

# WHAT IS AN ELDER? WHAT DO ELDERS DO?: FIRST NATION ELDERS AS TEACHERS IN CULTURE-BASED URBAN ORGANIZATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

This paper discusses the nature and role of First Nation Elders in Toronto urban community organizations. It presents the Elders' own definition of what they do in these organizations, how they came to be called Elders, what they see an Elder to be, and their relationship to the urban community. We see a natural process of aging and personal development where, as individuals grow older and accumulate knowledge and skills, they are respected for what they have learned. They are asked to teach others about culture, tradition, and "being a human being" based upon their experiences. This teaching is seen as essential to facilitating a strong sense of cultural identity and healing, especially in urban settings.

L'article étudie la nature et le rôle des Anciens autochtones dans les organisations de la communauté urbaine de Toronto. L'article définit le rôle des Anciens tels que ceux-ci le conçoivent eux-mêmes, l'origine du terme Ancien et ce que représente le terme, ainsi que les rapports des Anciens avec la communauté urbaine. On constate un processus naturel de vieillissement et de développement personnel où, à mesure que les personnes vieillissent et accumulent des connaissances et des compétences, on les respecte pour ces connaissances. On leur demande de transmettre aux autres leurs connaissances sur la culture, la tradition et le sens de l'être humain. Cet enseignement, basé sur leur expérience, est considéré essentiel pour faciliter un fort sentiment d'identité et de guérison culturelles, surtout en zone urbaine.

I asked a question to my teacher one time about Elders and how old you have to be. I said, "how old do you have to be to be an Elder?" He said, "how old is old? I don't know how old is old." He said somebody had asked him that one time and he told him to go over to another man and ask. He said, "you'd better ask him -- I'm only 75, he's 84." So he went over and asked that 84 year old man and that 84 year old man said, "I don't know, but there's a man up there--he's 88. Ask him," He went over there and asked the 88 year old man and he said, "ask that man over there--he's 92." The 92 year old said, I don't know how old is old. That man over there is 97. Ask him." I never did find out how old you had to be to be an Elder.

We all have a different concept of what an Elder is. You have to listen and not ask any more questions. It takes common sense to make it so that you can understand (Gladys Kidd, Ojibway, Curve Lake).

I first met the late Gladys Kidd as a member of the Board of Directors of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. She was then on the Elders' Advisory Council and travelled into the city from Curve Lake to run women's circles, act as a teacher and counsellor to community members, and participate in Centre planning and activities as a respected Elder. In 1988, the Elders Advisory Council was something new to the Centre and the Centre board, staff, and the community were trying to understand how best to relate to the presence of Elders. Who are Elders? How do you act around them? What do they have to offer an urban organization? Why are they here? These and other questions were the impetus for a documentation project about the Elders and their involvement with the Centre (Stiegelbauer, 1990). Later it became a broader study of their role in different urban Aboriginal organizations (Stiegelbauer and Nahwegahbow, in progress). However, as Gladys Kidd said above, the most important part of understanding is to be involved and to listen. This article, first, is about who the Elders are, *what they do and how to listen to them*, especially in the context of First Nation cultural and community centres.

Secondly, this article is about the role of Elders as teachers of what it means to be a First Nation person, especially an urban First Nation person. The Elders teach about the vision of life that is contained in First Nation philosophies and handed down in ceremonies and traditional teachings. Living this vision is First Nation culture, something that continues to change and adapt as the world changes. Traditional philosophy itself talks about how to live a healthy life and be stronger in identity and self as a result of understanding what Native culture means. The strategies that these tradi-

tional teachers employ, both individually and organizationally, offers suggestions to all teachers: they emphasize the importance of being a role model, of tailoring your teaching to the readiness and needs of the individual, and of continuing to learn as a teacher. The information provided here is the result of ongoing conversations with Elders involved with Toronto urban centres. Most of the conversations and interviews were conducted with other Board or community members present. In writing this article, some interpretation is mine, but for the most part, I have tried to let the Elders speak for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

## **Elders and First Nation Urban Centres**

Elders should be role models for everyone else. Elders should be teachers to the grandchildren and all young people because of their wisdom. Elders should be advisors, law-givers, dispensers of justice. Elders should be open to everyone. Elders should be knowledgeable in all aspects of Innu culture. Elders should be teachers for everyone of the past history of Innu people. Elders should be recorders of history, not only orally but to be preserved in print. Elders should be teachers of values important to Innu to be passed on from generation to generation. Elders should be teachers of language and oral history. Elders should be teachers of Innu medicine.

We place great importance in our Elders. Their directions for us will guide our lives. Their instructions have been to advise us to fight for our land. We will do this by keeping up our protests against development (Statement by the Innu delegation from Sheshatshiu Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, April 27, 1989).

The role of teaching Elders has become increasingly meaningful in First Nation communities, especially urban communities. Elders are important for their symbolic connection to the past, and for their knowledge of traditional ways, teachings, stories and ceremonies. It is very common for respected Elders to be called upon to help communities with decisions regarding everything from health issues, to community development, to governmental negotiations regarding land use and self-government. In the context of First Nation communities, the term "Elder" can have many meanings. Most commonly, it simply refers to an older person. It can also mean someone who has been sought by their peers for spiritual and cultural leadership and who has knowledge of some aspect of tradition. A number of the community organizations in Toronto, such as the Native Canadian

Centre and Anishnawbe Health of Toronto--two forerunners in the involvement of Elders--Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto, First Nations House of the University of Toronto, Council Fire, and many more, have introduced either a resident "Elder," a visiting Elders program, or an Elders' Advisory Committee to provide guidance and information to the organization and its community.

As an example, at the Native Canadian Centre and Anishnawbe Health of Toronto, Elders have played an active role in the development of "culturally appropriate" or "culture-based" programs and approaches to community interaction. Such a strategy provides the community with contact with tradition, traditional beliefs, ceremonies and experiences, and a philosophy unique to First Nation cultures. Elders are the personification of tradition, whatever their specific expertise or training. They are symbols of Aboriginal culture not only in their words and actions but in their very being.

The "Elder business" however is not without its problems. On a provincial and national scale, Elders have come to represent a First Nation perspective and philosophy. As Beatrice Medicine, a Sioux scholar, states: "in cases where Indian individuals have lost Indian cultural focus...[E]lders have assumed almost mythic and mystic proportions" (1983:143). The symbolic aspect of being an Elder is potentially attractive both to those looking for a philosophy to give meaning to their life, and to those seeking status and followers. Some individuals interested in this kind of power have set themselves up as "Elders" or "got in the elder business" as one Native Centre Elder put it. Organizations interested in the status of involving themselves with these "symbols" have included Elders on their Boards or as part of their organization, too often as a figurehead or with a visitor's status. Real involvement with Elders is something different from the everyday way that organizations, especially those funded by other bureaucracies, operate.

