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INSPIRING CHANGE

HELPING STUDENTS REALIZE THEIR DREAMS

Fall 2025

A message from Mike DeGagné

This edition of Inspiring Change shines a light on students whose studies and careers focus on mental health — a field that is urgently needed in our communities. Each of the remarkable young leaders you'll meet in these pages is combining education, lived experience, and deep compassion to address the growing mental health challenges facing Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island.

They've experienced what researchers call the “social determinants of health” — things like poverty, limited access to education, and the lasting impacts of systemic discrimination. These challenges can make mental health issues and stigma even harder to overcome in Indigenous communities, often leading to higher rates of suicide, substance use, and other struggles compared to non-Indigenous populations. But these students are turning their lived experiences into strength, using their education and cultural knowledge to help create healthier, more supportive communities for the future.

What's inspiring is their shared belief in solutions that begin within the community: approaches grounded in Indigenous knowledge, culture, and traditions. They remind us that Indigenous communities are best placed to define their own needs and create healing strategies that reflect their own strengths and values.

This work brings not only hope and resilience, but also moves us toward greater health equity, healing from past harms, and a brighter future for reconciliation in Canada.

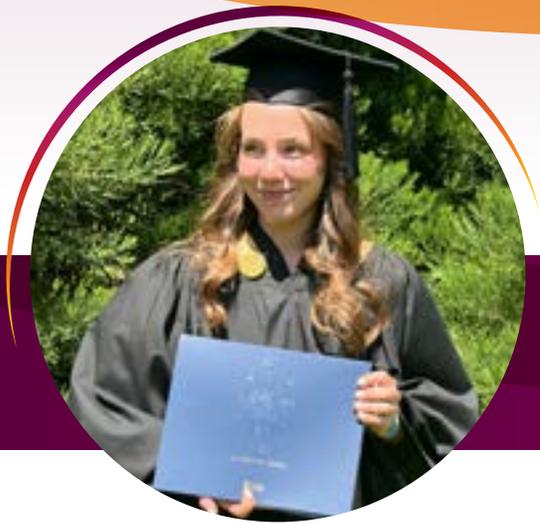
This is a particularly meaningful edition for me, as it will be my final newsletter as President & CEO of Indspire. In January, I will be transitioning out of my role, with Indspire Laureate Jocelyn Formsma taking the helm as Indspire's new President & CEO. It has been an honour to serve alongside our dedicated team, our students, and you — our committed supporters — in building brighter futures for Indigenous youth.

Miigwech — thank you for walking this journey with us.

Sincerely,

Mike DeGagné
President & CEO





There is always help available for young people – don't give up!

Devon Rees
Cowichan Nation, BC
MA Candidate, Counselling Psychology,
University of Lethbridge

“Today is an exciting time in mental health” Devon Rees says, “In the next five to 10 years, we’ll find out so much more than we know today about diversity and community growth – and mental health services will become more accessible for all types of people.”

A Building Brighter Futures bursary recipient, Devon’s ultimate goal is to complete a PhD in child and adolescent psychology and to work as a registered child psychologist.

She tells us that, “Previously in Western culture, most research into mental health has traditionally focused on white males. That’s all changing and today, especially for Indigenous people, there is a strong move toward more client-focussed therapies. We now understand that putting the client in charge yields much more success in therapy. Especially for Indigenous people, understanding the role of cultural history, diversity, intergenerational trauma, and spirituality in the healing process increases a positive outcome.”

Devon’s work also focuses on Indigenous youth, where there is a significant gap in terms of resources, opportunities and mental health outcomes for young people. Her powerful goal is to ensure that “young people know there is always help available, and not to give up. Things are slowly changing for the better!”

For Devon, her work has been made possible in part through the generosity of donors to Indspire. “Receiving an award made it possible for me to dive more deeply into my studies and to expand my research. The award means the world to me as I am that much closer to being able to support others through my line of work.”

How did her interest begin?

“After completing my undergrad at the University of Victoria, I found a love for the mental health stream of psychology.”

She says, “Prioritizing mental health in Indigenous populations is essential not only for improving individual well-being – but also for promoting cultural continuity, social justice, and human rights within communities.”

Further driving social innovation, she sees that “the idea of building our own unique solutions is taking hold, and there is an increase in community-based resources, community ownership, and trust.”

Devon says this work starts by “acknowledging historical traumas, facing the social determinants of health, supporting cultural resilience, and ensuring equitable access to culturally relevant mental health care services.”

With a strong sense of the great potential to come, she says, “I feel that working as a psychologist is the perfect opportunity to make a positive change in someone’s life.”

