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# Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project: A Unique Platform for Youth

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*This article is the sixth in a [series](#) on Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy.*

**SUMMARY:** The Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project (OIYPP) supports Indigenous youth living in Ontario to engage in their communities through projects that promote environmental, social, spiritual, and physical well-being. In addition to access to small grants of up to \$5,000, youth have opportunities be mentored – or be mentors – to participate in skills training, and to connect with other youth, partners, and funders. Projects to date include an incubator for Indigenous fashion, textiles, and wearable art; an initiative to connect adolescent girls to Mother Earth, building their confidence and self-esteem along the way; and a safe place for Indigenous women and women of colour to share common experiences. OIYPP is led by Tides Canada, The Circle, and Ontario Trillium Foundation in close collaboration with a team of youth advisors.

**RÉSUMÉ :** L'Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project (OIYPP) aide les jeunes Autochtones qui vivent en Ontario à s'engager au sein de leur communauté dans des projets faisant la promotion des dimensions environnementale, sociale et spirituelle, ainsi que du mieux-être physique. Les jeunes peuvent recevoir de petites subventions pouvant atteindre 5 000 \$ et ils ont la possibilité d'être suivis par un mentor (ou d'être eux-mêmes des mentors) dans le cadre d'une formation professionnelle, et d'entrer en contact avec d'autres jeunes et avec des partenaires et des bailleurs de fonds. À ce jour, les projets comprennent un incubateur pour la mode autochtone, y compris les tissus et l'art-à-porter; une initiative pour relier les adolescentes à la Terre mère, tout en renforçant leur confiance en elles-mêmes et leur estime de soi; et un lieu sécuritaire où les femmes autochtones et les femmes de couleur peuvent partager leurs expériences. L'OIYPP est géré par Tides Canada, le Cercle et la Fondation

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Trillium de l'Ontario, en étroite collaboration avec une équipe de conseillers jeunesse.

The M'Chigeeng Lil'Sisters—seven girls aged 10 to 13—gathered on the first Friday of every month over the past year for a series of seven sleepovers. Each month had a different teaching theme from the Seven Grandfather Teachings: love, respect, humility, bravery, truth, honesty, or wisdom. The girls worked together to design physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual activities related to that month's theme. They explored the idea of respect by connecting with Mother Earth. They went ice fishing, and learned how to filet their catch and prepare a healthy meal. With space to be themselves, they gained confidence together as a group—and as individuals.

“We've had girls who didn't talk at all the first session, and by the end we can't get them to shut up. They're coming out of their shells, they're expressing themselves. One of them is now in a lead role in a school play. It's incredible to see,” says Lynzii Taibossigai, coordinator and youth mentor for M'Chigeeng Lil'Sisters Empowerment Project, one of eight projects supported by the Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project (OIYPP) in 2014-15, its first year. OIYPP supports Indigenous youth living in Ontario to engage in their communities through projects that promote environmental, social, spiritual, and physical well-being.

At M'Chigeeng, Lynzii, Anishinaabe-kwe from M'Chigeeng First Nation and Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron, Ontario, has seen the need for youth engagement.

“Youth need someone to be there, to listen to them or just hang out with them,” she says. “In a lot of communities there's problems with drug and alcohol, there's poverty, homelessness, and I try not to focus these issues but I recognize that they're there. If I can offer positive experiences to young people—experiencing nature, going on a canoe ride, or having a girls-only sleep-over and getting away from all those negative influences—then that's how I see I can help a little bit. I think they need spaces to be themselves.”

### **Openness: what do you(th) think?**

Over the last 15 years, Tides Canada has been supporting Indigenous communities across the country using a variety of philanthropic models. One Tides Canada initiative is a funder collaborative in northern Manitoba that was created to help Northern Manitoba communities design local solution-oriented projects to address poverty, food insecurity, and related health issues through projects such as boreal horticulture, northern beekeeping, community chicken coops, community greenhouses, and traditional food programs reconnecting people with country foods.

Wendy Cooper, Program Lead at Tides Canada, started exploring the potential for similar work among Indigenous youth in Ontario, her home province. Indigenous youth are the largest and fastest growing population in Ontario. Almost half of the province's Indigenous population (43%) is under the age of 24, compared to one-third (32%) of the non-Indigenous population. What issues might they want to tackle if they had the resources? Would they be interested in participating in a youth-focused initiative that would support their engagement?

“So many youth are taking leaps of faith right now, turning innovative ideas into actions. There is so much energy and the possibilities are endless. It just felt like the right time for us to do something,” she says.

She began by contacting The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada—an

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open network promoting giving, sharing, and philanthropy in Indigenous communities across the country—to explore getting young people together to see what they thought of the idea.

Wanda Brascoupé Peters, The Circle's executive director, is Mohawk/Algonquin, from the Bear Clan, and a member of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. She is also known for the way she deftly maneuvers people through tough conversations.

“What intrigued me most was the approach of, ‘Let’s see if this is a good idea first. Would Indigenous youth want this out there, or is there something different that they would want?’” she says.

