

Audrey:

Let's start with introductions. T, please go ahead. T has someone with him, a helper. That would be awesome if you could to restate his introduction, even just for the purpose of the recording. I think I got some of it but it would be great if you wouldn't mind restating?

T's Helper:

Okay, so this is T and he's Cherokee, Choctaw and other tribes. He was born in Chicago moved around a bit grew up in Oklahoma and now is in California. He works on Disability Justice and how it intersects with Native issues. He prefers he uses the term 'disability person' in kind of day-to-day things, but the term he prefers is 'crip' because he feels like that's the word we've chosen for ourselves.

Audrey:

Thank you so much. Was that everything?

T's Helper:

Yes, that's everything.

Audrey:

Okay. D's next in my little zoom screen.

Participant 'D':

Hi, D here. I'm originally from the Sioux Sainte Marie area. But I live here now in Toronto, I've lived out West for probably half my life. And as far as the terms go, I grew up having ADHD and now I have C-PTSD and I always didn't like the term 'disabled, I always used to identify myself as 'differently-abled', because I saw the world differently than other people. And while in university, I always liked the term that they used 'accessibility services. So, it kind of gave it more of a, you know, a 'positive' kind of feel to it and the term itself, I like that terminology. And with them now having like physical disabilities and stuff like that, I mean, as far as like ODSP, they still call it disability. So, in certain things, you know, like, as far as filling out forms and stuff like that. I do have to use the term but I prefer when I am describing myself to use 'differently-abled'.

Audrey:

Okay miigwetch. B, please go ahead.

Participant 'B':

Hey everyone. I am also from X. I didn't think that these questions would bring up so much anxiety in me. I do like that I can sit in this safe space with everyone here to be able to talk about this because it's hard to talk about in a Western colonial space or in those frameworks. I do have to use the word 'disabled' when it comes to legal documents and navigating our colonial Western healthcare. I do prefer using 'differently-abled'. I've been trying very hard to see my differences as gifts because I try not to focus on what colonial norms are around my cognitive and emotional and neurodivergent issues and all of the labels and stigmas that are imposed upon those. I do find also that folks are more accepting of myself using 'disabled' when I speak more about my physical disabilities. So, yeah, I'm still really struggling with what I can use as a 'differently-abled' person and feel 100% confident in standing in that space. I feel like the transition and growth within these words and labels is like constantly evolving so that's kind of where I'm at right now.

Audrey:

Thanks B, miigwetch. Wanda, did you want to also share?

Wanda:

Well, hello, my name is Wanda Whitebird. I'm Mi'kmaw from the East Coast. I am now living in Toronto for probably longer than I lived at home. I've been here since 1986. I've never even really thought of myself as disabled and I guess; I haven't been disabled for a long time; it's only been just over two years that I lost the use of my leg; I recognize that with that I lost some of the things that I wouldn't be able to do. And one of those is crawling into a sweat. So, when I asked the rehab people if they would teach me how to 'crawl' well they wanted to teach me how to walk, there was this conflict, that they didn't understand that I felt it was more important that I could crawl into a sweat, versus. And then I guess through that I realized that it was something that I wasn't going to be able to do anymore was to do that ceremony. I can do others but in particular this ceremony. And so that's why we're here to follow that dream. So, thank you all for coming and having that courage to share with us. To make the dream a reality was to build a sweat that's accessible for everybody. And I've learned so much from everybody around what people seem to think are disabilities or you know, that I just want people that have a way better experience with this than they have with other things. So, thank you.

Audrey:

Thanks so much Wanda and in case people haven't noticed the chat, there is an awesome link in there, clarifying the difference between 'big and small d' deaf.

