Ititwewiniwak: Language Warriors—The Young Women's Circle of Leadership

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Taiaiake Alfred (2005) reminds us of the fight that Indigenous warriors engage in and the tools that they will need for this time ahead: "The battle is for the reclamation of an Onkwehonwe spirit, mentality, and way of being in the world. In this context, our survival as peoples is dependent upon the survival and revitalization of Indigenous languages" (p. 247). In this article, we reflect on Alfred's words as we write about a group of young women who are taking on their own journeys as language warriors in these contemporary and conflicted times. Through an intensive summer program of Cree language, creative theatre, storytelling, traditional and contemporary arts, computers, and woodworking, these youth fight to regenerate themselves and their people. These Iyiniwoskinîkiskwewak (young women) will be the future contributing members of their communities (Mâmawi-owîcihtâsowin), proud of their culture and able to stand confidently as they lead others in cultural and linguistic revitalization.

Language Warriors—The Young Women's Circle of Leadership

Language is the essence of our being, of who we are. It's the defense against assimilation. If we lose our language, then we've truly lost. (Frank Weaselhead, Blackfoot Elder, The Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute [CILLDI], Edmonton, July 14, 2004)

Introduction: Tanisi kawi'itweyak

In his talk about "defense" and the "risk of loss," Blackfoot Elder Frank Weaselhead positioned us to think about the battles that need to be fought, the important confrontations, and the fight ahead for Indigenous people to retain and reclaim their language. As the young women began to gather around our registration table on the first morning of the Young Women's Circle of Leadership (YWCL) some shy, some almost clinging to their mothers in fear that they would leave them—the term *warriors (Okichita)* did not come to mind. In Cree, a warrior is a person who protects or attacks or goes to battle with another tribe to protect the people.

These teenagers were definitely brave, with most coming for the first time to a big university for two weeks, willing to try out and take on some

very new experiences. They didn't know what to expect or what challenges or rewards they might encounter. Their friends and sisters were at home on the 'Rez' in a comfortable place, where they knew what they would be doing each day, including sleeping in. It was summer holidays. Here, however, the young women didn't know what lay ahead. Was it going to be like school? Would it be hard? Would they like these other girls? Would their leaders be kind? Why were they here? The adults also were milling around the area near the registration desk. Many seemed to know each other; their mothers knew them too, and people seemed happy to see each other. "Tanisi, Kiyas," one mother said to another, smiling, as they shook hands. Some were even hugging these other women, who seemed to be their friends. There were muffins and tea, and several adults approached the young women and told them that they were glad to see them there. Everyone seemed to be here for a reason. The young women were told that they were coming to this camp to learn Cree and how to be Indigenous. The adults told them that Cree people are losing their language and that it is important to keep it alive.

Taiaiake Alfred (2005) reminds us of the huge fight that needs to be fought and that Indigenous warriors need to be equipped with many tools and strengths for this time ahead: "The battle is for the reclamation of an Onkwehonwe spirit, mentality, and way of being in the world. In this context, our survival as peoples is dependent upon the survival and revitalization of Indigenous languages" (p. 247). In this article, we reflect on Alfred's words as we write about our young women who are taking on their own journeys as language warriors in these contemporary and conflicted times.

Over time, Indigenous languages have all taken tolls against the seemingly more powerful languages or "those dialects with an army and a navy" (Weinreich, 1945). In this context, English and French have invaded the First languages spaces. Through the horrendous processes of colonization, Indigenous languages have been beaten back to the recesses, to the reserves, to some homes, still carefully guarded by the Elders but with few young, healthy speakers left to fight. These languages are currently undergoing severe obsolescence and are at serious risk of being wiped out. The nature of such language loss with Indigenous people worldwide has been well documented (Crawford, 1998; Dorian, 1989 & 1993; Fettes, 1998; Hinton, 1994; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Pennycook, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Wurm, 1991).