As Medicine describes it, the terms "my Elders tell me" or "we involve Elders" are frequently heard especially as a rationale for behavior and policy, without specifying what "the Elders do indeed tell" or how they are involved, other than as speakers or figureheads. To really learn traditional ways and incorporate them into a non-traditional setting is no small feat, as the Native Centre and Anishnawbe Health will testify, not the least of which is involvement with "real Elders" in a "real" way, not for image or personal gain.

## What is a "Real" Elder?

We are still looking for teachers, people who still remember, people who still know, people who still held onto it and there's not many around. There are people who know parts of traditions, parts of teachings, some songs, some of the culture, some of the language. There's not very many who are teachers who know the teachings as they were handed down and who know how to put that into your life and practice it as everyday living. So in our need to find that for ourselves and for our children, we are looking for what we call elders.

That's what an elder is. He's one who knows the teachings, who knows them so well that he's able to live by them. And he's lived through all those stages of life and he's held onto them and now he can give people those teachings and not only can he give them those teachings, he can help them to understand them because he's lived it. That's what an elder is (Ojibway Traditional Teacher, Sudbury, Ontario [Stiegelbauer, 1990]).

The term "Elder" can refer to anyone who has reached a certain age and in some cases is used interchangeably with the term "senior" as in senior citizen. In both cases, the individual has had enough life experience to have something to offer those behind them. In a sense, Elders are "experts on life." Their exact expertise may be dependent on the nature of their experience, but in one way or another it involves some aspect of traditional knowledge and culture, *or an interpretation of their experience in traditional terms*. What they learned from their experience and how they interpret it is as important to being an Elder as the experience itself. It is also important to be able to communicate that learning to others. While age is a part of this, it is not the only part. As one Ojibway traditional teacher described it: "some people say that it isn't a matter of age, but to a certain extent it is when you have experienced enough of the stages of life that you can look back and reflect on them...some people have been able to do it more completely than others. When you're 35, you're only about halfway, so you can't talk about all of life, not from experience."<sup>3</sup>

The aspect of enough experience, and enough learning, includes life experiences and experiences with aspects of traditional culture and knowledge. Learning enough traditional knowledge is usually the result of the influence of an older person who acts as a teacher and role model. Being a role model for the path of life is an important part of being an Elder:

You see, the elder, the concept for me is like if you go into a strange land and you don't know the country and you're swamped and there's muskegs and there's bad places to travel

and there's good places to travel. So the one's who have been longer are the good guides because they know how to get around the swamps, who know where to go on, and so on. It doesn't matter if there's a trail. They know that country.

You know the channel, on the north side of the channel. That was cut by glaciers, the second to last one and they cut deep. The last one that came down, they cut this way almost directly across the other. What they have left is all these whalebacks or humpbacks, and if you're traveling close to the borders of the channel on the far side, then you're always going up and down and around. Always like that. But if you go maybe a half mile north, you're walking on good land.

That's how simple it is. So there are in fact guides who have been there who have each individually lived through their own hell and have found their way and they are in fact guides. So if you are going into a strange land, and God knows, it's strange to so many young people. And they can avoid all that and ensure you a good trip. That's really what it is. It's that simple (Ojibway Elder Art Solomon [Stiegelbauer, 1990]).

It is not surprising that many of the people recognized as "Elders" have lived through difficult times, both personally and politically. Some have had problems with the law, with alcohol, with family separation; some have seen such things happen to others. What they have in common is the fact that they learned something from those experiences, that they turned to the traditional culture for understanding, support and healing, and that they are committed to helping others, especially those of similar background.

In traditional terms, an Elder is also a specialist in ceremonies, traditional teachings, language, and heritage as it applies to mind, body and spirit. As each individual is unique in their experience, learning, personality and knowledge of traditional culture, each potentially has something different to offer. Some individuals may be specialists in certain teachings, ceremonies or healing practices, while others have another expertise. Individuals seeking an Elder to talk to consider these factors in approaching an Elder, but often find the decision is a combination of personal attraction and the type of expertise needed for the particular situation. One quality, however, that is common to "real Elders" is expressed by this statement from a Native Centre Board Member:

When you ask an elder for advice about tradition, you are also asking for a kind of honesty and purity and the best of tradition itself which was the spiritual as well as the everyday. Elders

are practical, they have practical situations to attend to. You can confide in them and just ask for direction and help yourself.

Diversity among Elders offers choices to individuals seeking an Elder to talk to or be involved with. Such diversity also represents an area of strength in Elders' Councils, such as that at the Native Centre, in presenting an ability to offer advice in different realms. As an Elder at the Centre described: "...different Council members have different abilities--some to work more directly with helping with developing programs and training that is culture based. That doesn't mean that everybody would be called upon to do those things or would want to" (Stiegelbauer, 1990). Despite differences, all of these individuals have a commitment to the traditional culture and an understanding of how it works. This is primarily what they have to offer urban settings. Yet, in the words of Elder Art Solomon, "each elder is an individual. Each one is special in their own way."

In the next section I address how Elders come to have particular responsibilities, and later, how they come to be "recognized" by the community and what that means. Aside from the issue of age, a person becomes an "Elder" in the "eyes of the community." That in itself is a process, as one Elder said, "part of the process of life." Elders, however, are also practical people--people who live and make choices within an everyday life. Being an Elder requires a certain quality of person. It is also informal and something in tune with the cycle of life, with the natural way that things work.

### **Becoming an Elder: A Learning Process<sup>4</sup>**

I am called a teacher in two ways. One is that I have learned the teachings, I wasn't just sitting around enjoying ceremonies. I was learning them, I was rehearsing them, I was practising them, until the day they asked me to stand up in the lodge and give those teachings. That's when I was recognized. On the other side I have taught it to my children and raised them by it and lived by it myself so in that sense I am a teacher. I am qualified to teach because I live by the teachings and I raised my family by them. So it's not just that I am good at remembering and I am good at talking, but it's that I practice it and that I have put it into my life and the life of my family.

