

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KIM ANDERSON

I am a Cree/Métis woman, living in Guelph for the past eight years. When I first moved to the city, I wondered how I would be able to practice my spirituality. What was most important was finding a site where I could conduct ceremonies. As Native people, we don't need much in the way of bricks and mortar; our church is the land. This means that in order to practice our spirituality, we need access to sacred outdoor space, free of interference or distractions.

Many of our ceremonies take place outside because of the necessity to be in direct contact with the natural environment. In the sweat lodge, for example, participants sit on the ground around a pit where hot stones from a fire adjacent to the lodge are placed. The lodge has been equated to the womb, and the birth and renewal one feels from engaging in a sweat lodge ceremony are connected to the participant's relationship with "Mother Earth." Another ceremony that is increasingly popular is the full moon ceremony. This ceremony is done outside on a full moon, where Aboriginal women can pray, sing and talk in the presence of their oldest relative, "Grandmother Moon." Prayers in various Aboriginal languages often end with "All My Relations," the significance being that we must foster good relationships with all of creation in order to maintain mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellness and balance. In order to do this, we need to spend time in the company of all our relations; we need to go out on the land.

The land is what teaches us about cycles, birth, death and renewal. In order to understand and engage in a spiritual way with this knowledge, we must spend time in prayer and meditation in the quiet outdoors. This type of contact with the land allows us

to renew ourselves and give thanks. In the ten years I have been doing full moon ceremonies, I have been out in all types of weather to spend time under the full moon. This has taught me respect and gratitude for the earth and her seasons. This is not something I could have learned or appreciated from ceremonial practice that takes place indoors, or in populated, noisy, or well-lit areas.

Not long after my arrival in Guelph, I began to inquire about where I might find land that would be appropriate for practicing my spirituality. Someone told me about a sweat lodge on the Ignatius property that a group of Aboriginal people from Toronto had been using for a number of years. I made contact with the Jesuits and inquired whether there would be a space where I could lead ceremonies specific to Aboriginal women. The Jesuits were incredibly open and generous, taking the time to walk the property with me to find an appropriate spot. Since that time, I have been leading full moon ceremonies on the Jesuit property, in the company of Aboriginal students and other Aboriginal women from the city of Guelph.

I am extremely grateful to the Jesuits for preserving this sacred space on the edge of our city, and especially for their generous sharing of it with the greater community. This space is one of the things that makes Guelph a great place to live, and I think other cities could learn from our example. Urban dwellers benefit enormously from having easy access to nature, land, and sacred outdoor space, and the Ignatius Centre offers this to residents of Guelph and beyond. Urban dwellers also benefit from commercial space, but commercial space is much more common. I could move to any city in the country and immediately find a place to shop, but finding a shared public space to practice Aboriginal

ceremonies without interference would be much more difficult. Spaces like this are all too rare, and we must preserve those that we have.

I also belong to the community shared agriculture/farm that sits on the Ignatius property, just above the site of the proposed development. This, too, is a significant part of my health and spiritual well-being. Within minutes of my city home, I can take my children to work on the farm that feeds them. This allows me to teach them about cycles of growth and change, about giving thanks, and about deepening our relationships with the natural environment that supports us. These are spiritual principles that are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world, and we learn this by working the land that produces our food. This, too, is ceremony.

The proposed commercial development adjacent to the Ignatius property is alarming to me because of the noise and light pollution that is sure to follow. Last spring, I did a grieving ceremony which required me to sit outside on the land for four days and four nights. I was able to do this ceremony because of the silence and isolation offered by the property. My grieving involved listening to the sounds of the environment around me. Every day sounds from the "outside" world, such as car doors slamming, honking, or human dialogue would have greatly interfered with my ability to grieve. Looking at the night sky was also an important part of my grieving -- and is a significant part of full moon ceremonies. Light pollution interferes with the ability to see the night sky clearly, and is distracting to the mind and the spirit.

I am aware that the proposed commercial site is down the hill and in view and earshot of the community shared agriculture/farm fields. This pollutes the natural environment that is now ideally suited for teaching the value of living in balance with,

and by the grace of the land. There are few environments where we can teach our children such values, as consumer values hem them in on every side. This site is but one example of how consumer culture knows no boundaries. I am writing this statement in the hope that we can yet protect those spaces that we hold sacred.

I am also concerned about how the proposed commercial development may threaten the privacy currently offered by the Ignatius property. As Aboriginal people, we have come through a colonial history of having our ceremonies and spiritual practices banned and outlawed. We have been accused of practicing “witchcraft” by outsiders who did not understand our spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. Beginning in the late 1800s, our Elders had to go underground to maintain our spiritual traditions, and only in the last forty years have we begun to practice these traditions once again without fear. Because of our history, our spiritual revival has been cautious and slow, and there are many new threats to our spiritual practice. We must now contend with “New Age” appropriation of our traditions, and cultural appropriation has resulted in stealing songs, dances and ceremonies for inappropriate use. For all these reasons, we need to have privacy in the form of space where we can revive and practice our traditions without interference.

Many of our ceremonies involve singing sacred songs. We can sing these freely and openly in a natural or sacred environment. When we sing these songs on the Ignatius property, we know we are in a sacred space, and that any other people who might be listening are those who have respectfully entered into this space. I would not be able to sing freely if I knew there was a parking lot full of hundreds of people coming and going on a regular basis. This would be prohibitive and regressive, as I would feel a need to sing quietly or hide part of the ceremony.

Many Aboriginal cultures operate on the principle that we must make decisions by considering how they will impact people seven generations into the future. If we make thoughtful decisions now about what we do on the properties adjacent to the Ignatius land, “seventh generation” Aboriginal people and those from other faiths will be able to continue to practice their spirituality in this sacred place.