

# Inherent Rights Youth Initiative Youth & Elders Gathering 2022

Ben Sylvestre



Darrell Boissoneau (right), sitting beside his helper Jackson (left), shares teaching from his lifetime experience in leading First Nations towards governing themselves under their own inherent right as the original people of Turtle Island.

Around a sacred fire on Ketegaunseebee (Garden River First Nation) territory, Darrell Boissoneau and Jackson made a tobacco offering and held a smudge for those attending the 2023 Inherent Rights Youth Initiative's Youth & Elders Gathering. These were the first of many ceremonies which set off the final gathering for this year's initiative in a good way.

"Cleansing our mind, our body, our spirits and our emotions, is going to really encourage us to listen to what is going to be shared today.," said Boissoneau.

Since September 2022, the IRYI event series has instructed youth on each of the Five Pillars of Effective Governance through virtual storytelling sessions with Elders across Turtle Island. The Pillars, a learning tool developed by the Centre for First Nations Governance (CFNG), highlight the essential aspects of all First Nation governments both past and present: People, Land, Jurisdiction & Laws, Governing Systems, and Resources. In this final event, Youth and Elders who participated in the virtual series gathered to build upon the knowledge they gained, celebrate their learning, and continue to advance their skills in First Nations' self-government.

“We're so happy to welcome everybody and finally wrap up our storytelling journey here, bringing together everyone who has joined us along the way,” said IRYI Coordinator Amsey Maracle. “It's been so nice listening to the Elders over the last few months share their stories with us.”

The IRYI participants successfully completed their five-month learning journey with the support from a grassroots coalition of organizations including The Centre for First Nations Governance (CFNG), The Rebuilding First Nations Governance Project (RFNG), Laidlaw Foundation, and The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC).

### **50 Years ago: Elders Reflect on their Youth Leadership Journey**

“I want to talk about transformative times,” said Boissoneau—the gathering's first speaker. “We all go through a period of time where the energy and the spirit will tell us this is the time to do certain things. Sometimes we refer to it as a gut feeling.”

“Mine came to me around 1973.”

It was then, the former Chief and lifelong leader from Garden River First Nation became involved with The American Indian Movement or “A.I.M”: A spiritual and political campaign founded in the late 1960s and taken up by thousands of Indigenous people across Turtle Island.

A.I.M. united countless young First Nations, Metis, Inuk, and Native American individuals who together discovered a sense of belonging and purpose as protectors of their own rights, communities, and shared land.

“It was at that particular time where many of us as young people such as you today (were) searching for a sense of belonging, and purpose,” said Boissoneau. “That effort led to many of us going out to Morley, Alberta, and attending the Indian Ecumenical Conference.”

There, Boissoneau connected with not just other youth but Elders, medicine people, spiritual leaders, and knowledge keepers from a variety of life experiences. Though a Christian event, Boissoneau says the conference was a watershed moment in his journey with First Nations spirituality and self-determination.

“It had a profound impact on me, because it gave me a sense of identity (and) purpose. It really led me to the work they did for the next stages of my life,” he said.

50 years ago, his involvement in both youth gatherings and generation-bridging events built a strong foundation of skills to protect the Indigenous peoples and their inherent rights as the stewards and original people of this land.

“For me, that was my moment in time as a young teenager, searching for something that I gravitated to,” Darrell said. “I really felt safe as well. Because I knew that this was the work of the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit was going to protect me.”

Now an Elder, he looks back proudly on the powerful acts of resistance he performed in his youth. One such act, the words “THIS IS INDIAN LAND”, painted in big white letters on a red, rusty train bridge on Ketegaunseebee territory, looks back on him today.

“Long ago, our people would do pictographs and leave messages on the rocks. It was a story, right? It was a message, telling our people to stand up, there's more work we got to do,” he said. “Back in 1973, we needed to tell a story as well. We needed to inspire the next generation.”

Now, much like the paint which he and fellow land defenders repeatedly refreshed despite several attempts at its removal, Boissoneau and his encouraging message for First Nations youth aren't fading away.



Boissoneau's message at Grand River still remains today and is featured on [Garden River First Nation's webpage](#).

### **5 months ago: Elders pass the torch**

Boissoneau isn't the only one whose experience at the Indian Ecumenical Conference 50 years ago was a significant moment in their journey to reassert First Nations' rights.

“I met Boissoneau at the Canadian Indian youth workshop in 1973. And I went there searching for the same thing,” said Satsan (Herb George). “All of those medicine people that Boissoneau mentioned, I have a picture (of them) on my back wall. This work that we're doing, the way I see it, is just carrying on their vision.”