The severity of language loss should not, in any way, be downplayed (Canada, 1996). Children speak very few of the endangered Indigenous languages at home in much of Canada. It is therefore reasonable to expect that these languages will be close to extinction within a generation (Canada, 2002). Linguisticide is being committed (Pennycook, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) with Indigenous languages worldwide. This is a legacy of colonization, and according to James Crawford (1998):

> Language death seldom occurs in communities of wealth and privilege, but rather to the dispossessed and disempowered. Indigenous people are one of the most dispossessed and disempowered of all contemporary groups, so it is little wonder, then, that much of their linguistic and cultural heritage has already been extinguished, or is currently facing extinction. (p. 2)

This linguistic and cultural genocide is happening in the province of Alberta, Canada, where we live. The languages under threat are Cree, Dene Sutline, Dene Tha, Dene Za, Kainai, Siksika, Pikuni, Nakota, Saulteaux, and Michif. Hare (2005) cautions that, "if language transmits culture, then any interruption to language continuity would result in a break to aboriginal culture" (p. 252). In Alberta, the languages are dying, also placing the cultural and Indigenous knowledge systems inherent in the languages at great risk. Language and cultural identity are central to a people. Taiaiake Alfred (2005) elaborates on this: "Given that languages are the repositories of particular understandings and patterns of knowledge that shape the way people see the world, believe, and live their lives, language is in fact the only true source of distinctiveness among group identities" (p. 246).

As researchers and writers of this article, we see ourselves as language warriors and advocates. We are Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars who believe it is important to acknowledge our position to our readers. We are members of the larger community in which this program was nested and we participated daily in this project with these girls over two years. While this paper is our interpretation and we are not suggesting it as the absolute truth, we can only write it from our collective personal experience as knowledge. As Brant Castellano (2000) elucidates in the example of the James Bay Cree Elder speaking at an injunction hearing who is asked to swear that he would tell the truth, the Elder replies, "I can't promise to tell you the truth. I can only tell you what I know" (p. 25). We acknowledge that we are not young Indigenous youth and hence cannot be considered insiders to their experience; thus, this account is our interpretation. Brant Castellano (2000) also reminds us that "immunity from corrective influence renders suspect any outsider interpreting insider knowledge and, indeed any writer whether a member of the community or not. Writing things up gives authority to a particular view and a particular writer" (p. 31). In this case, it is a combined perspective as we have constructed it.

Goals: Tanisi kawi'isicikeyak

The goal of our initiative was to provide young women with opportunities to be warriors. Alfred (2005) describes a warrior as one who has a "courageous way of being in the world" (p. 19) and fights to connect herself to her cultural sources of "goodness and power" (p. 20). He states that such sources come from one another and from culture (Alfred, 2005). To access the strengths of their culture, warriors are able to "confront fear" and "free themselves from the grip of colonialism" (p. 20). As they confront fear and

fight for freedom, "warriors understand the need to refuse any further disconnection from their heritage and the need to reconnect with the spiritual bases of their existences as Onkwehonwe" (p. 22). Such a spiritual reconnection can be achieved by learning language and listening to Elders.

In an effort to assist the young warriors of the YWCL in their fight to regenerate themselves and their people culturally, we provided them with opportunities not only to reconnect to their heritage, but also to be courageous leaders; through experiences that require courage, these young women will gradually gain the skills to fight for cultural regeneration throughout adulthood. We aimed to provide the young women with experiences to reconnect to their heritage, "give expression to Aboriginal philosophy, world views and social relations" (Brant Castellano, 2000, p. 23), and be courageous leaders. The YWCL strove to present the young women with ways to (a) develop their leadership skills in a fun, cooperative, and caring environment; (b) learn basic conversational Cree and recognize the importance of Indigenous language revitalization; (c) learn about and be strengthened by traditional First Nations values and practices; (d) explore Indigenous knowledge systems through immersion and Elders' teachings; (e) practice the values of respect and responsibility in a culturally affirming manner; (f) realize and nurture their many strengths and talents by exploring creative theatre, carpentry, and digital technologies; and (g) learn how to use these strengths to benefit themselves and others. These objectives were shared with the young women in the following YWCL belief statement:

