

TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Indigenous teens gain parenting skills from Terra Centre's cultural services programs

BY: DANIELLE PARADIS PHOTOGRAPHY: NANCY CRITCHLEY

Every week, a group of Indigenous teenage women meet at the Terra Centre for a program called Beading and Birthing for Expecting Moms.

"It's the Kookums (grandmothers) and the old aunties sitting around the table beading and addressing some of the questions that the expecting moms might have," says Nicole Van Kuppeveld, who co-ordinates the centre's Indigenous cultural and support services.

Terra Centre is a non-profit organization that since 1971 has helped pregnant and parenting teens develop the skills and self-reliance to be successful parents. It helps them finish high school and find affordable housing, and offers childcare, counselling and relevant programs.



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The Indigenous cultural and support services are important because nearly half of the 1,000 moms and dads the centre assists annually are Indigenous.

The cultural teachings, ceremonies, events and activities, which have been running for almost two years, are meant to nurture staff, parents and children through traditional Indigenous teachings.



Beaded moccasins are displayed at one of the weekly Beading and Birthing sessions held by Elsie Paul

"We felt that it was important for participants to connect with culture and ceremony," says Van Kuppeveld. "We know that when that happens it is one of the strategies to create resilient and confident children."

Through the program, youth have the opportunity to speak with Elsie Paul, the elder-in-residence. She provides customized training for the different program teams and has led healing circles and a program called Aboriginal Ages and Stages. A few times a year, Paul reads Indigenous stories and holds drum-making workshops for parents and babies.

Other elders, such as Pauline Paulson and Francis Whiskeyjack, conduct seasonal ceremonies and sweats (ceremonies that take place in a sweat lodge and focus on purification, healing and cultural teachings).

With funding from Edmonton Community Foundation, the centre was also able to start Knowledge Keepers, a group of allies and self-identified Indigenous people from the Terra Centre who act as cultural liaisons and bring in information about the Indigenous community. Currently, there are six knowledge keepers.

As further commitment to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, Terra Centre encourages its staff to participate in ceremonies, such as seasonal sweats and weekly smudges (purification and teaching ceremonies using sweetgrass or sage) and requires all new hires to attend an Indigenous cultural teaching session.

"Overall, our goal is to help empower our teenage parents to succeed and that culture and ceremony are a means to that end," says Van Kuppeveld. ■