Further, she wants to develop “skills to merge psychological science and clinical practice and develop an exciting career conducting research – as well as to provide psychological services in private practice, focusing primarily on children and adolescence.”

Devon is also very interested in research on Indigenous beliefs, healing practices, and in changing the lack of diversity training for practicing psychologists in Canada.

She concludes by saying that there is much more work to be done. “Although things are getting better, there is still a long journey ahead!” •

Art is a Natural Healer

Erin Simpson
Otipemisiwak Métis Government, with ties to
Calling Lake. MA Candidate, Psychotherapy and
Spirituality, University of Alberta, St Stephen's College



Art therapy has shown impressive clinical success in improving a broad range of mental health and neurological conditions including anxiety, depression, trauma, chronic illness, and injury. Today, Indspire bursary recipient Erin Simpson is using the power of art therapy to tackle the issues of Indigenous intergenerational healing.

As Erin goes into the third year of her program, she sees a valuable new opportunity for Indigenous youth to access art and to understand the process of creativity. In addition, she believes that art therapy can help provide “the freedom we so desperately need to reach our individual potential.”

For Erin, the working definition of art is both subtle and all-encompassing. In her practice, art is “everything, walking, nature, making art, taking care of yourself. Whatever you are doing in the act of living can be art. We all can make art – it is an opportunity to connect with the self, work, friends, spirituality, and the family.”

She reminds us that “we live in an increasingly chaotic world. That means it has never been more important to create opportunities for personal and social healing.

Indigenous people have always survived and gotten through very hard times, and in the process, we have become leaders in this practice.”

What is the transformative impact of Erin’s deeper understanding of art therapy?

She says, “There can be much more passion, more care for the self and for everyone, and more benefit for all. We can heal with compassion and care.”

She continues, “It makes me emotional to think about all the possibilities, especially for our youth. There are so many wise Indigenous people, and so many talented creators among our young people.”

For Erin, her dream became a reality with a bursary from Indspire’s Building Brighter Futures program. “I am so grateful to Indspire for believing in my goal of graduate school. Gifts from donors give people the chance to thrive.”

What is her personal motivation to become an art therapist?

“I have always been an advocate for people who struggle, and someone who struggles myself,” Erin says. Confronting deep personal challenges, she remains steadfast in defining herself with hope and positivity as “a mother, an active community member, an advocate for those who struggle and for systemic change, a learner, an educator, a support person, an artist of many mediums, and a compassionate and kind human being.”

“My goal as an art therapist is to help Indigenous intergenerational healing by providing culturally, spiritually, emotionally and mentally relevant opportunities for youth to access art. Art is fluid, open for anyone to interpret and do what they want within. It’s the freedom we so desperately need. It is self-expression and connection, and learning who we are in the process.”

She continues, “Connecting with young people through the process of creation is life to me, it is beautiful, and it is art. Art is a natural healer, our ancestors knew this for time immemorial, and that is my main goal as I forge ahead in life.” •



Author, Advocate, and Champion for Inuit Culture and Mental Health

Braden Kadlun
Inuit (2024), Kugluktuk, NU
Indspire Award Youth Laureate

Braden is an author, keynote speaker, new dad to a baby girl, and passionate advocate for sobriety, mental health, and Inuit culture, and his voice is resonating across Turtle Island and beyond.

“I feel compelled to share and to speak on my journey... because it’s not just about sharing the hardships,” Braden explains. “It’s about sharing the success you’ve found to show that there is another side.”

Growing up between Nunavut, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories, Braden’s life was rooted in his Inuit heritage, thanks in large part to his mother, Hovak Johnston. “No matter where we were, my mother always made sure to raise me and my brothers in our culture... She’s the definition of resilience and she laid the foundation for my own healing journey.”

Braden’s journey into public advocacy began unexpectedly in 2017 when a “sealfie” of him wearing a sealskin parka made by his mother went viral, sparking global conversation about traditional Inuit practices. In 2022, he stepped fully into this space on social media, sharing his language, traditional foods, and sobriety journey.

A gifted storyteller, Braden has delivered keynote addresses nationwide, served on panels, and

completed the TikTok Accelerator for Indigenous Creators program in partnership with the National Screen Institute. His work has led to collaborations with CBC, APTN, the North American Indigenous Games, Sephora and Naloxone. In 2023, he co-produced and hosted *Local Lives*, a television series spotlighting Indigenous entrepreneurs, Knowledge Keepers, artists, and activists. In 2024 he published his book *A Guide to Sobriety: 10 Gentle Reminders*.