Young Aboriginal Women/*Iyiniwoskinîkiskwewak*
Fun: *môcikihtâ!*
Cooperative: *wîcihtâso!*
Caring: *kisewâtisi!*
Respectful: *kisteyihta!*
Responsible: *nâkateyihta!*
Strong: *sohkeyimo!*
Talented: *nakacîhtâ!*

Essential and Contributing Members of our Communities (Mâmawi-owîcihtâsowin)

To strive to actualize this belief statement, we wanted these young women to have one foot solidly grounded in their ancestral ways and the other in the contemporary world. These youth were therefore "tied in meaningful ways to their heritage" (Alfred, 2005, p. 134), all the while exploring the benefits of today's contemporary world. Ultimately, they have carried out their "right and responsibility to be different from the mainstream society" (p. 134) by viewing their culture and language as bases for navigating the modern world. In our case, they made many connections among the spheres, as we will discuss in this article.

The Young Indigenous Women: Iyiniwoskinîkiskwewak:
We invited the daughters, nieces, and granddaughters of our adult summer students at CILLDI. They came from across western and northern Canada, urban areas, and reservations or Métis settlements. Over two years, the 18 participants ranged in age from 11 to 18. They came from Edmonton, Beaumont, Hobbema, Chateh, and Wetaskiwin in Alberta; and from Tulita in the Northwest Territories. All of the young women are of First Nations descent, and their families hold the traditional spirituality and values of their culture in high esteem. Their mothers and grandmothers are language advocates and have chosen to attend summer courses where their languages are honoured and celebrated. These youth brought this family support and understanding to their new endeavours.

These young women came to the University for 10 days to become immersed in Cree language and culture, take part in creative drama, explore digital and computer technologies, and work on woodworking projects. We decided to focus on young women for this project because we see the women around us, in our area of language work, as the keepers of the language (Zapeda & Hill, 1991). In addition, women are responsible for most of the child rearing, and they are the ones who introduce children to their mother tongue. We believe that young women are the key to ensuring that future generations acquire these languages.

Women Chiefs: Iskwewak Okimakanak
It takes a strong person to demonstrate the knowledge, leadership, and language expertise to present such an intensive language program, and we were very fortunate to recruit very talented women. Over the two summers we had three teachers, two Elders, and several area specialists. The Cree instructors, Donna Paskemin, Dorothey Thunder, and Sheila Kennedy, taught Cree and traditional cultural values and used immersion strategies for more than half of each day. They also integrated Cree language into the carpentry, drama, and digital technology components during the remainder of the day. For example, when the young women were making posters to illustrate appropriate and inappropriate dress for the carpentry shop, the teachers helped them to write the posters in Cree and English: "She's Ready to Work *(nohte-atoskew)*" and "She's Not Ready to Work *(namoya nohte-atoskew)*." They also offered everyday kinds of activities, including trips on the light rail transit (LRT) system and lunches in the University cafeteria and local restaurants, in a bilingual manner. Each day, the instructors demonstrated to the girls how to be smart young Indigenous women in these new contexts.

The cultural knowledge and lived experiences of these Cree instructors were rich and authentic. Donna Paskemin is a Plains Cree woman who was raised on the Sweetgrass Reserve in Saskatchewan. She credits her learning to her parents. She was an Assistant Professor in Native Studies at the Uni-

veristy of Alberta for seven years and also has experience as an elementary teacher. Dorothey Thunder is a Plains Cree woman from Little Pine First Nation, Saskatchewan. She is currently an instructor of Cree in the Faculty of Native Studies program at the University of Alberta and is working on a Master's degree in Linguistics. Sheila Kennedy is also from Little Pine First Nation and currently teaches Cree immersion in a large public school district. All three women participate regularly in Cree ceremonies, including Sundances, and are well versed in traditional ways.

