

Surrounding Children with Cedar

THE NONG SILA URBAN ADOPTIONS PROJECT A Community-Based Model for Urban Aboriginal Adoptions



“For that child in foster care, waiting to be adopted out, we have to be that strong link, a link to their identities, a pride in who they are, pride in our community.” – Elder

“We have to really own this, these are our kids. We have to create soft places for them to feel safe and flourish. We just have to step up to the plate and do it our way, with our values, the way we care for our kids. We have to heal together.” – Foster parent

About the Aboriginal Caregiver Recruitment Logo

The Thunderbird is a legendary gigantic figure found in almost all Indigenous cultures on the Northwest Coast. The Thunderbird flapped his wings emitting a thunderous sound, and lightening flashed when he blinked his eyes. One story I heard as a child always stuck with me, about how the first carver was unable to lift a huge beam to build his house, until the Thunderbird came and lifted it into place for him. This one story seems to me appropriate, as we are attempting to rebuild and heal our societies through the efforts of Aboriginal organizations.

About the Artist – Ray Sim Sr.

Ray is a member of the Musqueam Salish Nation of Vancouver, BC. He also has close familial ties to the Gitksan through his grandfather, who is from the Gitanmaax Band. Ray's first exposure to First Nations Northwest Coast Art came when he was age 12, attending art classes taught by Ron Hamilton. This early experience acted as the catalyst in his continued exploration of this art form.

Ray has taught art classes at both Ha-ho-payuk School in Port Alberni, and also at the Port Alberni Friendship Centre. He has instructed students on the Qualicum Reserve and at Parksville Malaspina College campus. To contact Ray, please email rsim96@hotmail.com

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“Aboriginal perspectives are diverse, but one message is clearly delivered: Aboriginal people want and need to be actively involved in developing policies that affect them, and in delivering services to their communities.”

– Ted Hughes, 2006, BC Children and Youth Review

NONG SILA: A Community-Based Research Project

NONG SILA is a Victoria-based research project on urban off-reserve Aboriginal adoptions. NONG SILA is a Lkwungen word meaning many grandparents, many grandchildren. The project was developed in response to an urgent need for culturally appropriate models in the Aboriginal foster care and adoptions sector in British Columbia. We strongly believe that urban Aboriginal children have a right to a safe, caring and culturally sensitive environment to build relationships with their communities, learn about their history and background, and develop a sense of pride and belonging. The project involved a consultative process with Victoria’s urban Aboriginal community to develop a community-based, culturally relevant model for urban adoptions. The NONG SILA adoptions model will support urban Aboriginal children to build and maintain roots in their communities.

The Victoria Urban Aboriginal Community

NONG SILA was coordinated by an all-Aboriginal research team. The agency partner is Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services (SCCFS). Based in Victoria, SCCFS is the only Vancouver Island delegated agency working specifically with off-reserve urban Aboriginal peoples. The agency provides services to over 230 urban Aboriginal children representing over 45 different B.C. First Nations as well as communities outside B.C.

Urban Aboriginal communities have unique features and needs that must be recognized in policy, practice and research dealing with child and family services. The diversity and mobility of Victoria’s urban population presents both strengths and challenges. SCCFS works with a wide range of Aboriginal clients, agencies and overlapping jurisdictions. The community holds diverse values and traditions related to adoptions and caretaking. Finally, while there are many strengths, resources, and active community groups to draw from, our community is also challenged by the legacy of colonialism, including poverty, lack of affordable housing, and funding barriers for off-reserve families. The NONG SILA adoptions model speaks to these unique needs.

Why is this Research Important?

The cycle of external foster care and adoption has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities. In B.C., almost half of the 1,000 children in care waiting to be adopted are Aboriginal. Many of these children are living off-reserve and in urban environments such as Victoria.

Did You Know?

- The number of Aboriginal children in care has actually increased since the Residential School system reached its peak in the 1950-60s.
- Less than 5% of BC's total population is Aboriginal yet:
 - 52% of children currently in the care of the BC government are Aboriginal
 - 48% of all BC children who are available for adoption are Aboriginal
 - over 63% of Aboriginal children in care are adopted by non-Aboriginal parents
- 50-70% of the Aboriginal population in BC lives off-reserve, yet:
 - delegated Aboriginal agencies that are mandated to offer child and family services receive, on average, 22% less funding than their government counterparts
 - the adoption needs of off-reserve, urban Aboriginal children have not been adequately addressed in policy, service delivery and research

Current research on Aboriginal adoptions demonstrates that successful initiatives must be grounded in the cultural experiences and values of Aboriginal peoples. To interrupt the devastating cycle of external adoptions, we need models for supporting fostered and adoptive kids to maintain their connections to their communities and identities.

A Model for Community-Based Research

We asked community members how to work with adoptions in a way congruent with community values and perspectives. We employed an Indigenous action research design guided by a community-based Research Advisory Council. We spoke with over 45 community members, including Elders, families, foster and adoptive parents, service providers, policy makers and people who had been fostered or adopted. We also spoke with participants outside of Victoria, including Vancouver Island and Vancouver. We asked the following questions:

- How can we support adopted or fostered urban Aboriginal children to remain connected to their communities? What barriers do we face?
- What would a culturally relevant model for urban adoptions look like in a very diverse urban Aboriginal community?

