TWO DECADES OF GIVING VOICE TO ADVOCACY FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

VACFSS Celebrates 20-Year Journey

By: Aleks Besan, Communications Assistant & Bernadette Spence, Chief Executive Officer

1989 - 1991

The Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS) honors the individuals and collective who gave voice and created space for a child and family service that would hold our children up as sacred bundles, to keep them sheltered by ancestral wisdoms, to fortify their identities by grounding services within their culture. In 1989, our children were over-represented in the mainstream child welfare system. The first generation of former children in care were speaking about the trauma of growing up without an identity, family or community. Parents who had lost their own children were now seeing their grandchildren entering the system. These experiences prompted Aboriginal people across Canada, to assert their right to look after their own children. With nothing more than sheer courage and dedication, a small group of individuals became the change that they wanted to see. The catalyst for their ongoing efforts was a memorable resolution passed by the United Native Nations at an AGM to negotiate funding with the Regional Ministry of Social Services to be involved in the planning for Aboriginal families who were involved in the child welfare system. Unyielding work by Aboriginal advocates provided the fuel that led to the establishment of the Mamele Benevolent Society in 1989, followed in 1992 by the incorporation of VACFSS.

1992 - 2001

Opening its doors with an annual budget of just under $100,000, VACFSS started working within the context of the Ministry’s established practices. Diplomatic negotiations for change expanded former constraints as VACFSS was approved to provide Family Support for Ministry Child Protection social workers and cultural support services for foster parents looking after Aboriginal children.

Following the implementation of the Child, Family, and Community Services Act (CFCSA) in 1996, VACFSS became a designated agency. For the first time, the outlines of child welfare policy and the CFCSA would be interpreted under an Aboriginal lens. VACFSS stepped into the traditional role of community by looking after urban Aboriginal children in Greater Vancouver, poised to heal and prevent the erosion of the family system as the primary system of care for Aboriginal children. As such, VACFSS was able to negotiate cultural safety for children and families.

2001 - 2008

The re-engineering of structure, policy and practice within the Provincial Child Welfare Legislation began with the launch of the Guardianship pilot project in 1999, involving the transfer of 25 children in continuing care. This would serve as the beginning of the move towards full delegation. Capacity was bolstered and concerted planning with the Ministry led to the signing in 2001 of the Delegation Enabling Agreement (DEA), a document which highlighted the unique status of urban Aboriginal people with inherent rights and responsibilities within the Canadian context. 2002 to 2008 were active years for VACFSS – 2002 marked implementation of the Guardianship and Resources Program; in 2005, Family Preservation was established to augment the Child Protection program; and in 2008, Child Protection Services were transferred.

2008 - 2012

With ground-breaking work establishing the foundation for a culturally grounded service within an Aboriginal not for profit governance structure, VACFSS is now working with a focus to refine and nuance its services within the urban Aboriginal lived experience. VACFSS represents a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds and histories within our clientele and service providers. Still, we seek to honour the traditional territories of the Squamish, Tsleil Waututh, and Musqueam nations upon which we do the sacred work for our community.

The Tree of Life stands as a natural symbol of our growth, rooted within the deep history of resistance, and travelling up into strong branches and intersections between our varied services, all bearing the fruits of our struggle together — our sacred bundles, our children. They are our future, and our responsibility. With deep honour and pride, we look forward to twenty years and more in the work that we do.
Children have the right to maintain a connection with their relatives and community; VACFSS upholds this right by signing protocols with other Aboriginal agencies. On January 28, 2013, VACFSS was delighted to sign a protocol with the Gitxsan Child and Family Services Society (GCFSS) to promote continuity of integrated services, to establish communication guidelines and to enhance collaboration between the two agencies. The ceremony was held at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre with Chief Ian Campbell as the MC. Attendees varied in age and diverse First Nations representatives poured into the room. The front two rows, however, was already occupied by tote bags with names of the Gitxsan children in care attached to them. When the children arrived, they rushed towards the front, enthusiastically looking for their names on the seats. Once all the children have arrived, Chief Ian Campbell opened the event.

The ceremony started with an opening prayer by Elder Orene Johnston. The VACFSS singers then sang “children are our medicine”, accompanied by their drumbeats. President of the VACFSS board, Linda Stiller took the podium to say welcoming words and emphasized the importance of the children to know where they come from, and where they can go home to. “Children are flowers of our community. They are our future” said Gitxsan Chief Nicotin, representative of the four Gitxsan clans. There are sixty-two houses in the Gitxsan, “as long as you’re Gitxsan, you belong there, and nobody has been able to separate us” the Chief concluded in her speech. “We are not urban natives… We are Gitxsans living away from homes” said GCFSS Executive Director, Linda Mathews.