Braden is also candid about his experiences with bipolar type II disorder, ADHD, and PTSD — using his platform to challenge stigma and normalize conversations around mental health. “Not every day’s gonna be a good day, and there’s nothing wrong with that... The fact that you are here as one of that 5% [of Indigenous people remaining after colonization] is proof of the resilience and strength of your ancestors.”

Through speaking engagements, workshops with his mother, and creative projects, Braden continues to inspire others to embrace healing, cultural pride, and resilience. His work reminds us that Indigenous excellence is not only about overcoming challenges — it’s about thriving and creating a better future. •

The Benefits of Education are Priceless

Jocelyn Paul
Membertou First Nation, NS
PhD Candidate, Clinical Psychology, Dalhousie University



Doctoral student Jocelyn Paul starts by telling us that “funding from Indspire means everything to me. It’s the evidence that others believe in my work and my potential. Funding also eased the financial pressures I was under and gave me a chance to focus more fully on my academic work and research.”

“I’m from British Columbia and was raised on reserve in Tsleil-Waututh First Nation, with roots in Membertou First Nation, in Nova Scotia. With a coast-to-coast perspective I see the impact of racism across Canada and the roots of mental health challenges. It’s true that there has been a lot of reconciliation in Canada – but also, still much work to be done.”

Jocelyn wants her work to amplify leading scholarship, teaching, and to inform clinical training. “I want to help increase Indigenous health research and to bring community voices to the forefront.” Jocelyn sees great potential in “merging biomedical ways of thinking into something holistic, and to help make psychology accessible and safe for people.”

“As an Indigenous woman, I am committed to revitalizing cultural customs and traditions. This motivates me to use an evidence-based approach that incorporates traditional Indigenous knowledge to treat depression and anxiety in Indigenous youth and adults.”

“I have always believed that education was the key to a better life. My ultimate goal is to help break the cycle of poverty and to create a brighter future for myself and future generations.”

She continues, “As a registered clinical psychologist in Nova Scotia, I want to offer culturally sensitive and

trauma-informed care at the wellness centre in my home community of Membertou First Nation. Additionally, I am excited to collaborate with neighbouring communities to create community-based programs that cater to their specific requirements. I’m confident that by working together, we can bring about genuine positive change.”

She emphasizes that, “It’s my responsibility to help those in need who may not have access to resources. Volunteering at local clinics in communities and offering my services to those who can’t afford therapy is one way I plan to achieve this. I prioritize staying updated on evidence-based research in clinical psychology and sharing this information with communities. Giving back is a priority for me.”

Jocelyn’s clinical approach starts by “building a genuine relationship with the client and seeing them as an individual first. Each person appreciates culture in a unique way. I want to help Indigenous people understand health on spiritual, mental, emotional and physical levels – and also from a trauma-informed holistic and grounded place. It is this bigger understanding that will improve outcomes.”

Jocelyn sees Indspire’s long term impact as “a direct investment in reconciliation and community transformation. Indigenous student funding supports healing and identity and is a powerful way to make positive change in Canada. When one student benefits, an entire community benefits. I always tell young people, do not stop yourself before you even start. Have faith!” •



To Be Homeless on Your Own Land

Cohen Pinkoski
Yellowknives Dene First Nation, NT
Bachelor of Social Work Candidate, Algoma University

Cohen Pinkoski tells us that “when I received funding from Indspire through the Building Brighter Futures bursary program, I felt so much pride and connection that an Indigenous led organization saw me, and understood who I am.”

His identity includes strong core values that inform a current career as an “Indigenous social work student, and housing advocate based in Toronto. I am passionate about reclaiming lost Indigenous culture and have also worked in traditional food programming, and research.”

“Growing up, my grandma, a residential school survivor, was homeless for many periods in her life. She had a severe experience in the residential school system. I’ve seen the impact of intergenerational trauma firsthand, and I know how homelessness destabilizes every part of someone’s life.”

“Becoming homeless is often the last step in a chain of very bad things – a legacy of pain and trauma from events long beforehand. Growing up in downtown Toronto, this experience sparked my interest in addressing homelessness in the Indigenous community. I also feel driven to give back, as the community was good to me growing up, and I want to use my privilege to show gratitude.”

Cohen says, “I also believe that the context of homelessness is 100% different for Indigenous vs non-Indigenous people.

“First of all, Indigenous people are homeless on their own land. And much of their experience is part of the

impact of residential school systems continuing for generations.”

“Attitudes are changing fast. People are beginning to understand that housing is part of the prescription for mental health. There is an increasing demand for fact-based solutions throughout Canada and for people to work together.”

