

INDIGENOUS

SELF

REFLECTION

AMANDA'S STORY

My name is Amanda Bernard and I am a member of the Madawaska Maliseet First Nation. Recently, I made a discovery about what it means to be Indigenous and the impacts of colonization that I feel compelled to share.

Growing up, I did not know what it meant to be Indigenous, and as a youth, I did not realize that my lack of knowledge about Indigenous culture was due to the impacts of colonization and residential schools. My father grew up on the reserve and was bullied for being Native, so he avoided talking about Native traditions with his children. To further his education and pursue high-paying jobs, my father left the reserve and moved to Ottawa, where I was born. My grandma would teach me a few things here and there when I would visit the reserve; however, as I grew up, the trips to the reserve became less frequent.

It was only in my early twenties that I started to read Indigenous-related books to teach myself. Eventually, I got a job that allowed me to work with Indigenous youth at Laidlaw Foundation. Through this position, I was learning from Indigenous youth while also supporting them through projects that allow them to connect with their land, language, and culture.

While working at Laidlaw, I was fortunate enough to visit Chapleau, ON, in November 2022 to visit one of the Indigenous Youth and Community Futures Fund (IYCFF) grantees. Wahkohtowin Development GP received a grant from Laidlaw in 2022 to foster cultural preservation through knowledge transfer by connecting First Nations youth and Elders together in a land-based traditional canoe building project.

During the site visit, the community was filming a documentary about their land and how they take care of it as Indigenous people. More impressively, the project leads showed us the canoe they built and taught us how they harvested the materials themselves. We were also taken to a sugar shack and got to see the children's residential school burial ground. It was really nice to see how the community gets together to support one another.



However, what really took me by surprise was how similar this reserve was to my reserve.

Throughout my entire life, I was led to believe that my reserve was different from other reserves. I was often told by settlers and outside communities that reserves were dirty and dangerous, and when I saw that my reserve was neither dirty nor dangerous, I just assumed my reserve must have been different from others.

My site visit in Chapleau was really the first time I got to spend a few days on another reserve. The entire time, I was making connections to how similar the people were and how similar the community looked compared to my reserve. For example, the reserve in Chapleau has a log mill, whereas close to my reserve there is a paper mill.

Of course, there were many differences as well; however, it was the first time that I recognized the assumptions that were placed in my head by colonizers. I started to think about how people in Canada barely know anything about reserves. I also recognized that if I was feeling this way, then potentially others might also be thinking the same way. This was one of the main reasons I wanted to share this experience.

I am extremely grateful that I had the opportunity to visit Chapleau Cree First Nation. From this opportunity, I also learned how important it is to build awareness about what it means to be Indigenous. As a Director at Laidlaw Foundation, I look forward to continuing to support Indigenous communities across Ontario in their youth journey of self-discovery and development as I deepen/cultivate my own awareness of my own culture and the similarities and differences that our respective communities share.