For some Elders, the involvement with the teachings and the traditional life was a part of everyday life and evolved naturally. For others it was a near-sudden change, though they had some experience with the traditional context as younger people. Most describe taking on this role after going through the ups and downs, occasionally extreme, of another life--raising

a family, going through difficulties personal and political, or developing a long standing interest through a kind of apprenticeship. Consciousness to the potential of this role and the ability to use what they learned in exploring it, all seems to come later in life, beginning in their late thirties and forties. The story presented by a female Elder working in Toronto, a Mohawk from the Akwesasne Reserve, provides an example of this process. This Elder had been strictly brought up as a Catholic and had followed that religion seriously as a young person. In her thirties, she began to attend pow-wows with her children in various parts of the United States. She would put them all in a station wagon and take off to camp out on the outskirts of the dance grounds. At one of these events she had a kind of vision that greatly influenced her in the direction of her life:

I was brought up in the old ways and we lived on a farm and I was interested in herbal medicines. My mother never spoke English and it's just the way I was brought up. I was a Catholic for 37 years until I had a vision to go back to the real, old ways completely.

I had a visitor and I think it was the Great Spirit himself. He was a man. He was a man with a real smooth face and he had three eagle feathers in his hand and he had a beaded jacket on. All the beads and a beaded necklace and his pants were all beaded. And he glittered like a real bright star. He glittered so much that I had to rub my eyes. It was two o'clock in the morning. And it was really moonlit out. The stars were all out and it was in my tent. And I thought it was just somebody. I told him, I said, like I was in bed. I was real comfortable and I took two pillows and I put it together and I cupped my elbow and I laid sideways because I couldn't sleep. Then all of a sudden, I could hear this newspaper crumbling--"wow, what's that noise?" Then he stood there. Within my reach and it was real moonlight out.

I was in the tent. With the moonlight shining right in the tent. I didn't even need a light. And he glittered and glittered and he spoke my Mohawk language to me. He told me to go home. I was away in Oklahoma. I was at an eight day meeting. It was the seventh day of that meeting and I was supposed to go home the next day. It took us like 34 hours one way to drive non-stop--just used to gas up and use the bathrooms and that's all. And he told me to go home and he told me what to do. He told me to leave the foreign religion that I had and to go back to the old way of life. And he talked for about 20 minutes and he was telling me all these things I had to do and then all of a



sudden and there was a chair next to my bed. I said, "let me sit here and let's really talk." That's when he disappeared.

But ever since then he's never left me--that bright star is there. I am always rubbing my eyes like he was standing there. That bright light is there. He never left me, so when I came back to Akwesasne I started asking all the questions to all these old people. I'd sit there for hours asking them all kinds of things. I wanted to know everything. I had the background of the old ways, the medicines, the cooking and just nature itself. I was always in the woods anyway. And so I started travelling all over the Six Nations and every old person I'd see, I'd stop and I'd talk and I'd ask them questions. And I hardly ever slept because I was curious and I was asking questions.

Finally, I got it together and then all of a sudden, one day I'm asked to come to a meeting. Like an Elders' Conference. And when I went there, it was just like the meeting in Oklahoma. All these old people talking and everything. We learned so much from that meeting and we never forgot that. After that my name was there and then they had this meeting here and they asked me to come. Somehow they got word to me to ask me to come to this meeting and then soon after I was on the Advisory Board of the Elders. But I was 37 before I really got involved.

While this description would make it seem that no time had passed since this Elder had her vision and when she became involved with community centres in Toronto, in reality over twenty years took place between the two events. During this time she sought out other Elders to learn from them and had begun a process of giving back that learning to the community. She later described this part of becoming an Elder:

I would talk about things that I had heard from other old people and then the people older than me, each of them would say, "why don't you tell us?" I said, I always wait for you old people. You are older than me. I am waiting to hear it from you. They would say they didn't know. They said I acted like an old person--"you always have the answers."

The experience of this Elder also influenced her children. One of her sons also became a traditional teacher and is currently involved with teaching, counselling and with work in the prisons. As a child he accompanied her on her travels to consult with Elders and showed a talent for remembering stories and teachings.

Other Elders describe transformational experiences related to giving up alcohol or working with political groups to improve conditions for First

Nation communities. The late Joe Sylvester, who in his youth had been very involved with alcohol, talked about how non-traditional counselling led him to reconsider traditional teachings about health:

Once I was taken to a psychiatrist and I was more confused and mixed up when I came out. I told him, "when I sober up, I'll come back and see you." I went and spoke to the elder, to an elder and the voice was so low that there was no threat at all. It seemed to calm this turmoil inside of me. When I found that out, that's who I search for, was these elders. I didn't go to the psychiatrist. And so that's how I sobered up.

For Mohawk Ernie Benedict, Ojibway Elders Betty Pamp, Fred Wheatley, Art Solomon, and Jim Mason, recognition as Elders came about gradually as a result of their service-oriented involvement with organizations and the community. As Betty Pamp described:

I've been involved in lots of things, I've been on several councils and boards in the states. When people want help, spiritually, the Indian way, they call us [myself and my daughters]. They have been doing this a few years. People just started hearing about me and when I retired, they started to call more and more.

Ernie Benedict describes his emergence as an Elder as related to his experiences with the National Indian Brotherhood and the Indian Education Council:

I had no real training with anyone. I gave advice to the National Indian Brotherhood about their political plans and thinking as to whether it was in line with traditional Indian thinking or customs and whether what they wanted to do would go against some of the customs of various people. Some of what I know came from books. Some came from being on the road with the Indian Education Council.

Art Solomon and Jim Mason took their understandings about tradition to the prisons. The late Fred Wheatley got involved with helping and teaching through his connection with the Native Centre in its early days and through his being a teacher of the Ojibway Language. Gladys Kidd describes becoming an "Elder" as related to being a "grandmother":

I opened my doors to people a long time ago. If I had one piece of bread I'd share that with people. Anything: how I learned from the events in my life [I'd share with them]. To walk with them. To understand. And that's what everyday life is. You get that attitude I believe everybody can talk with you. Everybody can sit with you and you have total respect for how they are.

Lots of people don't like to call themselves an elder. It involves too much. I can't even put that onto myself except that the Centre calls me an elder and all I've been known by is grandmother teacher. If I'm a grandmother, it doesn't mean that I'm old and elderly. It just means that I can teach.

Some Elders and traditional teachers described the process of becoming recognized by the community as a teacher as a matter of choice. One talked about how, at the end of his university studies, he realized that his Native tradition offered him something that other religions would not. He returned to Northern Ontario to learn about the Native way. He describes this process:

For about 15 years I have been following the Midewin Way and learning the teachings. I have tried to learn all the songs. I tried to learn and understand as much as I could about the whole way of life and then I tried to raise my children by it, and I tried to live by it myself. I have managed to be able to actually live by those teachings and those principles and to live by that culture and to begin thinking, acting and behaving in that manner, that Anishnawbe life. I have done that with my children. And I have also been recognized during those fifteen years as a teacher of the traditional beliefs.