Then, everyone was invited for lunch, catered by the Friendship Centre. A feast of fresh fruits, vegetables, bannock, and pasta soon filled everyone’s appetite.

After the marvelous feast, the ceremony continued with a welcome dance presented by the Gitxsan—led by elder Brenda Wesley. To show their culture and appreciation, the Gitxsan sang a song that acknowledged the different villages and nations. When one’s village was mentioned in the song, you were to stand up and dance along. One by one, each village was acknowledged and a group of people would proudly stand up and dance along. Until finally, Brenda sang, “Vancouver”, and half of the room stood up and danced. Finally, Brenda sang “Squamish” which was answered by the one and only Chief Ian Campbell as he danced into the centre of the circle, solo.

VACFSS CEO Bernadette Spence took the podium to explain the protocol: a promise from VACFSS to keep the Gitxsan children served by VACFSS, connected with their relatives and territory. Gitxsan Child and Family Services Executive Director Linda Mathews and our beloved VACFSS CEO, Bernadette then sat at the table and signed the protocol—a symbol of promise and hope for the better future.

GCFSS have also prepared a slideshow to showcase the gorgeous Gitxsan territory rich with culture. Life books containing Gitxsan culture and community were presented to each child so they will be able to look back and read “Where I Really Come From” and to complete their genealogies with their elders, in a follow up trip planned for this summer to the traditional territory in the Smithers area.

To commemorate this friendship, VACFSS prepared a plaque of values as a gift to the GCFSS. In return, GCFSS presented the books: “Stories from Gitxsan” and “The First Fried Bread” for VACFSS—who promised to read the storybooks to the Gitxsan children under their care.

As a closing ceremony, Elder Bruce Robinson sang a healing song for all the four nations to live in harmony. The Git Hayetsk Dancers then took the floor and presented numerous songs and dances filled with various kinds of blessings. Finally, the Git Hayetsk Dancers closed the day with a victory dance to laugh and taunt at the enemy. VACFSS is confident that this partnership with the GCFSS will ensure that the familial and cultural continuity rights of Gitxsan children are served by VACFSS.
VACFSS concerted efforts to provide cultural healing for our clients in all stages of their respective journeys to betterment are truly able to shine in specialized, focused programs. One such success can be found in our Strengthening Families program, coordinated by Patricia Phillips, along with the assistance of Haida Elder Woody Morrison Jr. In a recent brief interview, both Patricia and Woody shared about their experiences working with referred families, and the families they have seen graduate the program.

Strengthening Families as a program is distinct in that it involved not just the parents or children alone, but brings the whole family together and foments a healthy interchange within families affected by destabilizing factors like alcohol abuse. In the duration of eleven weeks, families acknowledge past hurts and move onto pro-social skills such as improved problem solving and talking nicely to each other.

Patricia describes the five years of success with this program as stemming from a specifically crafted referral process, which indicates to her the backgrounds of the families that she is working with. Determination and an understanding of the necessary ups and downs of the process keep her persistent in her work.

This year, VACFSS has launched their pilot round of the Strengthening Fathers Program, which derives a lot of its structure and leadership techniques from the existing success of Strengthening Families. In describing the dialogue with fathers who are seeking help, Woody talks of the great honour associated with abandoning the tough warrior persona that has been falsely taught by western concepts as the superior assertion of male strength. Instead, his reminder is that “when you make yourself taller and another smaller, the latter actually becomes bigger than you.” Cooperation requires deflecting anger, avoiding conflict, and offering to be “lower than” your counterpart — not subservient, but humble.

Patricia further comments on witnessing the change in men’s roles as a young girl growing up, particularly as fathers. Having all their resources taken from them, men retreated to abuse as a way of negative assertion in their weakness. It is women who bore this weight and understood that in order to survive, they must either leave their men behind or else raise them too alongside their children, taking care of everyone in their lives. The men know that they are weak and need to heal, Patricia insists, and those who do confront this challenge are now powerful and admired. Yet, women have always held respect and in countering the ugliness of sexism, traditional teachings are reinvigorated. Historically, women would be held as equals in their different strengths, and the wife’s crest would always be at the bottom of the totem pole because she would balance her husband’s family. With a grin, Patricia remarks, “this is the way it is on Mother Earth.”