<https://www.deafax.org/single-post/2016/06/08/what-are-big-d-and-little-d>

So, our next question is about what folks think; we are not expecting you to be historians here or give facts that you have heard about in research; but just what your thoughts are on how folks with access needs, might have experienced themselves prior to colonization. Was it different? You know, was there maybe not such a concept such as disability? Or rather, yeah, what do you guys all think? How that was? How people related to people with various access needs; before the standardized norms that came with Western values and capitalism took over. Whoever wants to jump in and chat a little bit about that would be great. You know and even if it's not 'existing' prior to colonization how you might think; how the concept might clash with indigenous values, or even sacred teachings.

Participant 'D':

Hi D here, I was just thinking that it was probably the same as, like when we're on our 'moon time' that that person whose 'differently-abled would be looked after as part of the normal routine of daily life but in a respectful way and not be stigmatized or ostracized or anything like that. But to be respected and cared for in a nurturing and loving way. And that they would be respected for the 'gifts' that they bring from seeing the world and experiencing the world in a different way so that's how I would see it.

Audrey:

Thank you.

Participant 'B':

I agree. I believe that; I mean, in my very, very, very humble opinion; that we wouldn't be seen as 'less than', but more as teachings. Like our gift was teaching humility, patience, and love and respect and in ways that were not honored in Western colonial society. And that, you know folks

that were not typically 'abled' were, they had a different set of gifts that they brought to the people and those were gifts that you know others were not able to bring and therefore they were valued in like, such a different, sacred way. Does that make sense?

Audrey:

Yeah, totally. I think so. Yeah. I love the way you put that.

Participant 'B':

I mean I work with folks of all different abilities and I know the gifts I receive and the teachings that I'm reminded of. Like, love and humility and respect and honesty and truth and like all of the grandfather teachings are so beautiful the way that you receive them "through" other folks and learning from them and you really do just, like, there's such an abundance of knowledge and beauty that I've received through that and I am truly humbled and grateful for that, so.

Audrey:

Thank you so much. Would anybody else like to jump in on that point

T's Helper:

S is ready it just takes a second.

Audrey:

Okay, great.

T's Helper:

Yeah.

He thinks that even before colonization that there was oppression of people with disabilities. Because in the stories he's heard of people being left behind if they weren't strong enough, or they couldn't contribute, so it could depend on the disability but he doesn't think all peoples with disabilities were necessarily equally included, even before colonization and that's still work for native peoples to work on.

Audrey:

That's a really good point.

The next question, if nobody wants to add anything to that was - and I know, I recognize that this can be difficult and painful to talk about. So, I don't want to put anybody on the spot. And you have the option of writing it in the chat as well. But the next couple of questions are where we're hoping to hear from you on some 'concrete' kind of examples of where you've experienced "barriers". Like maybe not even been able to 'access' a cultural space or a ceremony at all, or where you had, you know, difficulties within that space or that ceremony.

Participant 'B':

I could give a very brief example of one experience that I've had. Because I do take medication daily, I've had elders refuse to allow me to fast. To go out onto the land and fast because they considered 'medication' to be 'breaking my fast' and that it just wasn't proper. And then I did eventually convince one elder to allow me to do "partial fasts" where I was allowed to drink water in the morning and at night to take my medication and then I would fast for the rest of my time on the land and I was then just when like, I had a lot of emotional things come up and a lot of emotional blocking happening, all of the thing that happen during fasting, being super overwhelmed and unsure of so many things that I was receiving and being unable to decipher them, it was then blamed on my "mental illnesses" and I was just made to feel less than and not worthy of having those conversations when I was struggling during that like really hard time and

there was no real accommodations made to ensure that I could have a safe fast that my experiences could be validated. Yeah, I just I felt like it was such a struggle to finally find someone who would allow me to go in 'to fast' and then once I did, I wasn't supported throughout the fast the way that other folks were. I felt like I was being kind of punished for wanting to fast on medication, when that's just not okay.

Audrey:

That's really what you need. It's not a choice.

Participant 'B':

Yeah, yeah exactly, it's like I'm staying alive and it wasn't that I was having like withdrawal symptoms, I wasn't medically 'unwell' in a physical sense, I was 'spiritually unwell' and not getting that support.

