinship with one another, and changes the world, ‘one story at a time.’”

She continues, “There is one very big way that anyone can make more help possible, and that’s by getting involved, and becoming a donor.”

If you would like to learn more about leaving a legacy gift to Indspire, please contact Margaret Purcell at [mpurcell@indspire.ca](mailto:mpurcell@indspire.ca) or 416-637-3562. •