Both Patricia and Woody clearly emphasize the practical, tangible changes as they move forward through their programs, guiding the participants to do the same, and to realize an actual, physical change in their lives. “Respect sounds good, but what does it really mean?” asks Patricia, pointing to the unique space her program provides by allowing folks to define this and to stick to their determinations. The program continues to be gripping and vivacious every week, with new content keeping families engaged and giving the men things to talk about, ways to move around the confrontation they see when asked to address their emotions. The freeing element of the sessions is that they do not hold a rigid agenda, and neither is attendance made mandatory.

The program doesn’t focus on anyone’s past records, and does not force talk — people come by their own will, and can expect a story-telling format, and real conversation, with movement towards trust. This way, a sense of community can be recreated.

December brings another graduation in the Strengthening Families Program. Both Patricia and Woody are assured that they will be walking away with the tools to face up to their future challenges.
HELPING ENSURE CHILDREN AND YOUTH HAVE A VOICE IN BC

Message from B.C.’s Representative for Children and Youth

By: Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, Representative for Children and Youth

Hello everyone. It is great once again to have space in your newsletter to update you on what has been happening in my office over the last few months. It also gives me the opportunity to thank you for all the important work you do with Aboriginal children and families.

I’d like to start by letting you know about a recent staffing change in my office. I am very happy to report that Melanie Mark recently became the Associate Deputy Representative, Advocacy, Aboriginal and Community Relations, based out of RCY’s Burnaby office.

Melanie worked as a Child and Youth Advocate from the first days of RCY in April 2007 until January 2013, when she assumed responsibility for the RCY’s advocacy mandate, Aboriginal relations, community outreach and youth engagement. She has nearly 20 years experience working directly with children and youth in a variety of roles.

In her role as Associate Deputy Representative, Melanie is also responsible for continuing the Representative’s outreach to Aboriginal organizations. She also builds and maintains effective collaborative relationships with all levels of government, First Nations and Métis organizations, and community leaders.

Melanie is of Nisga’a, Gitxsan, Cree and Ojibway descent. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Simon Fraser University, a Criminology Diploma from Douglas College, and formal training in child and youth human rights, conflict resolution, traditional consensus making, group facilitation and participatory action research.

Prior to her work with RCY, Melanie served as a child and youth officer, a youth worker, and project researcher. She is the co-founder of the Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre and past president of the Urban Native Youth Association. We are very pleased to welcome Melanie to her new role at RCY.

In early February we released an investigation report titled Who Protected Him? How B.C.’s Child Welfare System Failed One of Its Most Vulnerable Children. The report centres on the life circumstances of one child with complex special needs, whose story reflects significant shortcomings in the Ministry of Children and Family Development’s (MCFD) residential care system. The report also documents serious errors made by MCFD’s child protection system that left this child subject to abuse and neglect, both in his birth home and in subsequent residential placements by the ministry.

Sadly, the ministry’s involvement with this child and his family falls well below the standard any reasonable person would expect. MCFD failed to provide this child with safe and supportive therapeutic care and behavioural interventions. Instead, he was traumatized and harmed, and his basic human rights were minimized and even ignored.

The Aboriginal child who is the subject of this report was the focus of media attention after he was Tasered by police in April 2011. This report sheds light on B.C.’s child-serving system and recommends improvements to ensure that this child’s experiences are not repeated in serving other vulnerable children with complex special needs.

The report found that the Tasering incident and most of the 22 critical injuries reported about this child could have been prevented had the ministry invested in a proper residential care system with trained and qualified staff, behaviour therapy and other supports so this child could develop and recover from the trauma of his early years.

The report shows how child protection standards that should have resulted in the child being removed much earlier from his birth home and from a subsequent abusive foster home placement were not followed.

It also shows that residential placements in which the child lived since he was eight-years-old had a so-called “safe room,” in which the child was often isolated. There is no legislation or policy in place to permit this practice, and seclusion in a locked room repeatedly re-traumatized this child.

As a result of our investigation I recommended that MCFD create a comprehensive plan to develop a continuum of residential services for children and youth in B.C. with complex needs that cannot be met in traditional foster home or group home settings.

The ministry must address the current critical deficiency in matching children in care who have complex needs with a suitable residential placement that is properly staffed and equipped to nurture them and support their recovery from trauma and their development, rather than simply house them.