I was raised in another tradition and I came upon my own tradition and now I follow that. But I can speak to people who haven't found their way back home yet, because I have bridged across that gulf myself. I found my way back home, so I think I can understand something about that whole process. So I can help people to understand what the teachings are actually saying about their life, whether they are living it in Toronto, or on the reserve or trying to put together a traditional community. That translation of the age-old teachings that have always been there, translating them into our life today. So in that sense I feel I am a teacher also, I am a translator of cross cultures.

What all these Elders describe is a learning process that is sparked by an event, personal, spiritual, political or all of the above, that turned them back to the traditional way; causing them to take up the task of learning the teachings and the ceremonies, learning them in an active and involved way, by practising them. They in turn were called upon by the community to give those teachings back and through that process were "recognized" as teachers and Elders. However, their experiences outside learning those teachings also contributed to their ability to help others find their culture and regain the "good life of health."

All of these individuals have become recognized as Elders and teachers as a result of their individual knowledge and experience regardless of its source. They not only know the teachings, they live by them and use them as their responsibilities dictate. Whatever the direction their individual lives have taken they are acknowledged by their communities and others as "keepers of tradition" and as helpers in the traditional manner of Elders.

## **Recognition and Reciprocity**

A person becomes an elder in the eyes of the people and that probably is only when you--I have to be careful how I say this because there are people who call themselves elders--an elder won't self-appoint himself, but he is an elder in the eyes of the people and they depend on him or her in that way. Who puts a person in that position? They don't elect or nominate him. The process takes place over time. It depends on the quality of the person and on that person's life and his ability to talk to people and talk meaningfully to them in ways that they can understand in their own personal life. To do that he has to have knowledge of all the traditions and he has to know all that, but he also has to have the ability to talk to a person at their personal level.

The ability of an elder is to be able to tell a story in such a way that it's meaningful to you and that's almost an art, and to complement that fashion to relate to that person and at the same time, not take it out of the broader framework of the whole picture. Now that quality has to do with the ability of the person himself in that sense. He has to have the qualifications of being an elder. The people who see that, who recognize it and call upon that, that process is the process whereby that person becomes an elder in the community, in the eyes of the people. So, it's part of the process of life. But there is a certain proof of it there, what takes place.

Through the process of accumulating knowledge and experience, some individuals begin to show an aptitude for talking to people and helping them in ways that contribute to a better life. This aptitude is acknowledged by the community in seeking them out, for discussions, for teaching, for public lectures. This in itself is a process as it happens slowly over time so that by the time a person reaches the age of Eldership, the community begins to "recognize" them as an Elder, as one who is able to communicate the teachings in a meaningful way.

Life on Reserves or other places in the Native world is not the same, however, as it might have been many years ago. The combination of residential schools, poverty, movement to cities, pressures from political and religious groups and the like has meant that many people, especially those in cities, have limited, if any, involvement with a traditional culture. One result of this is that they do not know how to approach or work with Elders. Another result is that there are fewer Elders to go around;

I have always been able to look around and say, "can you help me with this?" And I would look to somebody who's older than I am that I have always called my elders, but there's nobody there now. I look behind me and there's nobody there. Now I've lived that whole life. I know the teachings, I've lived by them and now I'm standing there as an old man, as a grandfather. Now, I'm the elder.

Today, "elder" has taken on a broader meaning and I don't want to diminish that. I don't want to take anybody out of the position of being an elder, because we need elders and however much they know, whatever they have, they have lived life and they have the whole wealth of the experience of their life. When we give them the respect that they deserve, at this stage they are in their life, then we can learn something from them (Stiegelbauer, interview with Elder, 1990).

The process of dislocation and fragmentation of First Nations cultures has also resulted in the creation of "half-elders" as Art Solomon called them, people who know some of it, but not all of it; people who don't have enough grounding in the traditional environment. Such people have something to offer, but are of a "special category," and require careful looking at: "...an elder should be respected in his own community and that in itself should tell you something about him. People might flock to see him in Toronto, but nobody respects him at home. That's not good. He can be a kind of professional elder, or professional traditional person, so you'd have to know something about that."

Being an Elder, then, requires the recognition and respect of the community. That respect in turn is a kind of "proof" of quality. Elders develop in stature through their interaction with the community, though the term "stature" might be inappropriate. The purpose of this interaction is to help and to teach so that traditional beliefs are passed on:

So an elder is a very high quality of person and someone who never asked to be called an elder but is deserving of that title and of that respect, and it's other people who recognize that person. There's no process that I know of where you can make

someone an elder. It's a term of respect and recognition given by the people because a person has lived that life, has followed it, given those teachings from birth, has followed them through life, has lived it and practised it and now he can give that back, with the understanding. So that makes it even less in number how many elders we have.

Elders are not born, they are not appointed, they emerge as the sum total of the experiences of life, they are a state of being. The category of "Elder" as described by individuals in this section is special because there are few older people available who are willing to take on the responsibilities of an Elder, the responsibility to teach correctly about tradition and the good life, and who have the necessary knowledge. As Art Solomon suggests, "...elders are overworked because they can't refuse anything. They're given those responsibilities. I guess that's what an elder is. It's like carrying the pipe into ceremonies. Someone requests something and you have to do it."

In providing teachings and training in traditional ways through the urban community centres, the Elders are attempting to educate the young so that some day this void might be filled by those of another generation. Within the context of a non-Reserve environment, this is not an easy task. *People replicate what they know, and few urban Natives know the traditional culture.* This is an issue at the core of the involvement of Elders in the community centres and at the core of the Elders' commitment to what they do. If the knowledge of tradition is lost, so is the Native identity, as it is currently known. This is a reciprocal responsibility, however, for Elders cannot do it alone. It is up to the community to ask and become involved if they are to learn what the Elders have to offer. In the traditional way they have to approach the Elder with tobacco and ask for their prayers and help. In most urban centres, the Elders have had to take the first step to teach people how to do even this, and what it means.

### **Approaching an Elder: The Importance of Relationship**

Approaching an elder is a little bit like going swimming. The first time, some people are scared of water, but after they get used to it, it becomes natural to them. And so, we have to do as much as we can to get rid of the artificial barriers that are there. People are shy to go--reluctant to show their ignorance, that they don't know how to do it.

Essentially what the Elders do is help. They help through providing groups and individuals with a perspective on the future as presented in the teachings of Native tradition. The teachings place issues in a developmental

context and are process-oriented, i.e., teachings are not just a presentation of "words" but are a guide to a solution based on a need as presented by a specific issue. The Elder might suggest a solution such as ceremonies, herbs, or just talking. The goal of these solutions is to nurture the health of body, mind, and spirit as expressed in the traditional model. Teaching is active, experiential, and relational, and requires the participation of individuals through asking for help in some way. Once the request is made, the Elders bring their knowledge and experience to bear in finding a means to provide the kind of intervention they feel provides the best help.