Audrey:

That must have been really scary.

Participant 'B':

It was really scary but it also showed me just how strong my spirit is and it allowed me to find ways to speak to my helpers. You know my whole life, I knew that there was a helper with me I just didn't know who it was and through that isolation and all of that fear that was happening, you know, my grandma came; and I knew it was her; it was who has been with me, for a long time. It was the first time I was able to speak with her and so that was, really a wonderful thing to come out of it. But it shouldn't have had to get - I would have loved to connect with her through a safe and healing environment rather than one of complete terror and fear and isolation and being so alone. Because, what if it ended up being like a very negative entity? Which has happened in my life before and that fear and isolation makes you more vulnerable to that and can cause a lot more disruption and pain and destruction in your life. So, I just felt that it was pretty negligent to leave me that way.

Audrey:

Yeah, I'm really sorry that happened that way it shouldn't have but thank you for sharing. Okay does anybody else want to share an example?

Participant 'D':

I'll share something. I've been pretty lucky as far as in the past with sweats and fasting. I am diabetic so I've had different conductors accommodate me that way of letting me have like sardines and like crackers and stuff with me. And water to take my medications. And sweats, the thing that I've had problems with is I've been avoiding going on a fast or sweat, which I really need because I'm grieving the loss of my second son that just died a few years ago and a whole bunch of other stuff. And I really, really could use that but I feel uncomfortable going because I feel like I'm disrupting everything. I guess that's my own stuff but It's like, you know, because I had a hip surgery that didn't heal properly so I have like a lot of issues like W was saying. Like sitting down, I may have to lie down, so I don't want to disrupt the whole sweat by saying - you know and then same with fasting. I might have to get out and stretch because of my, again, my mobility issues I walk with a walker because I can't carry heavy stuff anymore. So, there's all those little things and I guess it's just not feeling comfortable enough with the right people to be able to say, "Look, I really would like to be part of this, but this is my needs and how can I accommodate them and not disrupt the whole thing?" So, that's where I'm at that's those are my issues. Thanks.

Audrey:

Thanks D.

T's Helper:

So, the first thing really is that many things like pow-wows or sundances or other ceremonies are they are held on grass so it's very hard for his wheelchair to get through them. And another thing is many things are mobility oriented right, as people dancing or moving in a way that he can't, so even if he's there he doesn't feel like he can fully participate or feel fully included so it makes him feel isolated when he can get there

Audrey:

Makes sense.

'T's Helper:

He's never been able to be a sweat before because he just physically wouldn't be able to get into it. Do you want to talk about the communication? And also, because it's more difficult to communicate with him people don't make the effort to do so, so they just ignore him or pass him by so that makes him feel more or let down.

And also, it's just challenging with everything being outdoors because even if you can get there physically, like flies will all fall in his wheelchair and stuff and it's not comfortable to be there even if you physically, you'd be outdoors for a long period of time. But those are some of the big barriers that he has. Like if it rains or things like that, he can't protect himself from the elements the way other people who are able-bodied can so, but there's a prioritization of being outdoors is more traditional and not an accommodation for having things be indoors for the people who need that.

Audrey:

Thank you!

The next question kind of ties into what would make it easier... What types of accommodation? I think what we can conclude from that, that it would in some cases, definitely make sense to have coverings or to have things be indoors. But what other types of accommodation have people may be actually experienced and have good examples of where they were assisted? Or what kinds of ideas do you have of what would it make it easier or possible for you to access these kinds of events and these kinds of ceremonies?

'T's Helper:

So, he was saying, just if native peoples had a more expansive understanding of what 'traditional' means, so that it can be more inclusive of people with disability.

