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NIIGAANSHKAAWIN | BREAKING TRAIL



An Introduction to the Project & Managers

The Niigaanshkaawin Project is supported by



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Tikinagan
Child & Family Services

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NIIGAANSHKAAWIN | BREAKING TRAIL

Chiefs Committee

Chief Donny Morris

Chief Delores Kakegamic

Chief Lorraine Crane

Chief Clifford Bull

Councillor Louie Sugarhead

Former Chief Chris Kakegamic

Board Representative Sonny Gagnon

About the Logo

Weagamow First Nation youth artist Memekwe Apetawakeesic (Morriseau) drew the Niigaanshkawin project's logo based on a childhood memory.

"When me and my family go woodcutting, my dad is often the first one to make a trail, so that's what 'Breaking Trail' is for me," explained Memekwe, 16.

"I'm proud of this logo, and I think it's important that First Nation children learn about their own culture and traditions. I like the way that it represents how Anishinabe people are moving forward."

The image, which took Memekwe about an hour to complete, was sketched on paper, then digitalized on her iPad.



Paths first walked by our Elders

An Introduction from the Chiefs Committee

An Elder once told a story of pre-contact, a time before our lives were disrupted. His grandfather was pulling a handmade sleigh uphill, and that sleigh was his lifeline. On it was food, supplies for shelter and cooking, a fishing net, and his knife. The snow had just fallen, so the work was strenuous. He was struggling to move forward, and things became more difficult as he climbed the hill. But he was determined, because he knew life would be better at the top.

For generations as Indigenous peoples, we have been climbing this hill much like this grandfather. When envisioned once we got to the top of the hill, our lives would change.

But our way of living was interfered, and we were forced to get back on the sleigh. We started sliding down the hill so fast that we forgot everything we left behind.

The Elder explained that in order for us to return to our traditional ways, we need to turn around and pick up what we left behind. We need to go back and gather everything we lost on that other side of the hill. Thankfully, we don't need to go too far to find it.

Prior to contact with our peoples, our lives were like a complete circle. We had everything: our laws, our child care, our land. Through contact and assimilation, we lost parts of culture, language, and traditional ways. Yet as a strong, resilient people, we fought our way back and now we have completed three-quarters of the circle once again. Every day, we are trying to get back to the full circle. When we are there, it will mean thriving communities, and healthy families and children.

The way forward is breaking trail on new paths. It begins with prioritizing our setting out. It makes us think of all the ways our Elders would care for and teach us as children.

It's like the Elder who would check the frozen lake in the early morning to help us get the water out. We had boundaries, especially when water was freezing up. We were told not to go near the lake and play around there until the Elder went out onto the lake to make sure it was safe. By going ahead, the Elder led the way and made it a little easier for us young people who had to do this work.

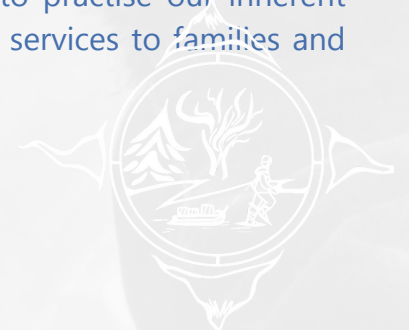
We were taught if you want break new trails, you need to make sure you have your items, such as a boat, rifle, and a net. This is what we've done our whole lives, and this is how we can provide for our families. We hunt, we fish, we live off the land. It's the simple things that matter most: family, community, culture.

As children, we remember our fathers would be out trapping, while we stayed at home, patiently waiting in our log structures with wood heating. We were filled with anticipated excitement at the thought of his return. When he arrived, we would be anxious to see what animals he would bring back. As soon as he dropped his sack onto the floor, we raced to see what was inside. We would help him bring in the beaver, moose meat or whatever else he got while out on the trapline. It wasn't fancy, but were happy and felt protected.

As we look back on our childhood, we see the influence through the teachings of our Elders. They both play an important role in ensuring we remain rooted in our traditional ways, which is how we want to care for our families and support our communities.

Our return to fully embracing this way of living is only a few steps behind us, and as a Chiefs Committee, we are determined to go back to reclaim what we was removed from us by carving out a new path. We want to walk ahead for the benefit of our future generations. As Chiefs, we have dreamt of having child and family services in our communities that would deliver services respectful of the culture and customs of the Indigenous people.

Community responsibility for child protection is an essential aspect of Indigenous self-government, which is key aspect of Tikinagan Child & Family Services' Mamow Obiki-ahwahsoowin service model, which means "everyone working together to raise our children." Today, we continue to work alongside Tikinagan to practise our inherent rights in making key decisions around care and provision of services to families and child wellbeing in our 30 First Nations.



Chiefs' Vision

Tikinagan was created to provide culturally-specific child and family services that emphasize a First Nations approach to child welfare. Prior to Tikinagan's Mamow Obiki-ahwahsoowin service model, services to support and care for First Nations families originated from outside the First Nations community where our people were not consulted or engaged in how we cared for our children. This did not help us.