The concept of "approaching an Elder" is an expression of this relational element. Approaching an Elder means that someone comes to the Elder and asks a question, or asks for help. This request becomes a kind of contract for work through the presentation of tobacco to the Elder and the Elder's acceptance of that tobacco. The presentation of tobacco means that the conversation in some way concerns the spirit. This exchange is very important from the Elder's perspective because it signifies the individual's willingness to listen and take the help of the Elder seriously. The Elder will continue doing the work necessary until that work is completed.

The Elders involved with the Native Centre also refer to the fact that the Board of the Centre approached them with tobacco when they requested their participation and advice in the Centre. They see this as a sacred contract, only to be broken if the Centre again requests that it be broken. Even if the Centre appears to move away from the original understanding, they will follow through with the intent of the original request for help and help the best way they can.

On an individual level, I asked one Elder to explain the process of approaching an Elder with tobacco. She asked me to hold the tobacco in my left hand--the closes to the heart--and state my request of her, which I did. After listening to my request, she took the tobacco, a cigarette, and lit it. She explained that in doing so she was calling on the creator for guidance and that she had also accepted my request. She explained that anything that was said between us would be confidential and that it was important that I speak truly, however that might come out. She said that she worked with both Native and non-Native people because everybody needs help and guidance at points in their life and that it was her role to provide this if asked. She then smoked the cigarette through our discussion. She gave her interpretation or response to what I had said and made some suggestions as to how I might deal with what we had talked about. These suggestions were framed from the standpoint of some of her life experiences and her knowledge of the Native way. In response, I felt I had an ally and that a dialogue had been started that could be called upon again.

In much the same way, the Elders encourage any individual to seek their help. The Elder I approached said that all you have to do is start talking to the Elder and things will happen--that starting the conversation, establishing the relationship is what is important, not judging the seriousness of what might be said. She said that was the nature of this kind of guidance and encouraged me to come again to talk, informally, that the conversation would take care of itself. My perception of approaching an Elder, before this discussion, was that it had to be done in the "proper way," within a traditional framework, and I wasn't sure what this was. This perception is likely one shared by many people, Native or non-Native, who have not had previous experience with working with Elders. In reality, the most difficult part was beginning, then the Elder helped with the rest.

In my interview with Art Solomon, he placed great emphasis on the need of organizations to educate the community in how to approach an Elder. He described the role of the Native Centre's Elders' Advisory Council in this regard:

The Elders' Council gives access to more people that we have always tried to reach. We have watched our young people growing up and we've wanted to help them, but you can't go to the young person and say, "hey, I'd like to help you." It has to be the other way around because when they ask you it becomes the "given." You then have an obligation to share what you can. So that's the process and you've provided the process at the Centre. The Centre is simply to make those teachings accessible to the majority and you really can't do any better than that. It's up to the community in a gradual process to finally be comfortable with that. There was a long period of time when this wasn't possible. But it is happening now.

As more people develop this relationship with the Elders, as individuals and as urban groups, the Elders are given permission to provide help and guidance and, reciprocally, these individuals are becoming more aware of themselves and what tradition has to offer to their current lives. It becomes a dialogue about process and growth, or in traditional terms about health, the health of individuals and organizations, as it affects mind, body, and spirit.

## **What Elders Do: Their Work in Urban Centres**

Having elders about influences the feeling, the attitudes and the behaviour in people that are there. It can have an influence: just the fact that those people are around and whether by some



process of osmosis, subtle or direct, some people have been helped by the fact of them being around.

The Elders provide help and guidance in a number of different ways within the context of urban centres. Figure 1 lists some general categories describing what elders do and provides brief examples of how that is expressed in events and activities. The core of all these activities involves the relational element expressed in approaching an elder and the teaching and support that results from that interaction. The categories shown in Figure 1 each reflect a different kind of activity that comprises part of what Elders do in community organizations. These categories overlap and are also separate. All of them also reflect something about what an Elder is as well as what they might do within the organization. Elders give back their wisdom to the community, they work from a base in their experience, they model the best of tradition, and they use tradition and belief to support their work. The following provides a brief delineation of activities in each category:

*Personal Counselling* is basically what was described earlier as approaching an Elder. An individual comes to an Elder with a question or problem and they work on that together. Many organizations have a Visiting Elder Program, in which an Elder is available for counselling appointments one week a month, one way this kind of counselling relationship is established. Counselling is at the core of the Elders' role in the community. Art Solomon describes what happens in counselling:

The magic of it is that if people articulate their pain, their anguish, their confusion, automatically they begin to deal with it. Just the fact of verbalizing is a tremendous healing, so that in itself is perhaps the most valid thing that the (Native) Centre can do. The simple fact is that there are people who come here [Elders] and they are accessible for people. The only condition is the need of the individual human being.

Elder Fred Wheatley also emphasized this area:

There's a lot of Native people that have a great deal of problems and I think the best thing for me to do, if I can be of any assistance to them, is to help them. To listen to what they have to say. They really need a sounding board. Somebody who will listen because everybody is in a rush. And by listening to them, sometimes they talk their problem right out. Sometimes I offer advice but often I ask them to come back the next day and sleep on it or just help them find their own answers.

*Providing Teachings* means that Elders are asked specifically to address a topic from a traditional perspective for a group. Elders do this for

<b>General Category</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Counselling (individual)	Visiting Elders' Program
Teaching (groups and individuals)	Elders' participation at Board Meetings; Presentations at the Annual Meetings; Elders' Conferences
Ceremonies	Prison "sweats," Centre Sunrise Ceremony
Healing	Client analysis for illness Suggestion of remedies
Advising	Participation on Centre Committees, i.e. Ways and Means Committee, Legal Services Committee
Conflict Resolution	"Processing" disputes through group discussion
Group Problem Solving and Counselling	Women's Circle
Role Modelling	Personal Involvement
Physical Presence	Participation in events, Elders Conference, visiting other organizations
Continuing to Learn	Visits to their own Elders to ask questions

**Figure 1: What Elders Do**

(Examples: Native Canadian Centre, Anishnawbe Health)

conferences, meetings, other social occasions. For example, Elders were asked to speak on "what is tradition" for the 1986 Native Centre Annual Meeting, or 'the role of helpers," for the 1988 meeting. Questions are also asked of Elders at meetings of the Board of Directors. For instance, Ernie Benedict was asked to speak to the Native Centre Board on the topic of selecting Elders to participate in the Centre. These two functions, counseling and providing teachings, are likely the largest of the responsibilities

formally asked of Elders at the Native Centre, at least in terms of the amount of time devoted to them.