Our Elders, M C and M R, are highly respected women, well recognized artists, and fluent and literate in their Indigenous language and knowledge systems. They taught the young women how to make traditional and contemporary artwork by using a range of mediums, such as leather, fabric, paint, beads, and string. While constructing these cultural items with the girls, the Elders built relationships of trust and guidance, modelled their actions, and, in a traditional manner, told stories to the girls. Hare (2005) stresses the importance of storytelling: "Stories are passed down from one generation to another, telling us who we are, identifying our places in this world, and directing us how to live in a respectful way" (p. 257). The Elders incorporated the medicine wheel, sacred colours, symbols, directions, and underlying belief systems into their teaching and storytelling. Brant Castellano (2000) explains that:

> The medicine wheel is one of the most powerful instruments currently used to convey the holistic character of aboriginal knowledge and experience. The circle, representing the circle of life, contains all experience, everything in the biosphere—animal, vegetable, mineral, human, spirit—past, present and future. Two lines mark the quadrants of the circle. The point in the centre where they intersect symbolizes a balance point. (p. 30)

The Elders also said prayers and talked to the girls about spirituality. Willie Ermine (1995), a Cree scholar who has written about Indigenous epistemology, notes that "the rituals and ceremonial observances still practiced by our Old Ones in our tribal communities compel us to make more inward journeys...[and] enable the children of those early spiritual explorers to advance the synthesized understanding of inner space" (pp. 105 106). Our young women were very fortunate to have access to the wisdom and integrity of these strong women warriors as they explored ways to value the inner spaces that Ermine discusses.

The Program: Isicikewin

The program focused daily on developing the young women's self-esteem, pride, and respect for self and others by acknowledging and learning the cultural values using the Cree language. They also learned conversational Cree, songs, and prayers. In this camp, the young women had many new opportunities to encourage and inspire one another, recognize and acknowledge their own abilities, learn Cree, experience authentic cultural practices, and gain self-confidence.

The Cree immersion program began each morning with introductions, appropriate protocols, and simple conversational strategies. The instructors included a range of teaching methods to have the girls acquire some Cree vocabulary and basic structures. They used total physical response (TPR) and accelerated language learning as language teaching methods, as these would support novice learners if done daily with repetition. The instructors spoke to each other in Cree so that the girls would have the maximum opportunity to hear the Cree language in authentic ways over this short amount of time. They used books, visuals, pictures, artifacts, photos, songs, and TPR stories. They tried to make the morning classes as "Cree rich" as possible.

Teaching about leadership was another major goal which can be challenging to implement. The teachers developed the program belief statement and used it in their daily teaching. They worked very hard to demonstrate these beliefs to the girls through their daily activities. Care, respect, and responsibility were at the core of their work. It was not without challenges, however. For example, on one day an iPod® went missing, and the leaders took on a group process of resolution. Initially, there were anger and hard feelings among the girls, which they discussed in a talking circle. They talked about honour and respect, and the group worked through a process of restitution. It was a difficult day that eroded the group solidarity, which they then had to rebuild. The girls and leaders all worked at resolving the conflict and figuring out how to rebuild trust. This is not easy in a camp, family, or community, but the lessons learned potentially have multiple applications to the girls' lives ahead. A contemporary world has many challenges, and we hope that having the experience and wisdom to look to cultural values as a way to resolve problems will serve the young women well in the future.

The YWCL provided a space where the instructors and Elders shared authentic linguistic and cultural teachings without hesitation. Because all of the young women held ancestral Indigenous worldviews, there was no need to water down the teachings (which often happens in mainstream school systems) to avoid offending those who do not hold similar beliefs. In teaching the Cree word for Sundance, one instructor shared her experiences of the Sundance, which prompted one of the participants to share her experience of using sweetgrass to rid her house of negative spirits. These stories gave the young women an in-depth understanding of the cultural significance of the Cree words that they were learning and how these understandings could impact their journey as Indigenous warriors and keepers of their language. As Alfred (2005) points out, "It is truly necessary to regenerate not only the words but the kinds of experiences that shaped and built our ancestors' understanding of those words" (p. 198). The ancestral and cultural experiences that the participants shared during this time gave the young women a unique opportunity to recognize the powerful

meanings that language carries and to think about ways that they can try their best to live them out.