As a result, Tikinagan was founded on two basic principles, as handed down by the Chiefs. First, "that no more children be lost from our communities." Second, "that a child and family service agency be created that would work with the people for the people, while respecting culture, heritage, and the concepts of the extended family."

Over the past three and half decades, Tikinagan has developed a unique service delivery model. The vision, goal and principles established by the Chiefs for Tikinagan have been fully integrated with Indigenous values and service delivery policies and procedures. Mamow Obiki-ahwahsoowin is a unique service model which means "everyone working together to raise our children." It is a system of protecting and caring for children and supporting families that has been designed and is delivered by First Nations people. This is a community-based approach to the inherent jurisdiction of First Nations based on traditional customary care practices.

Niigaanshkaawin – Breaking Trail is a new initiative that has its purpose: to support First Nation affiliates of Tikinagan Child and Family Services in the development of Band Representative programs, implementation of child welfare laws, and to reimagine the role Tikinagan will have in the future.

Niigaanshkaawin was developed to honour the original vision of those who came before us. With the support of the Bill C-92 Act and its objectives, Niigaanshkaawin gives the opportunity for First Nations to develop and govern their own child welfare laws.

Tikinagan will continue to assist our communities and partner with them to ensure ongoing services to children, youth and families. We are committed to supporting and assisting all communities who are exploring and/or working on developing their own child welfare laws and delivery of services to their members wherever they reside.

The answers are within each individual First Nation community. Breaking trail for the future generations to come.



Are you ready to lead the way?

More than 20 years ago when new customary care laws came into effect, there were a lot of stories that were told. That's how the laws came into being — through the stories of the Elders, the youth and middle-aged people. We know there are more stories out there; we just need to bring them out. That is how our laws are going to take develop. We believe your stories can help shape our laws.

Meet the Managers

Esther (Ester) McKay | Bearskin Lake
esterm@tikinagan.org



Ever since she was a child, Esther McKay has been helping others. It was something she learned by watching and learning from her parents, who provided spiritual support for her community in Bearskin Lake First Nation.

"My late father's dedication to the church and my mother's continual duty to provide church service in the Oji-cree language in an urban setting, speaks volumes to their past and present dedication to helping others with the gifts given to them from the Creator," said Esther.

Now an adult, Esther finds herself asking, "What can I do to help my community?" The answer to this question began to take shape when she left her community at 16-years-old for high school in an urban area.

With the guidance of loved ones, she learned how important it was to live in two worlds. It was there she decided to become a social worker. While pursuing her Social Work degree at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Esther worked for Tikinagan during the summer months. This firsthand experience taught her how to better support families.

"The answers lie within the communities and their membership themselves. This is what I am drawn to when I think about Niigaanshkaawin. I look forward to helping communities strengthen their families through their own knowledge of what has worked so far and what can help in the near future. I look forward to listening and helping the First Nations in whichever capacity I am lead. Let us break trail for the new generations to come."

That is why we want your stories brought forward. Only from there can we start to break trail together for our children. This way, our children and youth can know our history, our ways of living. Only then will we know how to begin.

Let us hear your stories. At the community level, we want to listen and learn how you want to take over child and family wellbeing services for your children. We are to help alongside Tikinagan.

Robin Bunting |
robinb@tikinagan.org

**Lac Seul First Nation
Constance Lake First Nation**



At just 11-years-old, Robin had her first interaction with child welfare. "This was the first time in my life I felt unsafe and in harm," Robin recalled. "It was scary. I recall thinking that I never want a child to feel this way."

That mindset began a long career in child welfare, starting by answering phones for Ojibway Tribal and Family Services in 1998-1999. Robin continued to garner experience and knowledge with 12 years in frontline services with child and family service agencies in Ontario. She has travelled widely among First Nations across Northern Ontario learning about each community's healing traditions. She brings extensive experience with First Nation children, youth and families, and First Nation leadership navigating the child welfare system and representation in legal proceedings.

In 2013, she moved back to Constance Lake First Nation where she became a leader for her people, serving two terms as Band Councillor. After declining a nomination for Chief, Robin decided she wanted to help bring change to the systems in our communities. Knowing everything has an impact on the way we care for our children and youth in need. Stepping back, she saw that to make change we needed to revitalize our own ways and govern ourselves.

"Although we have reached and advocated for a law to have authority in child welfare, there is so much work that needs to be done, it may take years to come. We have lived in these systems for so long, we have lived with colonization for so long, we need to acknowledge this pain and heal from this while taking the steps towards the options set out in Bill C-92. To achieve this, it will take collaboration from everyone in our communities. Now is our time to revitalize our way as First Nations peoples. Our children today are proving to us that life is getting better because they want better. They are voicing it. Let's work together and make it happen."





Are you ready to lead the way?



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