

KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA

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In order to get to where she is, she needed to challenge everything she'd known growing up and struggle to learn the most important things that made her who she is now.

She grew up on the rez and walked around like her blood quantum and clan made her better than everyone else. She was raised by the culture of her community to look down on “half-breeds” or those without a clan because it meant they were less Mohawk, and, being born of two full Mohawk parents, she obviously was part of the elite group of Mohawks. She wasn't raised with the traditional longhouse teachings of her people. Instead, she was told that they were witches and could put bad medicine on you and that the only religion worth having was the Church. She didn't see the harm she was inflicting on others because most of her community acted the same way. This was normal for her and it's what shaped her growing up. Until one day when she was in her twenties, she fell in love with someone from

the longhouse. Everything she thought she knew would change in ways she never anticipated.

She was hesitant to attend ceremony at the longhouse at first. Scared to find out that people who attended ceremony were indeed witches. And scared that, if they weren't, they wouldn't accept her, that they would know she didn't belong there. Because that's how she felt, like she wouldn't belong. She never had the teachings of traditional ceremonies and how she was expected to conduct herself there. She was certain they would throw her out of the longhouse and slam the door behind her. Especially when she learned that she wouldn't be sitting with her boyfriend. Men and women sat separate from each other, and divided by clans. She was terribly shy and thought she would have an anxiety attack just walking in the door.

After attending her first ceremony she realized that all her fears had been for nothing. The women in the longhouse were so welcoming and kind. They were compassionate to her lack of knowledge and helped answer any questions she had. And of course, there was no witchcraft being performed there!

What she did struggle with was the fact that ceremonies are conducted completely in Kanien'kéha, and although she had grown up with parents and family who were completely fluent in the language, it was never taught to her, like many others of her generation. The language was used by our parents and grandparents to talk about issues they didn't want the kids to know about. And so, she grew up to be known as part of the group called the Silent Speakers—individuals who heard

it growing up, who know some of the words, but are far from being fluent. This was a shame she carried, and she hoped no one would notice in the longhouse.

Attending ceremonies at the longhouse was changing her. Although she didn't understand all the speeches, she felt her connection through the songs and dances and the overall energy in the longhouse. After a few years, she even noticed she was beginning to understand the speeches, and was picking up more of the conversations around her than she had when she first walked through that door. She began to understand the beauty and fluidity of her language and it prompted her to begin her journey in learning to become a second-language speaker.

She enrolled in as many language classes as she could attend and, as she did, she also began to understand the impacts of the residential and Indian day schools and the resulting generational trauma. She learned about the Indian Act and how it was created as a way to colonize Indigenous people across the Nation.

The Indian Act *villainized* Indigenous traditions in order to assimilate them into mainstream settler society. It was written into this legislative act that practising traditional ceremonies was illegal, and Indigenous people risked arrest if they were caught performing ceremony. Thanks to many brave ancestors, ceremonies were still conducted, but in secret to avoid jail. This was where she began to understand the mentality that traditional ceremonies were considered witchcraft. Because the government had made ceremonies illegal and also because they used the churches to aid in their assimilation of her people, she could now see how those who were

essentially colonized could perceive traditional practices as witchcraft.

Her parents hadn't attended residential school like some of the elders in her community, so she learned of the horrors through the stories she found online. Her mother did attend Indian day school but had never told her stories about those days until recently. She learned of the shame-based punishments and beatings for speaking in her language, and all the other horrors. Once she learned all of this, she began to understand even more how it was that she and her generation were silent speakers. Their parents were traumatized by their experiences and they either didn't want their children to ever have to feel that pain, or some were just too broken-spirited to have the confidence to be able to pass their language on to the next generation.

She continued to attend traditional ceremonies and to learn as much as possible about our culture and traditions. She also continued to research the horrible things done by the government and its legislation. The more she learned about both, the more she began to see that much of what she knew as being normal behaviours were in fact rooted in generational trauma. Her inability to speak her language came from her parents being punished and shamed for speaking their language in school. The value she'd placed on blood quantum actually came from engrained teachings rooted in the Indian Act. The Indian Act determined what percentage of your blood makes you Indigenous, whereas our ancestral ways never placed value on bloodlines.

She began to see that our sense of pride at living on the rez was actually the result of successful colonization. We were forced into a small, defined land base and then offered certain perks if we stayed within that boundary. The Indian Act made sure that, if we left and sought higher education, we would become disenfranchised from being Onkwehonwe and lose all rights or benefits granted by the Indian Act. That section has since been repealed, but only after they successfully brainwashed us and we willingly adopted this philosophy into our own way of being. And because they ensured we were dependent on those benefits, we began to accept them and convinced ourselves that we were better off and began to defend these “rights.”

Her connection to her traditional cultural beliefs opened her eyes to see this for what it is: colonization. And she began to shed her dependence on these “rights” because she knew now that our people were successful agriculturists and had our own governance system established long before settlers arrived on our lands. She no longer participated in the lateral violence toward her own people who’d left the rez to “be better than us.”

She also began to see the patterns of lateral violence throughout the community and began separating herself from these behaviours and instead chose to walk with *kahnikonhriio*, a good mind. This became easier the more she learned about her culture and history outside the Indian Act. Every day, she chose to be a better person. To be kind and empower people in reconnecting with their culture and language. No longer engaging in spiteful

talk where we put people down for wanting to learn their language and culture.

She did all this because she not only found a connection to her language and culture, which sparked a new way of thinking and living, but because she wants to be a part of the solution in making her community a better place where we support, encourage, and provide a safe place free of judgement for wanting to be more than the result of colonialism. And to spread the message that anyone can do this, regardless of blood quantum or place of residence.

Every day that we are given is a day to choose our future and our impact on our surroundings. We can choose to continue on paths long beaten and easy to travel because it's been done for so long and so many others do it. Or we can be like her, choosing to make each day better and more informed than the last. Choosing to use lateral kindness instead of lateral violence. Choosing to learn our own history, culture, and language. Choosing to share our knowledge with everyone, to pass the spark of knowledge on to the next person.

If given the choice... I choose to be her.