Elders are also called upon to conduct ceremonies, such as the pipe ceremony, naming ceremonies, the sweetgrass ceremony and to lead in smudging when they participate in a discussion with a group. As representatives of urban and community organizations, Elders also participate in speaking, counselling, and ceremonies at prisons, schools, and other kinds of organizations.

Another important area of Elders' involvement is that of healing, though all of these activities could be called healing in one way or another. Elders specifically address healing by talking to individuals about their health complaints and addressing those complaints through ceremony, herbs, and other remedies. Anishnawbe Health of Toronto, in particular, has applied itself to providing education and consultation about traditional ideas of health and healing, starting with the holistic view that the individual's sense of self is as important as any external remedy. Given this, education about an "Aboriginal self" and participation in Aboriginal life is considered a part of healing (Stiegelbauer and Nahwegahbow, in progress). Anishnawbe Health has a loose council of traditional healers and teachers that work with clients and provide for education on a monthly rotation basis.

As a group and as individuals, the Elders also advise organizations on traditional perspectives that might provide insight into working with Native people or developing culture-based programs. Elders are also involved with staff and Board meetings to give teachings and advice.

An emerging role for the Elders has to do with conflict resolution. As Elders became more involved with the urban organizations and communities, they have been called upon to mediate and clarify issues as situations arose. For example, at one Native Centre Annual Meeting, a heated discussion broke out relating to how procedures for the meeting should be handled, whether by "Robert's Rules" or through a traditional, though undefined, vehicle. Robert's Rules in this case was seen as the imposition of a structure of White society. As arguments went back and forth, the discussion deteriorated to something close to name calling, with some individuals stating that the Board and Administration of the Native Centre were not "Native" in how they did things and were not doing things right. One of the Elders on the Advisory Council stood up and asked to speak. He said that what was happening reminded him of a teaching of the Anishnawbe People, the Ojibway:

This actually, when it is given in its fullest, is a teaching. I am going to shorten it somewhat for the purposes here. It does speak to some of the things that are going on here but also that

seem to go on among us all over. It is a story that actually says a lot to various people at different levels, in different positions, and to people who have a great need and urge to do things, things that are of great importance and how can we work together in doing this. That is what this story is all about, one of the things. Of course in these teachings there are so many lessons and if you don't hear that particular one maybe you will hear something else.

This story takes place a very long time ago, long before we could blame it all on the white folks, or things like that so we have to take full responsibility for whatever is in the story. It also took place at a time when the people began to spread out from one another and began to form communities of their own from the first original community of the people...there were those who lost some of the things that were important to their culture, teachings, and ritual and so on. Amongst these people there was one particular community where for whatever all the reasons were they had managed to hold together all of their teachings, all of their rituals, all of their songs and they had maintained the greatest respect for the Elders and teachers and they continued to raise their children in the proper manner (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1987).

The story, despite its shortening, went on for 30 minutes or so and transcribed is nearly twelve pages long. Basically it is the story of a child of this special community who showed great promise and who was taught all of the facets of the culture in great detail--the beliefs, the rituals, the songs and the teachings--and who was sent out as an ambassador to teach the other communities who had lost their knowledge. He knew everything perfectly. At each of the communities "in the proper way he presented his tobacco and of course in the traditional fashion they accepted his tobacco and made a seat for him." In the course of the ceremony or the song he presented his exceptional knowledge, and in each case found himself alone at the end of the session. When he made his corrections everyone was silent. Finally he returned to the original council, disappointed, because he felt that he had not really helped these communities due to his lack of humility: "In that perfect way I learned everything that you taught me but you forgot to teach me that when I sat amongst the people and when I bring my voice to the people that I have to recognize where they are, the needs that they have and the voice that they need to give." The teaching ended by refocusing this story to the conflict at hand:

One of the things that we forget is that other people have dreams, have a voice. Other people have a perspective and a

way of seeing the needs of people...that we cannot force what we have on the people. That we have to have humility before we can have brotherhood. We have to have humility and we have to have brotherhood before we can have unity. If we don't have unity which we all talk about then we can't function as a community. That is a great concern to me. Because I see it happening so many times...you haven't done anything for the people if you are so busy criticizing and destroying the organization that exists and don't have time to do anything that is worthwhile and constructive... We have to have enough humility to be willing to share that with other people, even people we may not get along with...if we stay in anger and bitterness, where we are stagnated, there is nothing life giving that can come from that (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1987).

The result of this intervention was that the discussion calmed down and the proceedings were resumed. The length of the teaching allowed people to cool off but also forced them to listen, and through that listening, to think about things from another perspective.

Another example of conflict resolution conducted in a more specific context involved the accusation of one staff member about another in reference to unbecoming conduct while working as a representative of the Native Centre in one of the prisons. In this instance, four of the Elders met with the two individuals to allow them to present their point of view. After listening to the individuals involved, the Elders questioned them at length about their stories. Although the situation ended without closure, the process of smudging and prayers prior to the discussion as well as the support and discussion of the issue with the Elders helped with resolution. Both participants said that they felt that the matter was "cleared" through the procedure. The ideal impartiality of Elders in situations such as this is well expressed in this statement by Gladys Kidd:

An elder doesn't take sides with anyone. No sides whatsoever. Just to help you out and show you what you can do in a good way. We all have our own character. We all have that. We just have to learn to understand and I do understand the situations that many of them are in right now and I try to show them--be kind, be honest, speak out--don't hold that inside you.

Elders have been called upon to mediate in political situations as well as personal or small group conflicts. In the case of larger political issues, such as at Oka or Ipperwash, the role of Elders has been complicated by the political agendas of both sides. Nevertheless, Elders have been recog-

nized as important contributors in helping individuals in these tense situations.

Elders also hold men's or women's circles as a means to provide teachings and the answers to questions of specific interest to women or men. They provide a context for *group problem solving and counselling*. One Elder remarked that these are particularly important to Native women who need to have this information to raise their children in a traditional way, and to pass on the information to their children. These are occasionally held in one of the Elder's homes or at the sponsoring organization.

Finally, the physical presence of the Elders in urban organizations has made a great deal of difference to the tone and operation of those centres. As one Elder remarked:

The Elders' Council at the (Native) Centre means that there is always that gentleness, that wisdom and almost the emanation of generation, emanating this quality of understanding and peace that comes from elders.