I also recommended that MCFD immediately discontinue the use of isolation and restraint as behaviour management strategies for children in care, and that any future use of restraint to protect a child or those around him in crisis situations be reported to the Representative as critical injury incidents.

And I recommended that MCFD implement a system of senior management oversight for all cases of children with complex special needs and that the ministry develop an internal clinical unit to deliver training and support on how to work with such children to residential care staff, social workers and policy makers.

I’d also like to bring you up to date on the Integrated Case Management (ICM) initiative that I publicly reported on last summer. Late in January 2013, MCFD released an interim report by an independent consultant that confirms ICM has been poorly implemented and that there has been a significant lack of senior leadership in the ministry on this initiative.

It points out that MCFD’s child protection practice model was in “a state of flux” as ICM was being implemented and that this “new and evolving practice model – under the previous deputy – was neither well defined nor documented and was not well understood by those individuals representing MCFD throughout the solution design process.”

It appears that the leadership vacuum on this project has resulted in a highly flawed system that does not match the requirements to protect vulnerable children and families or properly equip their social workers. I was pleased to hear that the ministry is prepared to adopt the emerging recommendations in this interim report.

However, we still don’t know whether this system can do a good job for vulnerable B.C. children and their families. That question should
be answered in the final report due later this spring that will examine best practices from other jurisdictions.

Meanwhile, I am concerned about how the system will recover from the failed implementation of ICM. There are literally thousands of files that will now have to be reviewed to ensure they include the proper information.

Finally, my office is working on several reports that will be released in the near future: a review of Youth Mental Health services in the province and an audit of Plans of Care.

We have started a formal review of MCFS’s adoption program, which is looking at the broader context of permanency planning and how well the adoption program is meeting the goal of seeking permanency for children in care.

On April 24 and 25, we are hosting our Champions for Children and Youth 2013 B.C. Summit in Vancouver in partnership with the Canadian Red Cross and Child Welfare League of Canada. The National Conference on Keeping Kids Safe and Connected will look at how we can actively foster environments that keep children and youth engaged, safe and included in their communities. For complete Summit information, speakers and registration information, visit: www.rcy2013Summit.com

I hope you enjoy the coming spring, and remember – if you would like to talk to one of my advocates, you can reach us from anywhere in the province at 1-800-476-3933 or email us at rcy@rcybc.ca. Keep up to date with our activities by checking out our website at www.rcybc.ca or by following us on Facebook.

Sincerely,
Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond

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**RECOGNITION WITHIN THE AGENCY**

Agency Updates and Service Awards

By: Paul Hucul, Director of Human Resources and Quality Assurance

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On December 12, 2012 the VACFSS Update Meeting was held at the Italian Cultural Centre with a very good turnout. One of the highlights of the event was the presentation of the Service Recognition Awards. This was truly a significant landmark for VACFSS as we granted more Service Recognition Awards than any time in VACFSS twenty-year history. In all we bestowed 24 awards broken down as: 5-Year Award, 10-Year Award, and 15-Year Award.

The number of awards presented is a strong indicator of the stability and spirit of VACFSS and the commitment of our workers to a great agency. It is also significant to note that in recent Team Leader/Supervisor selection processes there were numerous internal qualified candidates who competed and the successful candidates were VACFSS employees.

I ask you to join with our CEO in raising our hands to these amazing workers. We also commend all of you for your continued commitment to VACFSS.

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**5 Year Awards**
- Anna Hudson
- Arlene Yellowback
- Brian Powell
- Debra Watson
- Erin Yao
- Francis Dionne
- Jennie Wang
- Meghan Hafting
- Nadine Wilson
- Paul Hucul
- Rosalind Merkley
- Sasha Robertson
- Suzanne Maurice
- Suzanne Premdas
- Yvette Bear
- Martha Bejarano
- Demian Young

**10 Year Awards**
- Lori Skulsh
- Maggie Fidler
- Sandra Sokkowy
- Rosemary Liu
- Glen Eddie
- Crystal Phillips

**15 Year Award**
- Lillian Antelope
Ten years ago a group of three foster parents, three birth parents whose children were in care, an Elder and two VACFSS staff met together in the large boardroom at the Rupert Street office to plan for the protection of the kinship ties and cultural identity of children in the care of VACFSS. During one of the meetings one of the caregivers suddenly announced that she could feel something. There was some teasing and laughter, but we all felt a presence, and the caregiver said:

“All of us, all the people are sitting in a circle, our hand are joined and we are looking into the flames. We are assembled together, talking together. The old ones, the spirit guides are with us, healing us and binding us in kindness, trust and love. We see that we follow the path of faith and acceptance, learning and working together, finding ways to keep our children safe, connected and loved.”