Participant 'D':

Well for me I think it would be awesome if hopefully what you're planning to do here is something develops that is specifically for people like us. That like say the bus is set up that way, if we're going fasting, everything around the ceremony is catered to people with accessibility issues and that everything is known before we go so there's not any misunderstandings and everything is set up that way because that would be so awesome for me. I would be so happy if I could see something like that. And even with sweats you know; like say at Anishinaabe Health or whatever; having every, I think they only have it once a week. A woman's and a men's so maybe you know every two weeks one specifically for us, that would make me feel I would definitely attend more regularly if that was set up.

Audrey:

Thank you. Any other ideas on what could make it easier or more possible to access such spaces? Those are already a lot of great suggestions. I don't know Wanda if you think this is might be a good time to talk about the things that you're thinking about for a sweat that we want to build?

Wanda:

I have learned a lot from the many people who have come and have been courageous enough to share and I don't know what the 'sweat' is going to look like yet but I know that the sweat is going to - I know that this ceremony, the sweat lodge ceremony, has got to be accessible for everybody. And what that means and what it looks like I'm not sure but I know that it needs to accommodate every one of you and the others that we have spoken to. Might not yet know what that looks like and I see some of it to be like, one of the big things that we've learned is space issue. People needed a lot of room to stretch out and because they put a lot of people into a sweat, that doesn't happen, you have to sit on your legs or what however. Cross your legs - my sweats would know not to do that but we sort of stretch out but we're still in we're still cramped, and we're still touching each other. But I think it's important that I see that maybe we might have to have two to three sweats at a time to accommodate everybody's needs. So, there's enough space for people who have neuropathy to move their legs that yet had to figure out someone who needs to see sign language, to hear or to talk to. I just know that I feel really saddened to hear what you shared and I can't believe it's taken me this long to even consider it. I think, you know losing the use of my legs, I realized that we some things needed change. So, you know, same as, full moon ceremonies and pipe ceremonies and other ceremonies that we do to make sure that everyone can attend. You know, 'the elevator's working'. Well, you know some people can't use an elevator. I heard T say going across the grass isn't easy for his wheelchair. So, how do we ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate? When I was learning four years ago from elders, and many of the elders I learned from, their ceremonies were in a 'darkened basement' so they wouldn't be arrested because, of course, it was 1978 in the United States that it was still illegal for us to do ceremony until it passed the Native Spirituality Act. So, yeah, they're not trusting. I learned in the dark and you know, a different style than I see that 'leaving no one behind' you know. I've worked a lot of years in the HIV movement and I know what that means to individuals who are stigmatized. So, I hear in your voice - your fear, but also hear in your voice - the courage and that courageousness that you've pulled up from beneath inside of you to be able to share.

And if you really want to sweat let us know, I put up fasters for I don't know, for how long. Someone always needed an accommodation. So, I see that fasting could be done with accommodating everyone's needs in 'a good way'. I'm ready for the challenge. And, and I, you know we're learning a lot and I want to thank you all for that. You know, I'm not, I can't guarantee you that I'm not going to make mistakes but I'm going to try my best to use the right language.

Audrey:

I also wanted to call attention to some of the great ideas in the chat. I love this idea of a "Crip camp" - that would be amazing. We could be COVID safe and have a camp where we would could go fast and have sweats and really talk about what expanding that concept of what 'traditional' means. That would be so exciting to look forward to.

Participant 'B':

I think that we could actually maybe be start a conversations of starting a collective around “crip camp” and what that would mean for people and being able to be fully accessible to such a wide scope of different needs and accommodation. When I thought, when that word came to me, like “crip camp”, I got really excited about it, just thinking of being able to, like, share and enjoy spaces with like everyone that I love and knowing what it's like to be isolated, like, physically, be emotionally, spiritually, in all the different ways from community and from ceremony and from being able to feel like I have a place ‘within’, you know, being an indigenous human being. It just, it just feels like maybe that's the right next step for you know our people to be able to make sure that everyone is getting everything that we deserve. You know, so much has been taken from us and we deserve to have it ‘reclaimed’. And to reclaim it in a way that fits our identities and our needs, instead of constantly trying to fit ourselves into others ‘boxes’.