People seem to act differently when Elders are around. They are models for the community, role models, models for how to live a traditional life. This is another responsibility of being an Elder, for good and bad. When an Elder misbehaves, or when there is even a possibility of the community thinking that an Elder is acting in an inappropriate fashion, the other Elders will not work with that person. Elders must maintain their goodness in the eyes of the community, continuing the respect of the community, or they are not able to help: "when it comes to elders, always all elders are supposed to set a good example for the young so that they can fall into their steps and be that good person" (interview with Elder, Stiegelbauer, 1990).

Elders also model traditional approaches to speaking, teaching and working with others, and mirror traditional values in everything they do. In teaching they often explain how to do things referencing the fact that it is the traditional way. Given that one criterion for being an Elder is living the traditional life, they continuously present this life in their involvements and in their approach to their work. In order to provide the best help and teachings, the Elders also regenerate themselves through continuing their contacts with other Elders, in particular those they call on as their own Elders. As one Elder described:

Elders go and visit their own teachers. In the mountains, both west and east. I've got a lot of questions that people at the Centre are asking of me and I ask about the right answers. I have a lot of questions to ask these people because they have a lot of knowledge.

In like fashion, many of the other Elders talked about their need to continue to/earn from those older or more experienced than themselves, or even from life itself.

## **Developing a Model for the Involvement of Elders in Urban Organizations**

In the past the elders were looked upon as though they had the greatest knowledge and the best kind of understanding of life and had the wisdom so when things came up that required that they come together, then they would. But I'm not sure if there were councils in the past. Bringing in a Council of Elders to give advice may be a modern trend. I don't know.

The issue of whether Elders should be a formal or informal group within urban centres, how much say they should have in organizational decisions, and how to structure their involvement is still an open question for many centres. The Elders themselves present a variety of opinions about this, and in the case of the Native Centre Council, whether the format of an Elders' Advisory Council was based on the past, that Elders were more informally involved with individuals than with groups regardless of size or format. The urban context, however, is an innovation on tradition, and as culture is dynamic and constantly changing, this question came to be an important one both to the organizations and the Elders involved with them.

Because there was no clear answer to this question, the Board of Directors of the Native Canadian Centre asked a number of Elders for help in listing how Elders might be involved in centre activities and what the qualities of these Elders might be. Figure 2 shows the qualities and expectations listed by the Board. Taken together these present the Board's perspective on the role of Elders in the Centre and also the Board's sense of what an Elder is.

In listing the qualities that should be present in Elders selected to participate in the Native Centre, the Board noted that the Centre was not expecting to find all of these qualities embodied in one person. In selecting Elders for further involvement, it was critical to give these qualities serious thought and consideration (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1989:7). At the time that these qualities and expectations were listed, the Board also took nominations from the floor as to individuals whom members of the Board knew personally who might fulfil these criteria. They put forward eleven new names, to be approached with tobacco in the traditional manner. The Elders working in the Centre at that time had asked for new membership

Qualities	Expectations and Duties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to traditional lifestyle evidenced by personal lifestyle</li> <li>• Commitment to helping versus looking for pay</li> <li>• Experience of life</li> <li>• Commitment to improve the quality of life of the Native community</li> <li>• Knowledge of traditions</li> <li>• In touch with today's reality</li> <li>• Proven ability to work with people</li> <li>• Understanding of the urban environment</li> <li>• Ability to communicate effectively</li> <li>• Knowledge of Native language an asset</li> <li>• A good understanding of self, others</li> <li>• Good listener</li> <li>• Good teacher</li> <li>• Non-judgmental, non-critical</li> <li>• Able to travel and make time commitment</li> <li>• Ability to communicate with younger generation and to have hope for future generations</li> <li>• Knowledge of ceremonies an asset</li> <li>• Patience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in Board meetings, Board development, and committee meetings</li> <li>• Participation in Staff meetings</li> <li>• Staff development and counseling</li> <li>• Counselling individual community members</li> <li>• Women's and Men's Circles</li> <li>• Elders Conference and other workshops</li> <li>• Summer camps for children and families</li> <li>• Prison work, i.e. group work and individual counselling, socials</li> <li>• Ceremonial leadership, i.e. opening prayers and ceremonies</li> <li>• Resource persons for other Native organizations</li> <li>• Visiting Elders Program</li> <li>• Policy and Program development</li> </ul>

**Figure 2: Qualities, Expectations and Duties of Elders Within the Native Canadian Centre** (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1989, Board Minutes)



so that the work could be spread out more evenly across a greater number of people.

Whether or not an Elders Council is in itself "traditional," the work that the Elders do in the Centre is based on a traditional model. Elders teach about traditional approaches to life, they live a traditional life, they help people in need, and they hold sacred their contract with those individuals. As an Advisory Council, they continue this same approach but add to that the aspect of in-group problem solving and advising since their different backgrounds offer them strengths in different areas.

### **Summary: Elders as Grandparents to the Family**

Native elders are living links to the past. Their vivid memories have the vitality, immediacy and authenticity of those who have experienced the transition from traditional ways to the new. In the short space of two generations, they have gone from travelling the coast in canoes to flying in floatplanes...Not even the social upheaval of losing nine out of every ten people to raging epidemics in the nineteenth century, not even the disorientation of changing to new, cash economy with a more complex technological base, not even the acceptance of a new cosmology and religion, none of these broke native pride in the past or native ties to ancestral lands and waters. This is remarkable continuity. This is what the elders are about (Kirk, 1986:8).

The issue of Elders and their involvement with organizations off the Reserve setting continues to present itself in the media and in organizations themselves. It is not without notice to the paradigm described here that Elders have been called in to mediate some of the politically explosive situations happening in Canada and the United States. The Native world is changing, perhaps for the better, given the state of First Nation peoples only a few years ago. Now, populations are growing, pride in self and culture is evident, and new possibilities are opening up, politically, socially, and personally. Urban organizations and the Elders involved with them have played and continue to play essential roles in facilitating this process.

What an Elder is can be briefly defined from the statements presented in the interviews with the Native Centre Elders' Advisory Council. An Elder is someone who:

- 1) is knowledgeable about tradition including ceremonies, teachings, and the process of life; is ideally a speaker of a Native language;
- 2) lives those traditions;

- 3) is old enough to have reached a stage of experience at which it is appropriate for them to communicate what they have learned from life and tradition;
- 4) is recognized by the community for their wisdom and ability to help;
- 5) is still an individual with varying knowledge and skills;
- 6) is able to interpret tradition to the needs of individuals and the community;
- 7) is often asked to represent First Nation views as symbols of the culture or through active involvement with issues and individuals.

