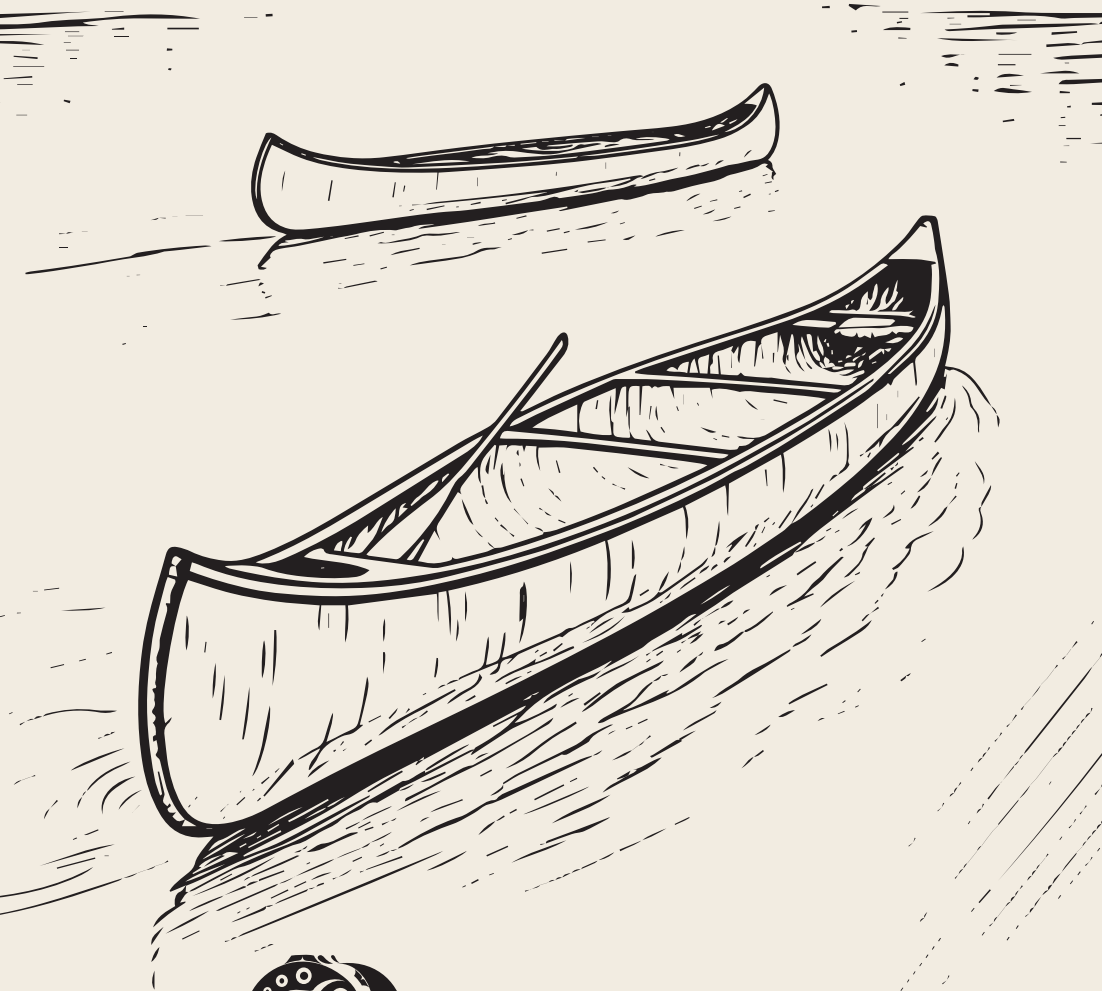


Intertwining Kinship & Justice

A Client's Journey Through BCFNJC's
Indigenous Justice Centre



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“We are doing things differently, outside the framework of a conventional law firm. Our work is holistic, rooted in healing and restoration. With each client we serve, we know that we serve their family, their loved ones, their communities, their Nations – we are all connected and the work of our IJCs transcends a single relation or individual.”

Kirsten Barnes
IJC Clinical Director

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The warm scent of cedar filled the room, mingling with the soft murmur of voices as an Elder offered a prayer. It was a space that felt safe, a stark contrast to the cold, sterile halls of the courtrooms where the fate of so many Indigenous lives was often decided. But this wasn't a courtroom. It was the beginning of a new journey for Michael, a young First Nations man caught between the weight of colonial law and the possibility of healing through community.

Problem Solving and Diversion

A Lawyer's Commitment

Michael had been arrested after a night out where tempers had flared and mistakes had been made. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the inside of a holding cell, but it felt different this time. The system seemed like a never-ending cycle—arrest, trial, probation—like being trapped in a whirlpool pulling him further from his community, his family, and even himself.

But then he met Gloria, a lawyer from the Indigenous Justice Centre (IJC), who saw him not as another case file but as a human being in need of support. As they sat together in the small, sunlit room of the Centre, Gloria listened intently to Michael's story. Her soft voice offered a sense of hope that was foreign in his previous legal experiences.