Cohen says that “Homelessness is also a political issue to me. When I was younger homelessness seemed like an easy thing to fix – I now understand more of the complexity at work. I see how the current political system impacts Indigenous people and seems to benefit others. The system was not designed for Indigenous people, from colonization to residential schools, to forced assimilation – all causing intergenerational trauma within Indigenous communities. I advocate for having shelter because it is such a fundamental part of living a healthy life.”

While Cohen works to prevent housing insecurity, he says that lately, “I’ve started thinking that achieving more education would allow me to better help others – and am starting to think about the possibility of an Indigenous law program.”

He continues, “I want supporters of Indspire to know that their gifts are a good investment in the future. I believe that while Indigenous people might be overrepresented in many social issues – they are also the people best equipped to solve these issues for themselves.”

“I believe community is the key to everything. I think all social issues need cross-cultural solidarity, so thank you for supporting Indspire and students like me.” •

Building Connection through Authenticity

Ashley Yeomans

Métis Nation Saskatchewan

**Bachelor of Social Work Candidate, Indigenous Social Work Program,
First Nations University of Canada through University of Regina**



Ashley Yeomans is transitioning out of a successful seven-year health care career as a licensed practical nurse.

Seeing a bold new direction started “when I worked in a maternity ward. I could see the challenges young families experienced in providing the parenting skills, love, and support that children need. That is when I decided to further my education in Indigenous social work because I want to learn more about Indigenous backgrounds in Prince Albert, including my own, so I can hopefully better help others.”

Her professional career goals are informed by an understanding of the intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. “I have seen the impacts of this in my community. My peers have struggled with the impact throughout their lives. I want to help people heal from past traumas and experiences.”

Ashley says, “Getting my LPN diploma taught me resilience, strength and perseverance, to not give up on your goals no matter how hard it gets. I’m now going to learn how to make a bigger positive difference in my community.”

She continues, “I received a bursary from Indspire through the Building Brighter Futures program toward my social work studies at the University of Regina. I had student loans, but it still wasn’t full funding – and this additional help brought a big feeling of relief. As a single parent, the generosity of donors to Indspire makes everything possible for me.”

Today, with the support of Indspire, recipients have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do so many things differently. Ashley says that with her new focus on Indigenous social work, “I want to make a positive impact in mental health, as well as focus on homelessness and addiction.”

She continues, “Some non-Indigenous people still do not understand the unique history of intergenerational trauma and how that impacts us today. I would say to them, do not be so quick to judge what they see in the community. I want to see more resources for shelters and addiction support. This will help us to meet people where they are at.”

What does Ashley’s future hold? This deeply thoughtful and caring person wants to break down barriers and foster belonging and resilience. She continues, “My social work training is a great opportunity to help people in hospital, in schools, in life – there are so many rewards to Indigenous social work. I want to work as a school counsellor and am also thinking of the possibility of opening my own counselling practice. I can bring personal experience and a new view on life to give me a better chance at building positive relationships with clients.”

Her nursing background, plus her lived experience, “helps me understand the connections between history, mental health, emotional, physical, and spiritual levels of care. I can give clients opportunities to get ahead, to have more success in living, and help them to open more doors.” •

Thank you to the Guelph Storm!

On February 28th, 2025, The Guelph Storm OHL team hosted a special *Indspire Night* fundraising hockey game sponsored by Mijidaa Café + Bistro. The Storm worked with Indigenous artist, Eugene Morrisseau, the son of the late Norval Morrisseau to design a special

commemorative jersey for the team for the game. The jerseys were later auctioned off to support Indspire and an incredible \$7000 was raised! Thank you to the Guelph Storm for their wonderful initiative and support of Indigenous education through Indspire.



Join us at the Toronto Waterfront 5K on October 18th!

Indspire will be participating in the Toronto Waterfront 5K run on October 18th. If you're a runner and have signed-up, we hope to see you there. To learn more

about the event and how you can support Indspire, scan the QR code.



Host a Fundraiser for Indspire

Indspire welcomes the amazing support of individuals like you to help fundraise and spread the word about our work with Indigenous students in Canada. Every dollar counts in our work to ensure that First Nations, Inuit and Métis students have the tools and resources they need for success. It's easy to support Indspire when you involve your friends, family members or colleagues.

You can invite others to join you in achieving a personal fundraising goal to help ensure that Indigenous students can reach their full potential.

If you are interested in creating a fundraiser for Indspire, please connect with Matthew Tavares at mtavares@indspire.ca.