What Did We Hear from Community Members?

There was a lot of support from community members for this initiative. We heard about both the challenges the community faces and promising perspectives for a way forward.

Barriers and Policy Gaps

Community members identified different levels of barriers in the area of foster care and adoptions. These include funding constraints, lack of housing, poverty, lack of culturally relevant supports and training, ongoing effects of colonialism, systemic racism, shame and internalized racism, biased and intrusive assessment

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tools for potential adoptive and foster parents, and limited numbers of “formal” Aboriginal foster and adoptive parents.

“I was just so ashamed to be First Nations, I didn’t know where I belonged.” – Adoptee

“Living in Victoria is really expensive. Aboriginal families that provide care are worried they don't have an extra room in their house. That’s a huge issue for people that want to become caregivers.” – Advisory council

“And then if they do try and apply, they are so scrutinized and it just traumatizes them all over again, it’s not honoring them in any way. A lot of them find it a very invasive procedure because you know you have to put your whole life out there. You have to have this and you have to have that. There’s a lot of shame there.” – Service provider

Community members also identified policy gaps in the implementation of community-based services. Funding and service delivery policies do not always reflect the needs of Victoria’s diverse and mobile population. There is a schism between funding and jurisdiction formulas as families move between on- and off-reserve communities, and a lack of resources to implement cultural plans and pursue custom or open adoptions.

“Sure we have cultural plans, but is there funding for their implementation and evaluation? It just puts another strain on the community members to meet with kids and parents, and then there is no support to follow through and no resources to support the teachers and caregivers who do the work in the cultural plans.” – Service provider

“I was placed in a non-native home. I just never had an opportunity to meet my family or my community. After so many years, it just never happened.” – Adoptee

Addressing Challenges

Community members raised key questions related to how the model would identify strengths and support community knowledge, given historical, funding and policy gaps. Some of the questions raised included: How do we balance the need for a congruent model with the diversity of traditions in Victoria? What customs and traditional teachings should be involved in the model, and how? How will the model address the challenges and gaps identified? How do we work towards prevention and breaking the cycle of adoptions? How will we create culturally appropriate assessment and evaluation tools? How will we support family and community members to be actively involved? How do we work with a child whose family or community is not available to participate? How can we partner with non-Aboriginal families? How do we ensure that concerns about tokenism, appropriation and accountability are addressed respectfully and openly?

Doing It “In a Good Way”: A Model for Urban Aboriginal Adoptions

Community members clearly supported alternatives to the current system of adoption policies and practices. They talked about the importance of culturally relevant options to formalized external adoptions, including open adoptions, custom arrangements, extended cultural planning and collaborative community initiatives that build capacity and promote social supports. The most important goal expressed by the community was to build culturally appropriate capacity for urban Aboriginal children, families, caregivers and service providers.

We heard that it was important that the model focus on the full spectrum of adoptions, from prevention to follow-up. The model should also address different models of adoption, from supporting children in permanent placements both inside and outside the community, to facilitating custom adoptions, to welcoming back kids who have been externally adopted.

The NONG SILA Adoptions Council

One suggestion we heard repeatedly over the course of the project was the need for a council to act as a consultative body. The council would work around each child to “surround them with cedar” by providing guidance for decision making, protocol use, cultural planning and partnership building.



“This is our model of governance; it is about us caring for our kids like we have since time immemorial. They tried it their way and it doesn’t work. Let’s try it with our traditions and our spiritual teachings.” – Elder

How Will the Council Work?

The NONG SILA council is a model for urban adoptions governance. The council will work as an advisory body to support any child or family going through an adoption related process. Based on a collaborative partnership model, the council will be involved in consultation, conferencing and networking to develop an adoption plan that is tailored to the child's needs and takes into account the many voices at the table. This may include arrangements to determine inclusive cultural planning, protocol guidance, long-term support, and evaluation.

Along with the child as the central participant, key partners could include siblings, biological family and community members, the foster or adoptive family, the child's workers, Aboriginal agency representatives, community supports such as Elders, mentors, teachers and community workers, and Band, agency and government representatives. The council would develop a tailored adoption plan that strengthens the child's voice and connection to their identity and community.