Elders are not separate from the community but are an integral part of it. Just as life begins with the child and is expressed in the adult, the wisdom of life is the realm of the Elder. As Ernie Benedict stated about the role of Elders in his presentation to the Board,

...keeping culture and traditions alive requires passing the teachings and wisdom to those who are prepared to take on the tasks from the elders. Modern technology cannot capture the essence of tradition. Every generation has the need...to keep the ceremonies going. The Board has to choose carefully in selecting elders

i.e. in selecting those they will listen to. Through the relationships established with Elders, younger individuals are beginning to take up the tasks of the Elders through their own learning. Through this relationship the cycle of life is continued. Like life itself, it is a slow process, but a process.

In a meeting between the Native Centre Board of Directors and the Elders' Advisory Council held in March, 1990, Art Solomon made the following statement:

I see myself as simply being a helper and that's the highest level I can reach. That's what the Elders are here for. I think we should take the word "advisory" out of the name of the Elders' Council. We are a family here. We need to feel that we are part of this family. The work "advisory" cuts the Elders off from the rest of the community. We are a part of the community. We are teachers and helpers. Our purpose in life is to help (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1990).

His emphasis on helping and on the community as a family puts the concept of Elder in the proper perspective. The Elder represents an individual who has lived through the experiences of life. In those experiences they at some time were in the same place as each younger member and because of this can provide a sense of the path, the way. At the same time they are a part of the family, the grandmother or grandfather, and are

respected and recognized as such. In that role, they have a place within the family, the same as the child or the parent, a place built on relationships with other people. This is the model the Elders wish to put forward about their relationship to urban organizations, a model of each organization as the family, with the Elders as the respected grandparents, not separate, not on a pedestal, but a natural part of the whole. Being an Elder is a stage of life that everyone reaches. A "recognized elder" is still that special person, but also a person who has included in their family all those who need them to be grandparents, or as Gladys Kidd calls herself, a "grandmother teacher." The relationship remains the same. In these days of emphasis on youth and "elder despair" this model has a lot to offer all families and social institutions.

Given the context of the urban centres as community organizations and in that sense institutions subject to funding and institutional restrictions, the relationship of the Elders to these organizations is sometimes more formal than the Elders themselves would like. One of the expressed goals of the Native Canadian Centre is to provide for community development, growth, and empowerment through tradition. The Elders as the embodiment of tradition provide the foundation for such a goal through developing a model of community as a family that supports and provides for each other as in a family. In the context of the Centre as a kind of family, it is the role of the Elder of the family to teach, to pass on wisdom, as well as to be acknowledged and respected for the status of their age and learning. Through providing an opportunity for this to happen, organizations are supporting the empowerment and personal development of all individuals as they come to learn more about themselves and their heritage through Elders, even other Elders. Given the trouble and chaos Native people have known over the last hundred years, this is an important task in itself. As Ellie Kirzner (1987) described in a review of the first Elders' Conference held at the Native Centre, the Elders are in a good position to know how to help:

They have tested life out there beyond the collective consciousness of their heritage and discovered its pains. They have experienced the institutions, tasted life on the streets and been downed by the bottle. But they want the generations to know that on the strength of the old teachings, they have risen.

There are many Elders who are not recognized as teachers. Some of these do not have the traditional upbringing necessary to have the knowledge of tradition essential to "being an Elder." They are still important members of the community and of a family and should be respected as that, even asked for what contributions they have to offer. A number of the Elders and community members have commented that it is not the Native Way to

ignore and isolate seniors. In giving them a role as a part of the community, in allowing them a context for expressing what they know, these Elders remain connected to life. This concept was well expressed by a community member at the 1987 Annual General Meeting of the Centre when he said:

I believe that the children were always pure strength and they always will be amongst all people. They are the lifeline, they are the bloodline...but one of the cruellest things I find in this life is the way we really, really, honestly treat our elders. I feel that we are all in a very sad way when it comes to that. I think that we need to be closer to our people that have seen many winters. They have carded the teachings and carried our way of life through ancient times. They are the ones that we should truly be honouring every day of our lives and when they pass through the spirit world it will be our turn to carry on. So our priorities must lie with that if we are to have a future at all (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1987).

In conclusion, an Elder is not a figurehead or a symbol but is someone who is actively involved with the community and with the organizations themselves. Elders are people like you and me, who are giving something back to their community. Through presenting the teachings and through emphasizing the relational element, the involvement of Elders in First Nation urban centres expresses the best of tradition, and brings that tradition forward into current times.

There are many definitions of what an Elder is. Beatrice Medicine, called an Elder herself by her Sioux community, describes them as "repositories of cultural and philosophical knowledge and transmitters of such information" (1983:142). The Native Centre's United Way Report of 1986 presented a similar definition:

Elders are the people who are the cornerstone of our culture as they are the keepers and teachers of traditional teachings. They are the link with our past, our present and our future. They are spiritual leaders and teachers but also have the wisdom and the experience to provide very pragmatic guidance and advice on how best to improve and ensure the physical, mental and spiritual health of our community (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1986).

To all this can only be added the Elders' own definition: "We are helpers, that is the highest level we can be. We are part of the family." While they are certainly also all of the above, it is in this role as "grandmothers and grandfathers" that they have a true relationship with the Native community.

### Notes

1. The information presented here represents two sets of data. The first is from a collaborative study conducted with the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto about the role and recommendations of the Elders Advisory Council. The summary of this study is presented in Stiegelbauer, 1990. The second is an ongoing documentation project conducted by S. Stiegelbauer and B. Nahwegahbow in conjunction with Anishnawbe Health of Toronto, called *What Makes Culture Based Organizations Different?* (in progress). What is presented here is the interpretation of the author alone, though with consultation with the organizations involved. Some of the Elders interviewed are named with their permission, others are not--they agreed that the interview could be used but requested that their name not be. In such cases, their nation is indicated.
2. All quotations indented from the text are taken from *The Road Back to the Future* (Stiegelbauer, 1990), unless otherwise indicated.
3. Teachings related to the stages of the path of life in the Ojibway tradition divide that path into seven year sequences. Up to the age of 35 people are still learning about life through their experiences and from listening to Elders. After the age of about 42, as their reproductive years decline, they naturally begin to focus their learning in order to come full circle and give back. Until this time, they have little to "say" as they have not "learned" enough (Stiegelbauer, 1990, Chapter 3; Dumont and Christian, 1989; Johnson, 1976).
4. The Elders quoted in this section were all members of the Elders Advisory Council of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto in the late 1980s. Some are still with the Native Centre, others have become involved with other organizations, or have retired.
5. Ernie Benedict presented a discussion of what *not* to look for in new Elders, as well as what qualities are important. See Stiegelbauer, 1990, Chapter 5.

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