

Looking back on the first fifteen years – an excerpt from the program booklet for the 15th Anniversary New Sun Conference: Above the Noise, February 27, 2016

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Kwey, tansi, she:kon, tunngasugitsi, bonjour, and welcome to the 15th Annual New Sun Conference on Aboriginal Arts: Above the Noise. As in the past, we acknowledge with gratitude the hospitality of the Algonquin people on whose traditional unceded territory we gather today.

Fifteen years ago this weekend, on February 28, 2002, we held the First New Sun Conference on Aboriginal Arts at Carleton. In truth, it was called a symposium for the first two years but then changed to conference, even though it soon became apparent that “conference” did not fully reflect the kind of energizing and inspiring event the New Sun Conference was quickly becoming. The theme of the inaugural conference was “Healing through the Arts”, and the presenters that year were Onondaga photographer/curator, Jeffrey Thomas; Ojibway comedian Don Kelly; Ojibway author and playwright, Drew Hayden Taylor; Inuit videographer and FASD educator, Evie Mark, with Cree writer and collaborator, Roberta Stout; Director of the White Mountain Academy of the Arts in Elliot Lake, Dr. Robert Kavanagh; and Academy co-founder, Earl Commanda, Chief of the Serpent River First Nation. The opening invocation and words of welcome were given by Carleton Journalism professor, and member of the Haida Nation, Clealls (John Medicine Horse Kelly). Midway through, we shared a light luncheon of Native foods while enjoying the flute music of Mohawk elder Rohahes, accompanied by Peigan drummer and dancer, Paula du Hamel. More than a hundred people from the Carleton and greater Ottawa community came out -- students, faculty, government employees, high school teachers, artists, and members of the general public and the local Indigenous community.

It was an auspicious beginning. What was clear from the outset was a desire on the part of those present to not only listen, and learn how the arts could be an effective tool in the promotion of cultural and cross-cultural healing, but to learn how they could actively participate in the healing process. At the same time, there was a fervent desire to recognize and celebrate the creative achievements of the participating artists. In the ensuing years the New Sun Conference has sought to sustain these inaugural twin visions, providing an intimate forum for inter-cultural dialogue, with ample opportunity for personal engagement, while offering a space to honour the lives and works and stories of Indigenous artists across a broad spectrum of creativity. Over the years, it has been an inspiring, spiritual, hopeful, humorous, challenging and energizing space.

Among the many memorable Conference moments some stand out: the running day-long bingo game to highlight presenter Darryl Dennis’s role as host of APTN’s TV show, *Bingo and a Movie*; author Joseph Boyden reading from his novel *Three Day Road*, three days after it won the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize in Toronto; Tanya Tagaq and her cousin Celina Kalluk conducting an impromptu lesson in the basics of Inuit throat singing; children’s author Michael Kusugak’s animated storytelling; members of Carleton’s student Word Warriors Society presenting a Pendleton blanket to Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor to recognize his

contributions to Indigenous literature; Tom Jackson's unexpected performance of his signature song, *The Huron Carol*, following his presentation; the use of Christi Belcourt's stunning beadwork-inspired mural, *My Heart (Is Beautiful)*, as a backdrop for the 2010 conference; the surprise distribution of a limited edition print, *Shining Through*, by West Coast artist/dancer and presenter Mike Dangeli, to everyone in attendance to mark the tenth anniversary of the New Sun Conference in 2011; A Tribe Called Red's joyous mid-day transformation of the Fenn Lounge into a dance club with their infectious electric powwow music; and Joy Maclaren's striking presence wearing the distinctive blue robe she was given when she received the name, "New Sun", from First Nations elders at a Carleton ceremony in 1995.

New Sun received the name and the robe in recognition of her philanthropy and support for Indigenous education. She helped establish the New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture at Carleton, and in partnership with the Dean of Arts and Social Sciences, most notably Dr. John Osborne, funded the New Sun Conference for more than a decade. At the time of her passing in November, 2014, at the age of ninety-two, Joy had attended seven of the previous nine conferences. Like many others here today, she considered the conference a harbinger of spring, and an event not to be missed. The same longstanding commitment to the conference is found in many of those whose names appear on the back of this program, in Carleton President Roseann O'Reilly Runte, and in Elder Jim Albert, whose warm words of welcome and thanksgiving have set the tone for the conference for the past twelve years.

A distinguishing feature of the New Sun Conference is the sense of community it fosters, with attendees likening the annual gathering of the New Sun community to a family reunion. Familial connection is an apt analogy that extends to the conference presenters as well. On separate occasions they have included: film maker and actress Jennifer Podemski and her sister, actress and singer Tamara Podemski; artist and curator Gerald McMaster and his daughter, photo artist Meryl McMaster; photographer and curator Jeffrey Thomas, his son Bear Witness, co-founder of A Tribe Called Red, and Bear's grandmother, actress and playwright, Gloria Miguel; actress and writer/director Kaniehtiio Horn, and this year, her sister Olympian and Storyboots ambassador for Manitobah Mukluks, Waneek Horn-Miller.

So tangible was the sense of communitas and familial camaraderie at last year's New Sun Conference, that former Dean Osborne referred to the event in his weekly blog as a "love in." This was high praise indeed, especially for a conference. But these words aptly presage the theme of this year's conference, "Above the Noise", taken from a line in the song, *Let's Sing a New Song*, from presenter Andrea Menard's latest CD, *Lift*. The fuller context for this lyrical phrase is:

What if we chose not to be shy and sang of love
What if we raised our voices high and sang above the noise

Within the context of the New Sun Conference, and mindful of the recent recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Above the Noise" has added resonance, suggesting a

desire to raise the level of discourse and public conversation above the pedestrian to something more meaningful, communal and compassionate. At the same time, “Above the Noise” recognizes that all of the presenters have publically distinguished themselves in their individual creative endeavours -- from film, music, literature and painting, to education, curation and the revitalization of traditional arts. In so doing they have brought honour not just to themselves and their home communities, but to the broader Indigenous arts community and the country as a whole. In the process, they have become role models and a source of inspiration to youth – especially Aboriginal youth – and to people of all ages. This deserves to be celebrated, and “Above the Noise” captures this sense of celebration and hope. And on a very modest scale, fifteen years on, this may be what truth and reconciliation looks like...and sounds like...and feels like.

Enjoy the day! All my relations.