A Warrior: Okichita

We believed that we achieved our main leadership objective through the many activities that we offered to the young women. They really worked hard at taking on new challenges in the immersion class, theatre, computer lab, and woodwork shop. Leadership requires courage—courage to try something new, courage to take risks, and courage to step forward and encourage others to follow. The experiences in each of these learning challenges provided the young women with many opportunities to be courageous warriors. Alfred (2005) affirms that "willpower and determination are the elements of courage" (p. 52). Spending their days immersed in these new endeavours was no easy feat for these young women; there were times when they felt discouraged or unsure of their abilities. However, this did not seem to hinder their progress for long. We were amazed by their willpower and determination, and by how they pulled together as a group. If one was struggling, another close by offered encouragement and help. Alfred (2005) comments:

> Onkwehonwe, like all warriors in battle, will realize [their] collective courage from sharing in others' wells of strength and determination and building up [their] collective store of mental and emotional strength by supporting each other in struggle and achieving victories along the way to [their] goals. (p. 52)

The iskwewak okimakanak (women chiefs) were there to show them that they, too, were willing to take on these new challenges as they worked side by side with the girls in each of these settings. Alfred (2005) suggests that courage can be generated when, "leaders inspire and motivate [people] to persevere when [they] feel like quitting the fight" (p. 52). In one instance, when one young woman was having difficulty grasping Cree language concepts, another quietly pulled her chair up beside her and guided her friend along as the teacher continued to teach. By helping one another to achieve success, these young women were able to develop their leadership skills. Similarly, in the computer room, theatre, and carpentry workshop, some were confident and some were hesitant. Their immersion instructors were also novices in these contexts, and demonstrated their courage to the girls, so that together they built a kind of collective spirit, trying and figuring it out.

Although the participants did not leave the program speaking fluent Cree, they were exposed to an atmosphere in which their peers and instructors were excited about the Cree language. These young women were positively influenced by the instructors, who continually conveyed the importance of Indigenous languages and the need to keep these languages alive. Most of the young women belonged to families and communities in which some members still speak an Indigenous language.

By developing an appreciation for the importance of Indigenous languages through these new experiences, we believe that the young women will make a more overt effort to continue to learn their language. Some of their newly acquired linguistic competencies are discussed in the sections that follow. Several young women left the YWCL having set goals for their future careers in an Indigenous language. For example, one participant expressed her desire to become a fluent Cree speaker by learning Cree from her mother, and she wanted to become a Cree language professor at a university. Another said she was going to approach the Indigenous language speakers in her family when she got home to learn from them. Overall, it was evident to us that their experiences in the YWCL left the young women keenly aware of the cultural treasure of relatives who speak an Indigenous language and to see a range of possibilities for themselves.

Stories: Acimowina

As a way to build some group cohesion and support early in the program, the girls took part in two half days of creative drama and storytelling, led by a very talented bilingual Métis actor whom the young women would have seen on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, offering immediate currency with them. In this forum, the young women had an opportunity to work on team building, trust exercises, theatre games, acting, and story collection. The workshop also focused on building the young women's self-esteem and recognizing the importance of story in learning. Drama is a powerful teaching tool, and the girls responded very eagerly. They had fun, laughed, and took on new roles. Brant Castellano (2000) explains that:

> Traditional stories were the primary medium used to convey aboriginal knowledge. Stories inform and entertain; hold up models of behaviour; and they sound warnings....They teach without being intrusive, because the listener can ignore the oblique instruction or apply it to the degree he or she is ready to accept, without offence. Stories of personal experience can be understood either as reminiscences or as metaphors to guide moral choice and self examination. (p. 31)

The actor talked to the young women about taking control of their lives and being responsible for their own actions. She told them about herself and how she came to be an actor. She also introduced the girls to her story, "The Secret and the Four Agreements," which was an example of different ways to start to change a way of thinking. She encouraged them to move forward, give themselves credit for what they could do, and look for strengths in themselves and others. She also led them through the experience of hearing others' stories as a valid source of knowledge. As Brant Castellano (2000) suggests, "Aboriginal knowledge is said to be personal, oral, experiential, holistic and conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language" (p. 25).