Audrey:

Yeah, I totally hear you! The time is coming!

So, we're getting close to the end of our time but there were two more questions that folks might want to comment on looking at disability- focused organizations versus indigenous- focused organizations. What is it that you want disability-focused organizations to know about your indigenous experience? On the one hand and what you would want indigenous focused organizations to know about your disability experience? If people can comment on those last two things?

‘T’'s Helper:

So, for the first part, little joke, you want to say that there are “native vegetarians” who wish to be acknowledged, but also that instead of using ‘tradition as a weapon’ to exclude people to think of tradition as a “big, expansive, growing thing that can change and be inclusive of people based on what they need.

He was saying that the disability community that like the more white-dominant disability community doesn't look at issues of law enforcement violence and other forms of state violence that really target native peoples with disabilities. So, kind of expanding that agenda to include to include that issue, that's what he works on with Crip Justice. So, those were his comments.

Audrey:

Do you mind saying that again? What you work on with Crip Justice? The expansion of understanding of state violence that is practiced on indigenous people?

‘T’'s Helper:

He's started a group it's called “Crip Justice” you can find it on the web here:

<https://cripjustice.org/>

The focus is primarily on law enforcement violence against people with disabilities, which he started because the mainstream disability rights groups didn't see that as a ‘disability issue’ it's white dominated and didn't see that the majority of people killed by the police have disabilities but they're also always racialized, or black or indigenous so that they aren't included in the “mainstream disability agenda”. So, he thinks that the disability movement needs to get with the program.

Audrey:

Amazing work, that's so awesome. Thank you for doing that work. And there are native vegans too. I'm one of them, FYI.

Participant 'B':

Me too. I'm vegan.

And we know one more in Toronto.

Wanda:

I seem to have a whole care team full of vegans.

Audrey:

You do!

Wanda:

And they're all Natives. S, can I ask you a question?

'T's Helper:

He said, "sure".

Wanda:

Is there anyone else there with you beside your friend?

'T's Helper:

No, I'm just his Aunt I'm just helping him with the interpretation.

Wanda:

Yes, there are many people around you today. I seem to hear the 'little people'. You have amazing spirit helpers around you.

Audrey:

Wow.

I'm feeling a lot of wisdom on this call man. Deep. Thank you.

I'm feeling deeply appreciative of everybody wish we could just like schedule the camp.

Wanda:

I still love that idea. Oh, wow

Participant 'D':

I would just add that just more education for both organized kind of organizations around, you know, kind of like 'educating' people on what is needed and 'normalizing' it, you know? Making it part of the community and just educating people because I think that's what they need. A lot of people don't understand, like, when they look at somebody and their disability is not obvious at first. And then like, you know, disagreements happen and misunderstandings and everything like that. So, I think it's just a matter of educating people and 'normalizing' it and then making it part of the mandate of any organization because it should be already, it just makes sense?

Audrey:

Yeah, miigwetch. Wanda, did you have any, is there anything that I missed or that you want to add before you send us off?

Wanda:

No, I just want to say thank you to all of you. I know I haven't seen you in a long time, D but I do remember you.

Participant 'D':

I remember you well too.

Wanda:

