

Outside Looking In: Inspiring Indigenous Youth with Innovative Programming

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After a career as a professional dancer, Tracee Smith was looking for her next challenge in her mid-20s. Upon obtaining her MBA, Smith, a member of Missanabie Cree First Nation in northern Ontario, had to decide whether to completely leave her previous dance life behind. She chose not to. That proved to be a wise decision indeed, as for the past 16 years Smith has been serving as the CEO of Outside Looking In (OLI), a charity she founded. OLI has various components, but it is primarily known for its dance program. It will work with students in various Indigenous communities and then invite them to Toronto to showcase their dance program in front of an audience.

“In your head, it sounds like a good idea, but until you actually try and do it and see how people respond to it, that’s when you really realize how powerful the program is,” Smith

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said. “After years of watching the kids where they start and where they go, it is heartening to see what they’re doing as adults. It’s nice to be able to say we had a small part in helping them develop into amazing adults who are now contributing to their own community.”

Smith is thrilled she was able to combine her own dance experience with overseeing OLI operations. “I was fascinated with the socio-economics of our communities,” she said. “A lot of our communities struggle economically. There aren’t a lot of jobs, and, as a result, kids don’t have any opportunities to play around with what they’re good at or discover what they like. Smith said the goal of OLI is not to turn everybody into a dancer. Far from it.

Instead, the charity is keen to bring focus into the lives of Indigenous students. “I think the thing I’m most proud of is that I started the organization to combat high school dropout rates that are a lot higher for Indigenous kids than the Canadian mainstream,” she said. “With our program, they have to stay in school, they have to achieve the requirements of our program, and they have to finish school.” Following up with various communities has proven that OLI is indeed achieving its goals. “When we went back after year 10 and looked at where our kids were, 97 per cent of our kids went on to graduate, which surpasses the Canadian graduation rates,” Smith said. “I’m very proud of that. We can say that we were a big part of helping them graduate from high school, which was really why I started the organization.”

Smith told *The Brantford Expositor* last May that she started OLI in 2007 to give Indigenous youth a reason to go to the school or to come back if they had dropped out. She added that the idea is to get students out of the traditional classroom and into a space where they can engage physically, emotionally, and socially. “Culturally, it’s a lot closer to our culture versus sitting at a desk all day,” said Smith, adding that the “carrot” for students is getting to dance and hear music every day. Smith also said she created the program as a tribute to her mother, who grew up in northern Ontario and had few opportunities during her childhood (Thompson, 2022).

Smith said she was more fortunate than her mother while growing up. “I had the best of two worlds,” she said. “I [have] danced since I was four. I turned professional. And then, when I got to a point in my mid-20s, I said, ‘What am I going to do now?’ I completed my MBA, and I realized that I could go right into business and leave dance behind. Instead, I married the two passions, and I started a business with dance. So, I turned my business into a charity.”

Though dance is the medium to achieve goals, Smith wants others to know what OLI is hoping to accomplish with its program. “What a lot of Canadians see about Indigenous people is such a small part of our community,” Smith said. “There are amazingly talented people. (Indigenous) people aren’t all troubled, like the media try to construe. They don’t need us to come rescue them. This program is about making the next leaders of these communities. They’re the ones going to college, to university. They’re the next political leaders; they’re the ones making a change in their communities. It’s a program for kids who want more and who want to see positive change in their communities. That’s what it’s about” (shedoesthecitey, 2017).

Smith herself notes that the OLI program over the years has had unexpected impacts within communities. “They do fundraisers, and I never foresaw that it brings the community together,” she said. “It’s really brought the various families closer in communities. Many of our students have run for Chief and Council. They’re starting to influence policy in their communities.”

Smith always sensed that success via the OLI could go on to generate even greater opportunities for those in the program. “I felt if we could engage kids through dance, they’re going to be more likely to economically contribute to society,” she said. “And that’s exactly what’s been happening with this organization. We engage them, and we keep them engaged. They’re involved with their communities. They’re successful with our program, and then they strive for more. They want to do our program again.” And that’s why many Indigenous communities continue to remain involved with the OLI. “A lot of our kids do our program over and over and over again,” Smith said. “Next, they graduate high school, and they’re ready for the next step. They might go into full-time employment, or they’ll go into post-secondary education. Our alumni are all employed. It’s very rare [that] we find a kid [who] is staying at home doing nothing. Our kids are engaged, and they’re more likely to have jobs or go to school.”