In December 2013, Tides Canada and The Circle hosted an exploratory meeting at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. A cross-section of Indigenous youth—from the north, on reserve, off reserve, Métis, Inuit—attended. Simon Brascoupé, a father of six and a valued voice in his community, acted as a facilitator, guiding the group through some difficult but important discussions.

“The youth really spoke their minds,” Wanda says. “They wanted to know, ‘Who are these funders? Why should we trust them? Maybe they made their money off land resources.’” They wanted the funding to be transparent to applicants. “But it wasn’t about laying blame, or saying everybody’s the same,” Wanda says. “It was just about hearing different perspectives.”

Emerging from those challenging conversations, Indigenous youth expressed their interest in receiving support, but insisted that it had to be a mutual relationship—not a purely financial and transactional one. They also asked for the program to stay true to nine different themes: youth, openness, dialogue, relationship, mentorship, reciprocity, intergenerational, leadership, and action. The initiative was given a name that honoured these principles—the Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project. OIYPP is led by Tides Canada, The Circle, and Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) in close collaboration with a team of youth advisors.

Sarah Yankoo of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation was an important voice at this gathering, and a dedicated member of OIYPP's youth advisory committee today. A writer and an artist, she is active in her community of Toronto. “Too often, Indigenous funds reflect the extreme inequality and exploitation that makes the fund necessary in the first place,” she says. “I feel that this project would have taken on a different shape without this discussion, and the foundations would have been shaky.” But being rooted in values gives the project both strength and flexibility.

### **The project**

Designed to be a partnership rather than a traditional granting program, OIYPP's strength is in its dedicated people and their relationships. Its personal approach is anything but traditional. Youth advisors took ownership of OIYPP and, in some cases, even developed real relationships with applicants, making phone calls and sending emails asking how things were going or sharing articles that might be of interest to them or their project. This makes it an effective connector, translator, and partner between Indigenous youth and those interested in supporting Indigenous youth. In addition to access to small grants of up to \$5,000, youth have opportunities to be mentored—or be mentors—to participate in skills training, and connect with other youth, partners, and funders.

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For sisters Sage and Skye Paul, OIYPP was a springboard for their project, Authentic Appropriations. They were able to leverage their modest OIYPP grant to secure more funding, allowing them to grow significantly. What started as a wearable art collection quickly expanded into Setsuné, an Indigenous fashion incubator that fosters and promotes the research, development and creation of works by young Indigenous women and mother artists (ages 16-35) in fashion, textiles and wearable art. Sage and Skye have since expanded their program to help connect artists with industry, galleries, and other allies.

It has grown substantially since its inception. “Part of that, they’ve told us, is because of the feedback that we gave them,” Wendy says. “So that’s really exciting.”

Fashion and textile arts are often ineligible for arts council grants, she points out. Sarah Yankoo of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation, who attended the initial consultation for OIYPP and is now a member of its youth advisory committee, agrees.

OIYPP’s flexibility opened a door for Authentic Appropriations when many others were shut, she says. “I was so happy to see an arts project receive support.”

### **Mentoring**

“We’re still learning what OIYPP can be, but at this stage we try to create a menu of options and see what the youth are comfortable with,” says Wendy. “Mentorship is a key piece—it could be from one of the core partners, so we at Tides Canada or The Circle, youth advisors, partners that we think are a good fit, or potentially youth from previous years now that we have a cohort behind us.”

Mentorship can take many different forms. It isn’t a one-sided knowledge transfer, and it doesn’t have to be an onerous responsibility. “For me, mentorship is just being there—they being in your mind and you being in their mind,” says Wanda. “It’s a broadening of the landscape, rather than, ‘I’m having a problem, can you help?’ I want them to know that we care about them. I want them to know we want them to succeed.”

Applicants don’t merely receive mentoring. Many of their projects include it as part of their engagement with the community. Latisha Reddick, known to her peers as “Cairo,” is Métis from the Eastern Woodland Metis Nation of Nova Scotia and identifies as mixed blood, Black, and Indigenous. She is also a Juris Doctorate candidate at Osgoode Hall School of Law. Her project Sisters of the Soil is supported by OIYPP. Sisters of the Soil builds solidarity between Indigenous women and women of colour in Toronto by creating safe spaces for them to share experiences pertaining to colonization and racism. “Sometimes, the need and want is there—we just need space. So just making space and letting conversations happen organically—there’s a lot of power in that. It doesn’t necessarily have to be super structured. Sometimes, people just need to talk,” she says.

### **Making meaningful connections**

Following the first round of successful applications, OIYPP invited youth, mentors, and funders to a two-day workshop called the Design Lab to help youth strengthen their projects by sharing ideas, getting access to resources, and developing contacts with mentors. Exercises challenged participants to think about their work in a new way and foster collaboration.

“The Design Lab was probably one of the best training opportunities I’ve had in terms of

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funding,” says Cairo. “It really got me thinking about Sisters of the Soil and who it is for. What is our purpose, what is our goal, what is our vision? I found that to be incredibly helpful.”

The Design Lab served a special purpose for Lynzii and Cairo, who live and work some 500 kilometres apart: they were able to meet in person for the first time to talk about their respective projects and share ideas. They have stayed in touch and continue to discuss the possibility of future collaborations. For example, Sisters of the Soil could organize their next retreat to M’Chigeeng First Nation. The girls and young women in their respective projects could have a special opportunity to meet, share stories, and be inspired by each other.