“When I first met Michael,” Gloria recounts, “I could see the exhaustion in his eyes. It was the exhaustion of someone who had been through the system too many times. But I knew this time could be different.”

Gloria didn't just approach Michael's case with a desire to keep him out of jail. She understood his need for healing. She made calls, pulling strings to secure him a bed at a local treatment center. The only barrier? Michael had no money to pay for it. Without a second thought, Gloria worked with BCFNJC and community resources to ensure Michael could access the necessary treatment, finding the resources to cover his stay and even a food stipend. It wasn't just about getting him out of jail; it was about redirecting his life toward recovery.

This was diversion in action—a way of turning a potential jail sentence into an opportunity for healing and growth. And it was only possible because of the unique, human-centered approach of the IJC.

Rebuilding Bonds

In the months that followed, Michael's life began to shift. Part of that change came from the steady presence of Jenna, a kinship mentor who worked at the Centre. Jenna's role was different from anything Michael had experienced before. She wasn't just a support worker; she was a bridge between him and his community, a thread tying him back to the land, the culture, and the people he had grown disconnected from.

"Being disconnected from your community," Jenna explains, "means you're cut off from the very people who are meant to help you heal. It's like trying to build a home with no foundation. My job is to help clients like Michael find that foundation again."

Jenna guided Michael to strengthen connections to his community, and through his own desire to build relations, he was able to engage with ceremonies and gatherings, things he hadn't practiced since he was a child. She arranged for him to meet Elders who spoke his language and shared stories of their community history, and the strength of where his people come from. Each story was like a balm, reminding Michael that he came from a line of strong people, and he too had that strength within himself to move forward. Michael's community participated in the development and implementation of his healing plan.

The IJC staff were knowledgeable about and able to collaborate with existing external Indigenous Justice Programs in the community which meant that Michael was offered wrap around services and supports that extended beyond his legal needs.

Specialized Support

The legal team at BCFNJC worked differently than the lawyers Michael had dealt with in the past. Each lawyer specialized in Indigenous child protection or criminal justice, ensuring that they not only knew the law but also understood the nuances of Indigenous experiences. Clara, the clinical legal supervisor, emphasized the importance of this approach.

“When you walk into a courtroom representing someone like Michael, you’re not just advocating for them in the legal sense. You’re fighting for their right to be seen as more than a case number. That’s why it’s crucial our lawyers are trained not just in the law but in understanding the cultural and community context of each client.”

Clara worked closely with her team to ensure every lawyer assigned to a client had the necessary experience. It was a carefully structured system—one designed to protect clients from falling through the cracks, ensuring they received the best possible legal representation while also honouring their cultural identity.

Communication and Understanding

A Lawyer's Dedication

In the colonial justice system, Michael had often felt lost, confused by legal jargon and overwhelmed by processes that seemed designed to keep him in the dark. But with the IJC, that changed. Gloria made it her mission to ensure Michael was part of every decision.

“We’re not just here to represent our clients,” Gloria said. “We’re here to make sure they understand every step of the process, that they know what’s happening and why. And most importantly, we’re here to remind them that they’re not alone.”

Gloria walked Michael through every court date, every meeting, making sure he had a clear picture of what was at stake and what their options were. She understood that clarity was power, and the more Michael understood his own case, the more empowered he became to take control of his life.

Cultural Safety and Humility

Gladue Writing and Beyond

One of the most powerful moments in Michael’s journey came when he worked

with James, a Gladue writer. James didn't just write a report for the court. He spent hours with Michael, getting to know him, learning about his family, his community, and the circumstances that had led him to this point. He listened with a kind of care and patience that Michael had never experienced in the legal system.

“I always tell the person I am writing a report for,” James says, “that this process isn't just about convincing the court to be lenient. It's about recognizing the trauma and challenges that brought them here and showing the court that there's a path forward, one that involves healing and restoration, not just punishment.”

James's Gladue report was a deeply personal reflection of Michael's life. It highlighted his struggles but also his potential for growth. And in court, that report played a pivotal role in securing a sentence that focused on healing rather than incarceration.

A New Way Forward

Michael's journey through the Indigenous Justice Centre was more than just a legal battle. It was a journey of healing, of reconnecting with his identity as an Indigenous man, and what that means in relation to his community, and Nation. The IJC's commitment to cultural safety, communication, and kinship wasn't just rhetoric—it was the lifeline.

Michael was not just viewed as an individual, independent of his community, he was an important part of a collective and responsible for contributing to the collective well-being of his Nation. When an IJC supports an individual like Michael, it creates a ripple effect that helps their immediate family and support system, that extends into the community and Nation, and eventually breaks cycles in a way that changes the fate of families forever.

As he stood outside the Centre months later,

watching the sun dip behind the mountains, the scent of cedar still lingering in the air, Michael felt something he hadn't felt in a long time: hope. Hope for himself, for his family, and for his community.

This is the power of BCFNJC's Indigenous Justice Centre. It's not just about legal services—it's about bringing Indigenous Peoples home, back to themselves.

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