

Through an Indigenous Lens

A First Nations human resources professional shares her experience of working with The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army Thunder Bay Community and Residential Services have served the people of northwestern Ontario since 1917. Located in the city with the largest urban Indigenous population in Canada, 60-80 per cent of the centre's clients are Indigenous, 35 per cent of employees are Indigenous, and three per cent of employees have a spouse or child who is Indigenous. Major Doug Binner, corps ministries secretary, spoke with Kathleen Anne Sawdo, employee relations manager for the centre, about how her Indigenous heritage and Christian faith influence her life and service.

Tell me your name, where you work and what position you hold.

Gaawiin aapijii ninitaa ojibwemosii. Ninga-gagwejitoon ji ojibwemoyaan. Kanakneepahwich Migisi Manitou Equay ndizhinikaaz. Makwa niindoodem, Sabe Manitou niindoodem.

Nezaadikaang nindoonjibaa. Animkii Wajiw nindaa. Translation: I don't know how to talk Ojibwe very much. I'll try talking Ojibwe. My name is Standing Eagle Spirit Woman. Bear is my clan and Big Foot is my spirit clan. I am from Lac Des Mille Lacs First Nation. I live in Thunder Bay [Ontario].

My English name is Kathleen Anne Sawdo. I work at The Salvation Army Thunder Bay Community and Residential Services where I am the employee relations manager.

You recently received a new, additional human resource (HR) designation. Tell me what that was and how you achieve it.

I am now certified as a tribal human resource professional (THRP). This certification includes human resource management knowledge in North America and a specialization in Indigenous or tribal human resources. In tribal human resources, employment law, human rights, and occupational health and safety considerations extend to include and consider tribal laws and custom, along with state/federal and provincial/federal laws. This adds another element or

level of consideration to human resources management and organizational risk management as a whole.

I pursued this certification because as an Indigenous woman in HR, I am always translating a linear system (structure) into a circular system. What I mean by this is that as an Indigenous person, my way of thinking is circular. I understand and learn in a circular way. Mainstream HR does not always think this way, so I sought out supports to assist me in navigating a system or structure that is linear. I am the second person in Canada to hold this certification, and the only person in Ontario.

How does this additional credential impact your leadership role? Does it make a difference in the way you serve the clients and staff at your centre?

As THRP certified, I have a different set of resources available to access supports and information for employees and The Salvation Army. As an Indigenous HR professional, I look at policy, procedure and legislation through an Indigenous lens, the value and significance of which is often overlooked. Our centre serves a great number of people from our community, and is also a hub for Northwestern Ontario, with 60-80 per cent of our clients being Indigenous. According to the last census, Thunder Bay has the largest urban Indigenous population in Canada, and is currently a place with high racial tensions. This makes my THRP certification a definite asset to the organization, our employees and those we serve. Because of the history of Canada and Indigenous relations, as well as the history of the Army's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action, it is important for employees and those we serve to see an Indigenous person in a leadership role.

Why is this so important?

The largest growing demographic in Canada is the Indigenous population, and it is estimated that within the next 10 years, approximately one in every four employees in a workplace will be Indigenous. At Thunder Bay Community and Residential Services, 35 per cent of our employees are Indigenous, and three per cent of our employees have a spouse or child who is Indigenous. As the employee relations manager, it is my responsibility to ensure employees have access to

supports and tools to perform their job duties. In order to do your job well, you need a healthy balanced work environment.

For example, an employee in our centre who requires a medical leave of absence will normally access benefits, sick bank time, the Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), and potentially long-term disability or coverage by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). An Indigenous employee may have alternative supports available, such as different medical coverage, different medical funds to access and support from their First Nation. An Indigenous employee may also want to access an Elder, rather than utilizing the EFAP provided by the Army. When I come across situations like this, I support employees in navigating some complex situations so they can access supports they need. With our EFAP specifically, there are registered counsellors that are also Indigenous, and are able to provide counselling based on Indigenous worldviews. Many HR professionals are not aware of this, nor do they feel this is important to know.

With ongoing changes to legislation, we need to begin to look at being creative within The Salvation Army framework on how we support employees in maintaining a healthy and respectful workplace, and while doing so, mitigate risk to the organization as a whole. One way to do this is to begin looking at HR in a different way.

As an Indigenous person, being healthy and balanced includes the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual parts of your being, similar to the roots of The Salvation Army—soup, soap and salvation. I translate this into an understanding that soup and soap meet the physical; soup, soap and salvation meet the mental and emotional; and salvation meets the spiritual. William Booth had an understanding of what Indigenous people refer to as walking a Red Road—living in a good way and walking with Creator.

What does it mean for you to be an Indigenous person employed by The Salvation Army?

I used a traditional introduction when we started our conversation, and while some may not find it “professional,” I endeavour to always begin this way. My family clan – Bear or Makwa – means, like a mother bear protects her cubs, the Bear Clan is responsible for protecting the village. Bear Clan people are also medicine people and help people with healing. My spirit

clan—Bigfoot or *Sabe*—represents honesty, because it is closer to the Creator than humans. It is believed the *Sabe* walked among humans to remind us of the Creator's wish for us to remain true to our natural forms. The eagle, or *migisi*, represents all seven of the grandfather teachings (honesty, truth, strength, courage, wisdom, etc.) Eagles are the highest flying birds, and are seen to be near/close to Creator. *Manitou* means Creator/Spirit. I share this insight into my name so you can understand a part of why I believe that Creator (God) has brought me to where I am today. When I say my name, it reinforces that I am never alone, Creator (God) is always with me.

How does your personal faith journey intersect with your work at the Thunder Bay Community and Residential Services?

I believe Creator sends me where I need to be, and that there is a purpose. My experience so far with The Salvation Army has been good, and at the same time challenging. The Salvation Army is a wonderful organization and I have come to love and connect with the work being done. It is indeed Creator's work. Unfortunately some are offended when I say Creator instead of God, and when I pray in my traditional way, I sometimes have to do it away from others because they may get offended. I pray extra for those people. My truth in The Salvation Army is that I have met some wonderful people I can talk to, laugh with, cry with and pray with. My truth within The Salvation Army is that I am participating in the beginning of a new circle where there might just be an understanding and acknowledgment that it is good God (Creator) made me Indigenous (Anishnaabe), and he can hear my Anishinaabe (Indigenous) prayers, just the same as he can hear European prayers.