Since then, the now founder of the CFNG and Wet'suwet'en Frog Clan Hereditary Chief has dedicated his life to helping First Nations across Turtle Island reassert their inherent right to self-government. He's been behind countless grassroots gatherings like this one

and highly public, historic moments like the Delgamuukw-Gisday'way court case, which recognized Aboriginal Title.

In his final address to the IRYI participants with whom he shared the five-month learning journey, Satsan stopped to pay tribute to both those who had gathered and the many First Nations people who have moved on from our world.

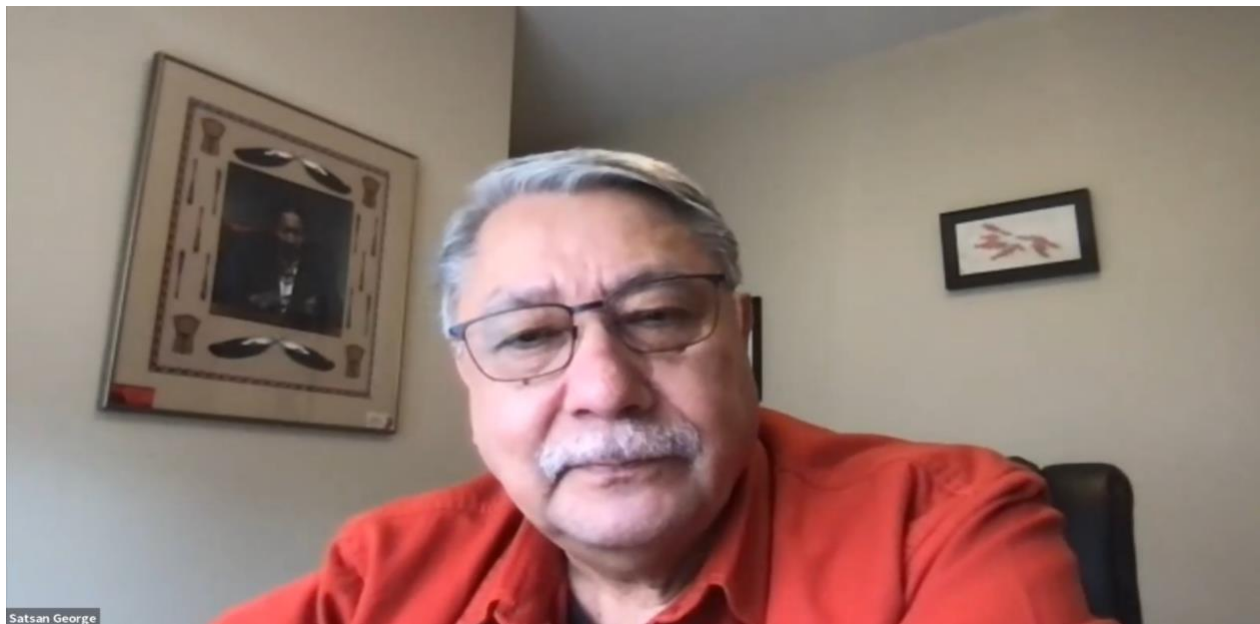
Among those no longer with us, Satsan said, are the children whose unmarked graves were recently discovered at a residential school in Starblanket Cree Nation (one of the communities we visited on our storytelling journey).

“The Five Pillars that we talked about and the spirit of those young people: we have to keep (them) in our minds, and we have to honor (them),” he said.”

“The work that we're doing is the best way to do it. Because in all that they tried to take away from us they were not successful. Because we're still here,” he said. “We need to honor those that have gone before us so that we bring back what they tried to take away and destroy.”

While the IRYI's youth are now prepared with the knowledge and stories behind each of the Five Pillars of Effective Governance, there is still incredibly challenging work ahead of them.

“When we're doing this, I'm always reminded of the words of Gisday'way, one of our greatest leaders of the Wet'suwet'en Nation in our history,” said Satsan. “When we're speaking to a group of youth, he said, if it's self-government that you want, then you better know and remember that it's hard work.”



Satsan says both youth and Elders across Turtle Island are reaching out to one another in support of reclaiming their nations' right to govern itself and the preservation of traditional knowledge.

But today's youth aren't without help. The Elders who paved the way for present-day self-government, including those who joined the IRYI gathering, are ready to provide support as the youth become leaders. Together, both generations can build upon the change made by those before them to better the futures of those yet to come.

Satsan says the importance of this relationship was further crystalized for him on a recent visit home in celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Delgamuukw-Gisday'way decision.