12 Key Principles of the NONG SILA Adoptions Model

1 Grounded in Indigenous community knowledge, values and practices

“What is missing in all those policies is that spiritual connection to your identity. You can't fake that in a policy or one program. We know how much work and training it takes. You need the right knowledge, know the ceremonies, the right protocol for that child. A manual will never teach you that.” – Elder

2 Integrated and sustainable

“We already have the knowledge of how to teach them. It's how do we get that to the children that are in care. Those kids are missing out on our cultural teachings on a regular basis. Bringing them to a pow wow for a one day is just not doing it. They need more. They need to know who they are. They need that community to be there for them day to day, not just once in a while. It has to be consistent.” – Advisory council

3 Reflect Aboriginal perspectives about child rearing and attachment

“All this research about attachment theory was never from our perspective, where a child could have a primary or secondary attachment with several caregivers. It worked out fine in our communities. Yes it takes some adjustment, but if the child is socialized in that way, in our way, from the start then they see the strength of it, they get the benefits. They can be connected to more than one family or identity.” – Custom adoptee

4 Support open-ended, inclusive, custom and culturally-grounded arrangements

“The foster parents and the mom were co-parenting these children and they had this wonderful working relationship. They consulted each other. It was just incredible to see. It probably all boils down to personality and dedication. You're there because you really care and you want the best for that child.” – Service provider

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5 Build partnerships: “it takes many cedar trees to shelter a child”

“Some parents are more willing to work in that custom or inclusive model. They’ll say to the family, “we’re going to the pool, why don’t you call”, and if mom says there’s a family gathering, there’s a community event, a salmon bbq, the foster parent will be open to bringing the kids down and it’s more than okay in the setting that it’s in.” – Foster parent

6 Reflected in policies and practice

“This really needs a new way of practice, with travel and visitation time and resources for building community connections. You have to take that time to visit. To develop that family conference, to get people invested, trust the process. That’s the only way it’s going to work differently. The policies and the funding have to support that.” – Custom adoptee

7 Promote ownership and accountability

“For us to build that capacity to do this adoptions work, to be there for all the kids that need it, we really need to be accountable. We need workshops to work on our own healing, so we are healthy to guide those kids. We have to stop that victimization, the secrecy. Be accountable to our kids.” – Adoptive parent

8 Provide skill building and training

“Community members, we do need the awareness and healing to do this, the training has to be relevant to our realities, talk about the history of colonialism, but also what we deal with on a daily basis. Prepare the families for the work, to support them so we don’t set them up to fail when they see the reality in the community.” – Advisory council

9 Address racism and cultural biases in recruitment, assessment and training

“One of the most important thing we can do to address adopted kids, is change how we assess risk, how we recruit those foster parents. The young people need encouragement to be adoptive parents. We can turn a lot of those numbers around if we just address the racism in the assessment tools.” – Adoptive parent

10 Promote a continuum of cultural participation

“You have to know how to build relationships with the children, the youth, the families, the Band, your colleagues, your other community service providers. If you can’t do that, you just don’t get anywhere. Some kids need a lot of time to connect with their culture, there’s so much shame and anger there.” – Service provider

11 Focus on child’s perspective

“All of these cultural plans and models to keep kids connected to their identity, it’s about THEM. If you don’t ask the kids what they think, if you don’t build that trust, if you don’t start with their needs and their wishes, you’ve got nothing.” – Adoptee

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“That child has a right to documentation. That thread will keep their identity to that community. So anything that can be done: visits, phone calls, life books... we have blankets or regalia made for them if it is appropriate to their background, anything they can carry with them with those stories.” – Service provider

12 Tailor approaches through consultation and evaluation

“Cultural planning, it can't be a one-size fits all. Every child has a unique culture and history, the family is different, who can or wants to be involved, what the teachings are, who the community reps are. You have to spend time asking the right questions, finding out who will be part of the process and how, who the community is.” – Adoptive parent

Principles of Practice for the NONG SILA Model

In summary, community members emphasized a way of working that should be guided by the following important principles of practice:

- **Leadership:** Supporting community leadership and role-modeling;
- **Healing and Accountability:** Providing training and support for community healing and wellness;
- **Transparency:** Using tools such as public protocols, community referencing, witnessing, and public acknowledgments;
- **Partnership:** Collaborative decision-making, inclusive & custom arrangements;
- **Comprehensive:** Focusing on all aspects, from prevention to follow-up;
- **Adequate resources:** Investing in recruitment, training, support and follow-up;
- **Cultural values:** Grounding practice, policy, consultations and networking in cultural values and knowledge. Value-based plans can replace specific cultural knowledge if unavailable;
- **Evaluation:** Providing a process for on-going consultations, evaluations and reporting back to community.

“Our system is about community and relationships, not legal agreements. That child may be with you for one year, one week, nine years, or forever. But we never just signed away our kids. It's about relationships, being accountable to the community, not contracts. In this system you sign a paper and it's over. You renounce your relationship, it's like signing a treaty. We have to find a way to bridge those two worlds.” – Advisory council

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“doing it in a good way”



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“A lot of our visits were with the Salish side, a lot of connection there. Also we would go to Alert Bay every year and we were part of the Kwagiulth Urban Society and we went to almost everything that they had going... The way that everything was kind of open and spoken about and the knowing both sides of both families just made it normal.” – Adoptive family

“I found what really grounded the one little girl is that her adoptive parents were really strong in the Big House and in that culture. Getting that connection to culture really helped her. It grounded her and brought her back in. Now she's doing really, really well. We need a lot more of that.” – Foster parent

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