Computers: Piwaspik-makonikan

The computer technology portion of the program provided the young women with opportunities to be courageous and adventuresome. They had access to digital cameras, video cameras, and computers with a range of software. They were introduced to numerous digital and Web 2.0 tools, and worked on projects in small groups. One of the platforms introduced was VoiceThread®, which one group used to tell about their lives and their family stories, recording them in both Cree and English. With the expertise of a technology teacher, they compiled these recordings and saved them to compact discs to take home. Another group took on the task of composing creative digital texts. Creating their digital stories involved numerous processes: cooperation, discussion, decision making, respectful listening, and reflection. In their story, they used Photo Booth® to videotape a short conversation in both Cree and English. Another group took digital photos of their art work and art, and created a slide show that involved music and transitions. Another selected a digital photo from those they had taken and created a Cree greeting card. One group also developed their technology skills by using digital photos, interviewing each other, recording their voices, and developing an original loop of digital music together to create a radio podcast.

Making an iMovie® was another popular choice. The central idea was that the young women would develop a story on what makes a good leader. Making their movie involved many steps, beginning with a brief idea brainstorming sharing session whereby one of the girls wrote suggestions on a whiteboard. The girls then worked in pairs, planned their ideas, and, with the support of their instructors, went outside to film their footage. They edited the video footage, created titles and transitions, and recorded voiceovers, music, and the final credits. Their iMovie® creations were from three to five minutes in duration. This process was challenging for the girls because few had previous experience with these new Web 2.0 literacies. It was a remarkable accomplishment, and they were very proud of their work. The reminiscent nature of reflecting on their experiences over the few weeks of preparing for these digital forums helped to build a sense of community and illustrated the young women's positive experiences in the program. In addition to the digital work, the teachers led a very engaging discussion on Internet safety, a topic highly relevant to these young women. They gained some expertise in a range of safety issues, both real and virtual. Awareness of the need for safety is extremely important for young women, and perhaps even more particularly so in the current and rapidly growing digital world. These girls will need to be savvy and smart as they manoeuvre their way into the digital world safely.

At the end of the program, the young women asked to show their digital products to their mothers, friends, grandmothers, Elders, and the staff. It was a very special and rewarding experience for everyone to see their

work on the big screen in a university theatre, with excellent sound and a very appreciative audience. The young women's presentations were varied and ranged from biography, to documentary, to fiction. They saw their own ideas come alive with these "cool" contemporary tools, and they saw ways of incorporating the Indigenous language and culture on these new platforms. They seemed to have a great deal of fun experimenting with what could have been seen as new and intimidating technology and digital tools. Some were nervous about the aspect of public speaking, but they all took it in stride and left feeling both empowered by the experience and proud of their accomplishments. At this closing event, with the entire CILLDI community present, the young women were very proud, and we were all proud of them.

The young women were encouraged to visit the Elders of their communities/reserves upon returning to their home communities to begin to explore traditional stories passed on from one generation to another. Aboriginal traditional teachings and stories will help these young women and future generations to maintain their own culture, language, and identities. They will also be beneficial for these young women during their adult lives, should they choose the arts, entertainment, teaching, and/or almost any other career in the future.

Woodworking: Mistikokan-ositawin

The trades exploration component gave the young women an opportunity to spend four afternoons learning carpentry skills and workplace manners from the staff at a women's trades training centre. A journeywoman cabinet maker with 12 years of experience and a retired shop teacher who had taught for 30 years connected well with the young women. They participated in safety training sessions before entering the woodworking workshop. Here they sawed, hammered, and drilled their way to confidence in their abilities to succeed in an undertaking that is typically reserved for male carpenters. These young women, each wearing work clothes, goggles, hearing protection, and a full tool belt, constructed their own hardwood box, complete with smooth, bevelled edges. Thoroughly excited about their experience of exploring carpentry, the young women were most proud of their ability to use the mitre saw. One participant remarked, "It was scary to use the mitre saw, but I did it and I felt proud." Not only did the young women independently construct their own boxes and learn how to use various tools to complete simple house repairs, but they also learned that they are strong young women, capable of learning new and complex skills, regardless of obstacles such as gender stereotyping.