"When I went home, and I first went to one of my communities, to the community center, one of my nieces was waiting for me on the top step. And she was very, very emotional" said Satsan. "We get into the hall and a couple of my clan members, young clan members, come forward. And what they all said was, we need to learn. We need to learn from you."

"In our way, according to our law, it's the uncles and aunties who teach young ones in our families, today's young clan members. I said the same thing to them. In our way, I'm your uncle. If you asked me to teach you, then that's my responsibility," he added.

"What I'm getting at here is that we need to be doing this all across the country. This whole storytelling initiative began at the request of the young people who joined us in ceremony a year ago."

### **Hundreds of years ago: Haudenosaunee histories are modern medicine**

With the drive to lead and the knowledge of the Five Pillars, youth will need the skills to support one another and come to peaceful decisions on the issues that matter most to them.

Aronhiaies Herne, a Haudenosaunee subchief, storyteller, and ceremonial conductor from Akwesasne Mohawk (Kanyen'kehà) Nation offered IRYI youth some of the knowledge and practice to take on challenges of supporting each other as members of a united movement.

"I think every one of us, every one of our people, have a piece of the puzzle," Herne said. "If we were to one day put all those pieces together, we (would) have a really beautiful thing to be able to share not just with Native people, but even with the whole world."

Herne has spent close to the last 20 years sorting through Haudenosaunee histories and speaking with his people to retrace the stories of one of the history's strongest confederacies and democracies.

He says First Nation's stories and the teaching they provide are more than a beginning, middle, and end. Reclaiming a story is an act of reviving a living piece of a Nation's spirituality, culture, and way of life.

"I want you to remember through all of this teaching today, no matter what nation you're from, or what teaching you're being given, it's up to us to give life to those teachings. We have to give it life—otherwise, they're just stories like Hansel and Gretel, right?" said Herne.

First Nation's stories can provide powerful medicines—even if they're hundreds of years old. Herne recounted the story of how the Peacemaker Tekanawi:ta united the Haudenosaunee Confederacy starting by showing respect to the most despised person in the then frequently warring nations—the cannibal Onke Ra'w:raks.

In the story of the 14 String of Sympathy, Herne recounted how the messenger Aionwatha tied 14 wampum strings representing 14 methods for processing grief when his three daughters were killed by the person-eater.

“Those aren't stories, those are real, living, breathing things. The more that we share those things, the more that we understand them and the more that we apply it to our own lives,” said Herne.

### **Now: Youth and Elders learn how to decide the future together, in one mind**

One lesson from the Haudenosaunee stories still readily applied today is the confederacy's national council system, used to come to a consensus about issues in the nation. Herne walked the IRYI's participants through a mock council to show how they too can use the decision-making systems of their own nations.

There are three families in Mohawk Nation Council who decide on issues together: the Turtle Clan, the Wolf Clan, and the Bear Clan.

“Firstly, it goes back and forth between the Turtles and Bears. Once they come to one mind between Turtles and Bears, then the issue, whatever it was, gets sent over to the Wolf Clan,” he said. “They can either agree with the Turtles and the Bears, or they can disagree.

“And once the Wolves disagree, then it goes back to the Turtles and Bears again, back and forth, back and forth. And it goes through this process over and over until they reach a consensus, which means all parties agree to the decision that's going to be made.”

In Herne's mock council, attendees became the trio of families deciding on a future meeting time for imaginary gathering the next day. They returned from a 40-minute decision-making session with one mind on the decision and comments just how effective consensus building can be.

“Even just speaking within our groups, you can see how we can think about each other,” said IRYI youth representing Cowessess First Nation, Darian Agecoutay, “The Bears are thinking about what the Turtles are thinking and vice versa. You know, even though we weren't discussing the issue directly to each other, we still have a sort of consensus.”

“I was thinking that it brought us together and that we were all smiling and laughing and talking about our thinking afterwards. And that it felt good to be able to make that decision together and that we all agreed,” added Maracle.

With decision-making skills, medicines to support one-another, and knowledge of all Five Pillars of Effective Governance, the IRYI youth are moving forward in their efforts to lead the future of First Nations Self-Government on Turtle Island.

For now, IRYI youth and Elders can look forward to more events in the future.

“And that’s a wrap,” Maracle said, “We’ll be in touch with our next initiative.”

Do you want to get involved with the Inherent Rights Youth Initiative (IRYI)? Email us at [services@fngovernance.org](mailto:services@fngovernance.org) and follow us at [www.facebook.com/inherentrightsyouthinitiative](http://www.facebook.com/inherentrightsyouthinitiative).