

REPATRIATION:

Empowerment through (Re)Connection

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MY NAME IS JORDAN COBLE. My Okanagan name is *çris*, which translates as Kingfisher. I am the cultural and operations administrator for Westbank First Nation (WFN) in the Sncəwips Heritage Museum.

I'm really happy that the Royal BC Museum is taking these steps forward in making sure that our path together is going in the right direction. We're starting off on a good footing, I believe. We have had a history of not so happy occurrences, not so happy events. But these next 150 years will be ones to celebrate. I know that in my heart because I see it in my children. I see it and I hear it in the language that they speak. I hear it in the pride that they take, knowing their dad works in a museum. And you know, I never thought in a million years that my daughter would be, like, “Can I come to work with you? I like your work.” And I was, like, that's awesome, you know, when you have children being so embrasive of the museum world, of what they can do and the potential of what we can do, the changes that we can make to make sure that First Nations, Aboriginal, Inuit, and Métis people are represented properly, respectfully, and according to their protocols. This puts a path for us that sets a bright future for all peoples, for all relationships, Indigenous, non-Indigenous. When you understand and create awareness about each other, it makes relationship building that much easier. It makes the idea of asking questions that much easier. And I think that's where we need to go, to make sure that people are comfortable to ask the questions and that we empower our young people to make sure that they are able to respond to those questions.

We have reached a remarkable point in our journey. Repatriation has moved from being a word, a concept, an idea, to being a call to action. There is now a sense of urgency. We, as Okanagan people, we as Syilx

and sqilx^w people, we've understood this for a long time. My struggle at my museum is that in our culture, when people pass away, when they go to the spirit world, we give away their items, their belongings, or we burn them and allow them to go on their journey with them, which makes it really difficult for us to have a museum of tangible items. And so, in a way – and please know that I'm saying this with a grain of salt – museums have done a really great job in preserving these for us, so that we can have a collection of items to share with people.

Yesterday my staff welcomed a visitor to the museum who was looking for early or pre-contact information about the Okanagan people. We always say, "Well, you go and talk to the people." We are very proud of our museum, but our museum actually exists out there. It is the land, it is the people who lived through the experiences, and so if you want to hear that history, to know that history, you have to talk to the people. But this gentleman was adamant: "I need something tangible, I need something in writing, I need something that I can look at and see and take a picture of." And we're trying to build that bridge between our perspectives, our worldviews, how we perceive history and how we can share that with people and how we can create a better understanding as to where that history lives, how it has existed over the years, and the importance of our oral history that our elders and our ancestors have preserved. That's a gift. Because our elders have this amazing ability to remember every little detail of every aspect of what they have gone through and what their ancestors have gone through. We have to honour that, we have to cherish that. And that becomes part of our collections.

Our museum is based on the vision of our community. In 2005 we acknowledged that there was a need to preserve and honour our cultural items, our history, our language. We put a survey out to our community and asked them, "How do we want to do this?" The resounding feedback was either a museum or a cultural centre or a combination of both, and that's what we started moving forward with. WFN hired Gayle Lyman and she started the repository for us and also the museum. It really started out of Community Services in our community core. It was a little closet, basically. That started a little spark, and that spark turned into a more formal space, a formal repository office. And then, in 2014 – after setting the foundation, repatriating some of the items that belonged to us, collecting new items that were out there that we needed to bring in, and then getting buy-in from community members to share – we started our museum.

The issue that we face with that museum is space. We're very humble in how we approach acknowledging our history, acknowledging our collection items. We focus on preserving them, not just according to best museum practices but also according to our best knowledge of our protocols and the ways that we handle human remains, how we handle artefacts as if they are living people. They have spirit to them. When people come into our museum, what we emphasize is that everything around us is alive. The canoes, the pictographs, the items that have been celebrated over the years – they have life to them. And so we want to breathe life into them and allow them to breathe back into us that life, that sacredness, and that honouring that we have in our museum.

What we want to do moving forward is grow. We want a bigger space; we want to have more collection items. It starts with our people first and foremost but it also starts with repatriating. We want to make sure that those museums, those collectors that are out there who have items that belong in our communities, in our Nation, are aware of our space and the important role that we provide. We also struggle with creating awareness within our own Nation. Westbank First Nation is only one community of the eight member communities that make up the entire Nation. Making people aware that we have repository status and that we have a space for these items to come back to is very important, so that we can receive that support throughout the Nation. Moving forward it will help with building relationships with larger museums, too, with other organizations and reaching our hands across the seas to make sure that those items that are not necessarily on our own Turtle Island here can find their way back to their homes.

I want to share my own personal story in the museum. I'll always remember my very last day of university classes. A young lady did a presentation on a small museum out to the east and she was talking about this museum in such high regard, saying it was so nice, it was great, and they even had a little exhibition for First Nations people, they had artefacts there and write-ups on those artefacts. And I was like, "Oh, that's nice." And I asked her, "How did they represent that? Was there someone there from that Nation to speak on those pieces?" And she said, "Well, no." I said, "Well, did they acknowledge that those people are still there?" And she said, "Well, no." And I was like, "So basically the museum killed off the people in that territory." I felt really bad because I'm usually a pretty nice guy but I was being really harsh with her. "Why are you being so happy about this? It's really not a great thing." And so it created that awareness for her but it also created that

awareness for myself. I walked out of that class saying, "I'm never going to work for a museum in my life." And I'm not joking: I'm walking to my car from that classroom and I get a call from Gayle Lyman and she says, "Hey, do you want to help us create a museum?" And I was like, "Are you serious? I just finished proclaiming that I'm never going to do that." But then I said, "You know what? We can do this. I'll be happier to do this, though, if we make it a living museum. By living I mean acknowledging that our culture, our people, our language, our items are alive. They have spirit to them." And she said, "Okay, we can make that happen." I said, "Okay, when do I start?" And that's how I got into the museum world.

As a community museum, we have a long way to go. We're very new in the game. We're still creating awareness within our own community that we exist. We're still creating awareness around our own Nation that we exist. But we're very proud of our space and we are empowered by what we've done politically. We want to make sure that people understand the importance of museums, the importance of repositories, and the importance of keeping our items in our Nation for our children and our future generations to learn from.