Sometimes, the value of a connection takes a little more time to reveal itself, often in unexpected ways. To celebrate the successful close of their first year of programming, Sisters of the Soil held a community feast. Cairo extended an invitation to the other OIYPP projects. “I was surprised and delighted that Doug from Ke Nokee (Earth Work) showed up—he actually brought his son as well,” she says. “We talked about how our projects could work together on something and he’s also invited me to a few different events. So, I really feel like these relationships are long lasting.”

### **Reciprocity: moving forward together**

While the OIYPP team still feels they have a long way to go before OIYPP is a true partnership, it’s clear they have made strides toward their goal. “I didn’t feel like they [OIYPP] were just funding us. I felt like it we were working together to actually have these projects come to fruition,” says Cairo. “I felt supported throughout the way—I was sent emails [about things that might interest me], I had questions and I would call. Everyone was really attentive, so it really felt like we were working on this together.”

“One of the things we learned about youth engagement in Indigenous communities is the importance of giving gifts as a reciprocal gesture. Those leading initiatives honour the engagement of youth in their initiatives by giving back. The gifts or gestures of thanks could be as simple as a free course on first aid or something else that is of value to the youth,” says Arti Freeman, a volunteer on OIYPP’s advisory committee and Strategy Lead for Ontario Trillium Foundation’s Promising Young People action area.

### **We all have something to contribute**

Reflecting on OIYPP’s first year, Wanda says, “I don’t know if these projects would have been funded anywhere else.” She points to the Treaty #3 Rites of Passage project, led by 19-year-old Alexa Lesperance. “I don’t know if a foundation has ever received an application for a rite of passage. I don’t know if they would understand what a rite of passage was and what an important role it can play in creating a whole individual 30 years down the road. But we knew how life-changing it could be, and it only cost us \$5,000.”

There’s still plenty of room for philanthropy to be creative, take chances, ask questions, and form new alliances. “I think we at Tides Canada have an important role to play in empowering the philanthropic community to recognize that some of these edgy, risky, or unconventional grants have the potential to really launch something,” says Wendy. “We were able to explore this amazing opportunity and create OIYPP because we have a great relationship with a private fund advisor who is very open to trying new things and doesn’t have expectations for things to be fully baked or even necessarily continuing.” (For more on venturing into uncharted territories, see the article Arti co-wrote for The Philanthropist about [The Importance of Taking Risks in](#)

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[Philanthropy.\)](#)

An Indigenous “model” of philanthropy is about building respectful relationships and creating space for shared learning and engagement. “Indigenous philanthropy isn’t about giving only to Indigenous people. It’s about looking at your granting with an Indigenous lens. You can still give to Yale or McGill, but if you look at it in a more holistic way, it might change your granting. So it isn’t about what you give, it’s about how you look at it,” says Wanda. “The success of this isn’t the granting. That’s an outcome. If you get the right people in a room—and those people don’t always have to agree with you, you don’t want them all singing from the same songbook, you want them to challenge each other. And if you can bring people like that in a room, it’ll be successful. Or, it’ll move. And that’s what we have. We’re not perfect. We’re still learning.”

For such a young project, OIYPP is remarkably self-aware. It’s borne from this spirit of learning by testing, moving forward with bold yet thoughtful action, and asking people—young and old—for their honest opinions: how can we do better next time? The team developed a learning agenda and have been intentional about capturing insights on how activities were achieved, what led to their success, and what they might do differently. “This cycle of action, reflection, and adaptation helps us gain insights and informs how we move forward,” says Arti.

Youth want to be successful—on their own terms. They also want each other to succeed. “The important thing is, it can’t be mandated,” says Lynzii. “Adults can’t decide on the program and theme and design the activities. It has to be youth engaged and youth led. And I think that’s the major success for our Lil’Sisters Project.” And, no doubt, for OIYPP so far.

Indigenous youth are an important nexus between our past and our future. “We have a large youth population that, sure, has its ills and has been affected by years of colonization and are still living it, but they are actually living very full lives in the 21st century,” says Wanda. “You can still be traditional and want your iPhone and Starbucks. And I think this generation does it really well.” Youth move gracefully between the traditional and the contemporary, and often create new ideas in the process. They are at once torch bearers and trailblazers.

“If you can’t find it out there, create it,” says Cairo. That’s a challenge. And an invitation.

Entering into its second year, OIYPP has just opened a call for applications, and the team is eager to see what emerges—and youth have to teach them.

*Supporters to date in this unique partnership include the Dragonfly Fund at Tides Canada, Sprott Foundation, Ontario Trillium Foundation, TD Canada Trust, Laidlaw Foundation, Inspirit Foundation, Counselling Foundation of Canada, and YouthREX.*

*This article was written by Amanda Jun on behalf of Tides Canada, a national charity dedicated to a healthy environment, social equity, and economic prosperity for all Canadians. Over the last 15 years, Tides Canada has been supporting Indigenous communities across the country and is a proud partner in the Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Program.*