In a 2016 *Toronto Star* article, Smith said that students in the OLI program “self-select” by working hard. “Sometimes when we go into communities, [we hear] parents say the bar is too high, but I always say, ‘Just watch your kids, because they will reach it’” (Taekema, 2016).

OLI operates with a budget of \$3 million annually. “We do well with that,” Smith said. “But if we had \$10 million, I could do more amazing things.” OLI doesn’t apply for any government funding. “All of our money is received through private corporate sponsorships or through donors,” Smith added. “To me, that’s what keeps me up at night. It always has.” Despite its numerous successes, Smith believes OLI could potentially be doing even more if additional funds were flowing into communities or being lent out. “We know our kids, and we know their issues,” she said. “We know they live in overcrowded housing. We have many kids who don’t have clean water or running water in their house. People are wrong if they think that doesn’t affect the kids day to day. If you don’t have clean water or fresh food and you don’t feel very well in the morning, then you’re not going to do well in school. Even if we have this amazing program, if those kids have experienced five hurdles before they can get out the door, they’re not going to be at school. The fact [that] our kids make it to school every day is pretty amazing.”

Smith said school days become even more interesting for OLI participants. “Dance is so powerful,” she told the *Nunatsiaq News*, a publication covering happenings in Nunavut as well as the Nunavik territory of Quebec. “A lot of kids come together from different parts of the community, and it begins to break down those barriers. You kind of lose yourself in the moment. There’re lots of studies that show how certain endorphins get released when you dance. Your stress reduces” (Tranter, 2020).

When possible, Smith said OLI likes to hire its former students to run its program in their communities. “I think it’s important to give the opportunity and see who applies, but I think at the same time it’s important to chase people,” she said. “Sometimes people don’t know if they’re ready for a full-time job or they’re not sure if they can do it, especially our alumni. But when you empower them by telling them that yes, you can do it and that you should be ready for this kind of job, they’re excited.”

OLI has had its share of challenges as well. “When you run a small charity, the [challenge is] that you don’t want to lose any money,” Smith said. “You don’t want to lose any sponsors. You’re trying to stay relevant. We charge a fee for our program. We make sure the community is very serious about the program because we don’t want to go into communities that aren’t ready for such an intense program.”

Upon reflection, Smith said she was uncertain how long OLI would last. “The challenges are more at the community level when you start really implementing the program. There are challenges [for] staff, volunteers, and the kids in the program to work through. Their challenges are really your challenges. From an organization perspective, if you had talked to me in Year 4, I would have said, I don’t know if we’re going to be here next year because you don’t know where your money is coming from.”

Smith also said there are various ways OLI representatives determine success. “If the communities think that the kids were successful, then we were successful,” she said. “If the communities want us back again, then we were successful. And once you start diving into each kid and how our program helped them, that’s success too. And every kid has a different story about how our program helped them. That’s success to me. And the fact we’re still here 16 years later shows that we’ve been successful, and we’ve stuck the course and rode the waves.”

Smith admitted, however, that she’s had some moments wondering whether she should continue running OLI. “There’ve been many times when I’ve wanted to give up,” she said. “There have been times when you say I’m going to throw in the towel. There are times when people can be very mean and rude, and there are people who try to take you down. I think all of us have experienced that. But you have to let those days go and just wait until tomorrow to start again. We’re telling the kids not to give up [and] to just stick with it, so we have to do the same things. We have to ride those waves. There’s always going to be good times and there’s always going to be bad times, no matter what.”

Smith believes OLI performances can also be enlightening for members of the public. “The reason it’s called Outside Looking In is because non-Indigenous people can come to our show and learn about these communities,” she said. “It’s a multi-media show. A lot of people are always inspired and made to feel a little bit different. I get a lot of non-Indigenous people saying to me that I’m going to see a lot of Native dancing. I tell them that Natives are dancing, but they are not Native dancing, which is the stereotypical thing. It’s an education about who we are, rather than who we should be. Sometimes there are changes in attitude when people come to our shows, which is good.”

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