This vision brought us, ten years later, to the same room at the Rupert office where on February 28th we celebrated VACFSS’ first Honouring Our Babies Ceremony.

The ceremony preparations began months ahead of time with the VACFSS sewing club and volunteers cutting squares and quilting blankets for wrapping babies. As the date got closer, many more staff, while continuing their regular jobs, volunteered to create and send invitations, encourage attendance, arrange for the helpers, prepare the room, and do the myriad tasks required for such an important community ceremony.

February 28th arrived remarkably soon the chairs were arranged, the helpers were gathering, adjusting their regalia. The guests were arriving, the parking lot was full, and the stroller parking lot in the hall was overflowing. The last quilted blanket was finished and joined the pile of completed quilts with five minutes to spare.

When all the babies had been tickled and admired, the babies and caregivers were taken aside and prepared by Elders who explained the meaning and importance of the ceremony and helped them to be present with good minds and good hearts.

The caregivers and babies returned and the room was settled and calm. We were welcomed to the territory by a Musqueam Elder and then the three Knowledge Keepers were blanketed. The VACFSS Cultural Coordinator called the four Witnesses and presented them with blankets. The witnesses were told that their role is to observe and remember what occurs. Traditionally, nothing is written about Ceremony and in the oral tradition, the witnesses preserve the knowledge of the way the ceremony is conducted.

Women were called to lay blankets and the caregivers were called to stand with the babies. Helpers wrapped each baby in one of the beautiful handmade quilted blankets. One staff member decided that every baby needs a drum and made and presented a small perfect unique drum to each baby.
VACFSS STAFF CHANGES

Who’s Coming & Going?

By: Sandy Partridge, Human Resources Technician

HIRING:
- SAM GEORGE - Family Preservation Counselor casual/ Elder, effective January 9, 2013.
- BRUCE ROBINSON - Family Preservation Counselor casual/ Elder, effective January 9, 2013.
- SUSAN POWELL - Family Preservation Counselor casual/ Elder, effective January 9, 2013.
- CLARISSA POERNOMO - Co-op Student Communication casual, effective January 28, 2013.

INTERNALS:
- ANNE MCMILLAN - Regular Full-Time Family Preservation Counselor, effective December 10, 2012.
- ANNE SAVARD - Resources Clinical Supervisor, effective February 4, 2013.
- CONDIA HILL - Guardianship Clinical Supervisor, effective January 8, 2013.
- SEAN MCFARLANE - Regular Child Protection Social Worker, effective January 8, 2013.

PRACTICUM PLACEMENTS:
- ALICE MICKELSON - practicum placement in Family Preservation, effective January 9, 2013.
- KASSIA HARDWICKE - practicum placement in Guardianship, effective January 7, 2013.
- RACHEL LUTGENS - practicum placement in Guardianship, effective January 7, 2013.

RETURNS:
- MICHAEL DELORME - has returned from leave and has resumed employment in IT, effective 28 January 2013.
- KIM MATTHEWS - has returned as Child Protection Social Worker effective Nov. 5, 2012.
- MINDI MOREN - has returned as Child Protection Social Worker effective Nov. 5, 2012.

LEAVES:
- LESLIE JUNEK - commenced a leave of absence, effective December 18, 2012.
- LORI SKULSH - commenced a leave of absence, effective December 6, 2012.
- KRISTI WHITE - commenced a leave of absence, effective December 3, 2012.
- MIKE DELORME - commenced a leave of absence, effective December 3, 2012.
- KIM MATTHEWS - commenced a leave of absence, effective February 1, 2013.
- CLAIRE BAXTER - commenced a maternity leave, effective February 1, 2013.

PRACTICUM CESSATIONS:
- CARMEN CHRISTIANSEN - ceased her practicum placement with VACFSS, effective January 24, 2013.

FAREWELL:
- WALLY RUPERT - ceased employment, effective January 4, 2013.
- HEATHER JOHNSTON - ceased employment, effective January 30, 2013.
- SERENA KULLAR - ceased employment, effective February 22, 2013.
- ALEKS BESAN - ceased co-op placement with VACFSS, effective January 7, 2013.
NEED A BREAK? SEARCH A WORD

VACFSS Word Search

Thanks to our contributors:
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