The following pictures *[Figures 1 and 2]* tell a great deal about the young women's experience and show their courage in what could have been a very intimidating environment. We understand what Alfred (2005) means when he talks about transformation to potentially include claiming

a space, such as a woodworking shop in the experience of these girls, as revolutionary. We also believe, as he suggests, that "the truly revolutionary goal is to transform disconnection and fear into connection and to transcend colonial culture and institutions" (p. 23). Perhaps these girls were not transcending this sphere, but they truly transformed it and, in the process, transformed themselves as being capable of many things in this short time span. They held and manoeuvred the woodworking tools in a very confident and connected manner, and faced their own fears as they worked. Their assertive stances and their continually increasing comfort and confidence radiated in the shop daily, as shown in the following pictures:

What the Girls Had to Say: Iskewksisak otitewiniwa

Overall, the girls seemed pleased with their accomplishments and the program. They thanked the Elders, instructors, and sponsors. The following comments reflect their thoughts and speak for themselves:

Without this program I would probably be at home eating chips and on the computer and probably bored. So thank you.

Doing the Young Women's Circle of leadership, I learned the importance of helping others. The YWCL has taught me that leadership affects many aspects of my life as well as the lives of others. Responsibility and respect have been a huge part also, whether it be respecting others or taking action for your mistakes. For the great help I would like to say thank you, Teneke. Thank you to the leaders for giving us an opportunity to explore and share new knowledge.

At Woman Building Futures, it was a good experience to use the tools. It was scary to use the big mitre saw, but I did it and it made me feel good.

This year I am not only going into grade eight, but I am going with a new experience behind me. During the YWCL I learned the importance of belonging, tipeyihtakosi, because everyone actually did make me feel at home. I had made lots of friends and had lots of fun. It made me feel like I did belong.

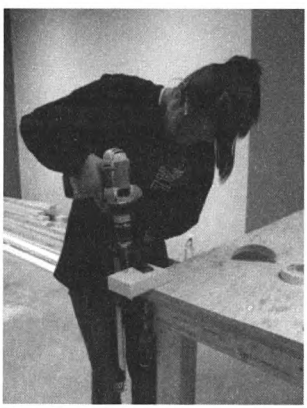

Figure 1. Woodworking Participant

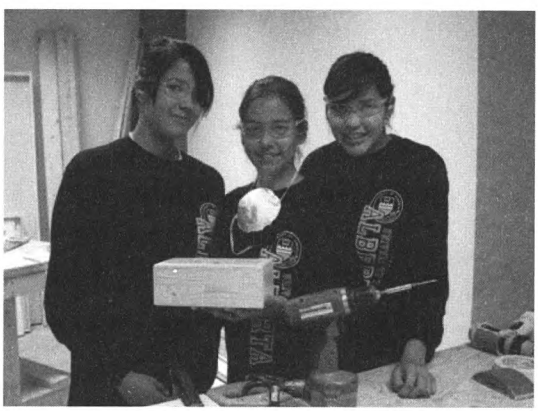

Figure 2. Proud Woodworking Participants

Conclusion: Iskowac-itwewin

In summary, we believe that these young women will be the language warriors of the future. With some considering careers in university-level Cree-language instruction, academics, or the trades, one thing is for certain: eighteen young warriors have left keenly aware that they are vital keepers of their language and cultural knowledge. Returning to their home communities, these warriors are "heeding the teachings of the ancestors and carrying a creed that has been taken from the past and remade into a powerful way of being in the new world" (Alfred, 2005, p. 29). These young women saw themselves as essential and contributing members of this community *(Mâmawi-owîcihtâsowin)*, who were proud of their culture and stood confidently when faced with challenges and problems. We hope that they will take a leadership role for the next generation of Indigenous people and heed Alfred's words to "regenerate ourselves culturally" (p. 20).

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