Thank you I want to say this was amazing. Amazing ideas. I love the camp idea honestly, that just blows my mind and the idea that we have a space just "specifically" for individuals who have to be accommodated in some way including fasting. And you know, not getting caught up in genders - I try very hard to 'shake up' my 'heterosexual default', that I have and try and tell the stories with a 'they' and 'them', rather than a 'he and she'. But it's a work in progress so be patient And I didn't know what to expect when we started this honestly, I was like, 'Wow, another focus group'. But wow, I learned a lot, I learned something from each and every one of you and the others who have been, you know, been sharing their stories with me and us and what I've done, I myself have never had a problem accommodating anybody although I don't know how I would have approached somebody who needs was in a wheelchair because it just wouldn't fit. But now I find myself in that in that dilemma, which we're going to figure out and that the sweats or the ceremonies that we have everyone gets accommodated. But it would depend on the size of - the only thing that, I mean, full moon ceremonies and fasting and pipe ceremonies and other ceremonies of those nature we can accommodate everybody at the same time, I mean, accommodate anybody who showed up, if we had this space. If we were in a city park, or recreational center, of course it was accessible but once we go inside, we run into the into the problem with burning something, they don't like it. Burning sage or any of those things so and I refuse to let them get away with that. So, they can turn off the fire alarm or hire a fire personnel person have been there while we do it. So, I'm looking forward to the challenge of building a sweat somewhere here in Toronto that's accessible to all what I see is that; depending on the persons or individual accommodations; would depend on how many sweats we would have to do in a day. Because there are people with neuropathy, they need to stretch out. So, we can only fit so many in a space, being able to accommodate the individuals, so they have what they need to be comfortable and continue to be a part of the ceremony. You can be in a sweat or you can be outside the sweat it's the same thing you know, the ancestors will touch you, it's not the same experience though. So, if anybody has anything else that they want to say and you haven't had a chance to say it or when you go away and relax and rest up and something comes to you, please get a hold of Audrey by writing an email. If you can't write it maybe have someone else help you with that or just give her a call. You can always do that on Facebook messenger. So, I found out. Anyone want to say anything else?

Participant 'D':

I'm excited that you're doing this. I'm really looking forward to it. It's going to be awesome to be able to attend a sweat and a fast again and you know not feel uncomfortable asking for special accommodation or anything. So, miigwetch for this incentive and for including us all.

Wanda:

Yeah, so if you have anything you want to say anybody before I,

Audrey:

We will definitely keep you posted going forward. We may end up you know, just doing what we always do as No More Silence as our own small grassroots group but we've also engaged in a conversation with the Indigenous Affairs Office at the City of Toronto, which is a kind of new institution and they've expressed a commitment to implementing the calls to justice from the

National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered. And we've reminded them that 'access to cultural spaces and ceremony' are one of those calls to justice and so we're kind of letting them know that it would be appreciated if we had a 'spot', a location, where we didn't have to fear eviction, like the folks who are building the teepee right now. For this semi-permanent lodge that we want to build. So, we'll keep you posted on everything as we as the project moves forward, including the guidelines that we develop and we'll ask for your feedback.

Wanda;

Creator, ancestors, we called you together to come and join us today, in this space and in the places that we're at. Thank you. Thank you for helping us to find the courage to share our wisdom and our stories with each other. It's not about an ending or a closing, but it's about a new beginning. It's about moving from this space because some of us aren't moving space places at the moment, and moving forward in time to take with us those stories you shared, the knowledge we have learned, the friends we have made or reconnected with. Creator, ancestors surround us in your universe with 'unconditional love' that the universe has for us. The trees that we see they're not going to treat me or you any differently, they treat us all the same. It doesn't matter to them who we are they'll provide oxygen for us and including those that are winged, the four legged, they connect to our breath because they create the oxygen that we need to breathe. Ancestors if there's anybody here who needs that special touch wrap them in your arms, your wings or your paws. Thank you to the little people. I heard you even though you were way over there in a place called California where I've never been. As we lay our head down to rest tonight in our dream space, be kind with us and fill our dreams with love and goodness; remembering, bring back the loved ones that we may be able to see tonight. Watch over us in that state and when the night meets the day at the crack of dawn is for you to go home and take with you those things that don't make us feel good. Creator as you move from as we move from here help A and I, and R and D; and R on looking and going through all of the people's stories and hoping to be able to create something that is accessible to all of you. Thank you for bringing us together today. So, we say miigwetch, thank you all my relations, a ho.