

Marilyn Courchene: An Indigenous Leader Focusing On Wellness

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I hold great hopes and inspiration for my community. I believe we can be the trailblazers for other Indigenous communities. We can't allow anyone to determine our destination; we define ourselves and we work with our own Constitution and Laws. This way Canada sees us as an autonomous and sovereign.

Marilyn Courchene (2017)

Marilyn Courchene is an Anishinaabe ikwe (woman) and one of four elected councillors for Sagkeeng First Nation. For fifteen years Marilyn worked with and trained Manitoba Justice Judges, Crown attorneys, and legal counsels on sentencing circles and was featured in *Maclean's Magazine* for her work. Marilyn went on to attend Red River College where she focused on Indigenous studies. During her time at Red River College she worked with a network of Indigenous students to produce change within their program as it did not accurately convey or meet their needs as First Nations peoples. As well as being a councillor, Marilyn is a mother to three daughters and grandmother to nine grandchildren. In order to protect her treaty rights she never married.

Marilyn has dedicated her life to promoting healing and economic growth within her community with a substantial focus on family, children, elders, and women. As a leader she has worked tirelessly to serve her community's needs through compassion, bringing spirituality and tradition into her role, and constant communication with both the members of her community and other Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders. She is active on social media to engage the members of her community both on and off reserve to inform and receive input for events and plans for Sagkeeng. Her overall vision in her role as an Indigenous leader is to work towards making Sagkeeng an autonomous and self-sustaining community. She is currently working towards this in a variety of ways by improving housing, child welfare, and promoting the equality of women.

HER COMMUNITY

Sagkeeng First Nation is an Anishinaabe community located 120 kilometres north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The community is a signatory of Treaty 1. Currently there are over 7,500 registered members with nearly half living on-reserve. Marilyn is currently the only woman on chief and council, first being elected in April of 2015 after running against thirty-seven other candidates. On April 4, 2017 she was re-elected as a councillor and is the first woman in her community to serve as councillor for two consecutive terms.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Marilyn details that one of the biggest hindrances to economic development for her community is a lack of suitable housing. It is often forgotten or ignored that poor health caused by unsafe housing conditions can impact the ability to work or go to school which in turn can have a detrimental effect on economic development. For Marilyn it is a source of pain for her to see overcrowded homes, children who are constantly ill from mould, and the overall impact this is having on the wellbeing and prosperity of her community.

Only six new houses are funded and built each year by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) in Sagkeeng, a minuscule number for the growing community. The houses are often built of cheap materials which in turn impacts the overall quality of the housing. Marilyn's aspires to improve the poor housing situation in her community by moving away from CMHC's approach. Her vision is to have Sagkeeng design their own homes with family input and potentially move towards building traditional log housing rather than suburban homes. This could be done by having CMHC funnel the money to the community where Sagkeeng will follow a Habitat for Humanity model to building homes.

Homelessness is an issue within Sagkeeng due to the unsafe and minimal number of homes and many community members have no choice but to move to Winnipeg. This has impeded Sagkeeng's ability to grow economically and gain independence from the federal government. Marilyn's vision for housing could also potentially include working with other Indigenous communities. If Sagkeeng is one day able to create a successful housing plan and other communities follow their example, it could create an opportunity for partnerships and economic growth. For example, one community could focus on making windows while another would run a lumber mill to process the lumber for the homes. Each community would sell and purchase the needed items and construct their own homes. This would create a source of capital, jobs, and a potential solution for the housing shortage in Sagkeeng. It would also provide the opportunity for other communities to engage in economic development and take control of their housing and economic future. Although there are no concrete housing plans currently in place in Sagkeeng, Marilyn is eager to approach her community in the future with her proposal.

As well as being committed to economic development within her community, Marilyn has always been devoted to the rights and opportunities of Indigenous women and children. As an Indigenous woman and leader she has faced prejudice and discrimination based on gender both outside and within her community. Marilyn relays that Sagkeeng had historically been a matriarchal society where women were respected and seen as integral leaders in the community. Anishinaabe communities traditionally governed themselves through a communal system and were heavily reliant on the clan mothers in choosing the leaders and ensuring the wellbeing of their clan and community. The removal of the clan mothers and women in general as leaders in Sagkeeng through the *Indian Act* has led Marilyn to dedicate herself towards improving the rights and status of Indigenous women.

Currently Marilyn is working with fifteen families in Sagkeeng on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Marilyn is not only a councillor in government, but a councillor for the members of her community. This is heavily reflected in her work with these families. Helping these families heal and working to bring their daughters, sisters, and mothers home shows a level of drive and compassion that many leaders lack. Matriarchs are vital to make all these changes and Marilyn states she is only their voice for when they cannot speak for themselves. In order for Sagkeeng to successfully engage in economic development and be a sovereign community, the health and wellness of all its members is integral and Marilyn is committed to ensure this is met by committing herself to work towards improving the lives of women and children in her community.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Since she has been elected as a councillor in 2015 Marilyn has focused most of her time on the improvement of child welfare within her community. The welfare and safety of children has been one of Marilyn's main priorities as a leader in her community. Marilyn has always been passionate and dedicated to keeping children within their communities. One of the projects that Marilyn and her community are currently working towards is customary care of their children which would include keeping children within their community in Anishinaabe families through customary adoptions. The health and wellbeing of the next generation of leaders is vital from her position as a councillor, an Indigenous woman, and both a mother and grandmother.

Keeping children in Sagkeeng and educating them on their language, culture, and teachings are all necessary aspects of the prosperity and autonomy of Sagkeeng. Marilyn alongside the clan mothers have successfully pushed for change in the child welfare system in order to protect and teach the children of Sagkeeng their language, culture, and stories. Before a child is apprehended, Child and Family Services will approach the clan mothers to decide on the best course of action for the family and child. Marilyn herself has been successful in keeping children in the community. She worked closely with one family in particular to address and solve the challenges they were facing and the child was ultimately kept in their home. There is still more change that needs to occur in the child welfare system to ensure the wellbeing of Sagkeeng's children, however Marilyn still remains optimistic and determined.

Marilyn is currently working towards Sagkeeng's long-term goal of becoming a sovereign community by being a part of the change to enact Sagkeeng's own constitution and laws. Sagkeeng had always had its own laws and a constitution; however they were removed by the federal government in favour of the current Chief and Council System outlined in the *Indian Act*. As Marilyn states, the *Indian Act* does not represent her community and it is vital to Sagkeeng's success that they replace it with their own laws and constitution. By returning to traditional Anishinaabe governance it will allow Sagkeeng to take control of its political, social, and economic future. Ultimately it is up to the community to ensure it is reviewed, approved, and accepted.

Although Sagkeeng's constitution and laws have not yet been enacted, Marilyn ensures she brings aspects of this system of governance into her position. She is at the forefront of council meetings and will not start a meeting without smudging or saying a prayer and will never close a meeting with these medicines until everyone has spoken. She also follows and incorporates the Seven Teachings into both her role as a leader and within her own personal life as well.

MOVING FORWARD

For Marilyn Courchene and Sagkeeng First Nation the future is bright. In spite of numerous impediments, Sagkeeng has been successful in many of their economic and social endeavours. Marilyn continues to work towards the overall betterment of her community and brings purpose, resilience, and humility into everything she does to ensure the betterment and healing of her community. By focusing on the health and wellbeing Sagkeeng's women, children, and homes she is ensuring the future prosperity of her community. Marilyn Courchene is living proof that as long as Indigenous leaders continue to show strength and determination, change will be made and the day will come where the economic gap will close.