

Paqtnkek collaborates with AWRC on sexual violence

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For the last year and a half, members of the Paqtnkek Health Centre and the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association have been collaborating on an important project and working together for change.

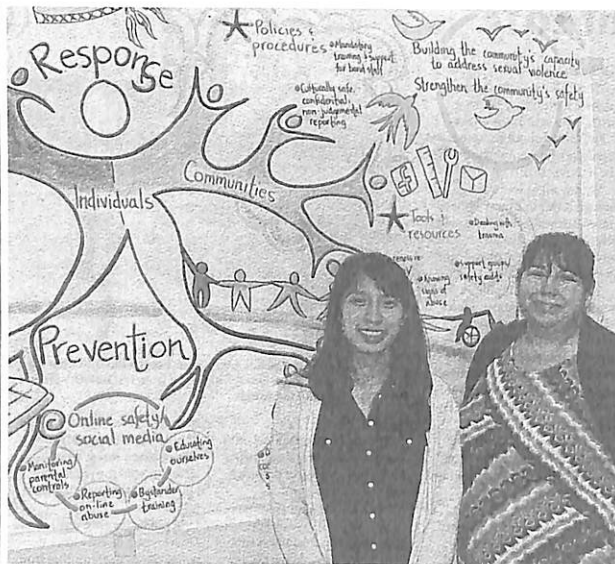
Responding to and Preventing Sexual Violence was designed to strengthen the abilities of Aboriginal communities to respond to and prevent sexual violence against Aboriginal women based in a culturally relevant, revitalizing and safe approach.

"I think one of the biggest things that we wanted to make sure we were doing with the project is that it's coming from community... all the recommendations and all the ideas are the ones that the community members have come up with and want to see implemented or strengthened," project co-ordinator Annie Chau said.

During the first year of the project, a community based advisory committee was created to help guide the work of the project and collaborate with on project activities.

The first phase of the project was a community needs assessment to establish project values, among other things. Values identified were culture, sharing, inclusivity, holism, strength, honouring, safety, transparency, pro-activeness and capacity.

Chau noted the community facilitator role, which Molly Peters was in for the first year and Karla Stevens is in now, is vital because they couldn't do



Project co-ordinator for Responding to and Preventing Sexual Violence, Annie Chau (left), has been working with Paqtnkek health director Juliana Julian for close to two years to strengthen the abilities of the community to respond to and prevent sexual violence. PHOTO: Emily Hiltz

anything without connecting with the community.

One of the biggest successes for the project has been the support for supporters. Through focus groups, Chau said many people came forward and said people in the community don't necessarily go to formal supporters or service providers.

"They find support within their own social circles and family circles," Chau said. "So one of the thoughts from these focus groups from the community

was how do we strengthen the knowledge and skills of those people in the community."

Because of this realization, within the project they have been working to build the knowledge and skills of the informal supporters, while making them more aware of the resources available and teaching them about self-care.

"It was nice because I had said that all along," Paqtnkek health director Juliana Julian said of the need for support for supporters.

"I kept saying, they don't really seek that [formal support] we really, kind of, have our own network in the community. It's not formal and I don't know

how to label it but when it came out support for supporters it was like that's exactly what I meant."

Chau noted healing has been another important part of the project.

"In, kind of, a dominant culture we don't really consider the importance of healing perhaps and that's really important to this community," Chau said. "As a First Nations community, as Mi'kmaq people healing from colonization, residential schools, this is the kind of context that people are really living in and trying to break through so what could healing look like for the community."

Along with the support for

supporters group, they are also organizing a community education team to have more advanced training on how to facilitate discussions on consent, healthy relationships and sexuality.

Julian noted another important aspect of the project, that they only realized when they had begun to work with the community, was the importance of bringing Mi'kmaq culture into the project.

"How do you bring some of the matriarchal traditions alive again and how can we revive them," she said, noting that was done with the Sisters in Spirit event at the beginning of October.

At the event, along the theme of matriarchal traditions, the question was posed 'what matriarchal traditions do you honour and want to revitalize?'

"We had some really great responses I think... some of those women need to be in leadership roles and we need to value women as decision makers in the community," Chau said.

"So I think just even asking that question gave people this space to think and reflect."

"This is part of honour and finding justice for missing and murdered indigenous women is reviving and honoring the matriarchal traditions," she added.

While Julian and Chau both agree the project has been a success, they wish they had more time.

"It's a very short project, we only have two years," Chau said.

"Another two years would have been better," Julian added. "I think we can learn lessons from other communities, even though I think we're kind of the first community to have a project like this."

Chau said the idea for the project is when it's done the capacity of the community will be strengthened and the community and external service providers, like the Women's Resource Centre, can better collaborate.

"And that we'll be in a place where there's going to be more awareness on sexual violence than two years ago and people will feel like this is a community that they can talk about these issues and they feel safe," Chau said.

After the project ends in March, Chau said she hopes the practices continue and maybe healing circles become a more regular event. She noted there may even be possibilities with the province's new sexual violence strategy for them to tap into.

"We're always open to sharing what we've learned about this project," Chau said, noting if people are interested in learning more to contact them.