

# CARRIER SEKANI FAMILY SERVICES

## Elder Youth Mentorship Program in Northern B.C.

BY LINETTE SCHUT

**T**hroughout much of Northern B.C., many First Nations children who are in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development have been separated from their home communities, causing them to lose touch with their heritage and culture. Although many efforts are made to help facilitate these connections, the reality of the long distances between communities in the North makes it difficult for these children and youth to stay connected.

Carrier Sekani Family Services (CSFS) provides holistic health and wellness services through myriad different programs for Carrier and Sekani people of all ages in North Central B.C. For many years, Mary Teegee, the executive director of CSFS's Children and Family Services, had been considering ideas that would allow for a beneficial and holistic way to engage these children with their home communities and, particularly, with elders in their communities who would be able to pass on vital knowledge and culture.

In 2017, the opportunity came for the Youth Services department to implement what has now become the Elder Youth Mentorship Program. As Kayla Brownscombe, team lead for Youth Services, describes it, "We received funding for a mentorship project in which elders and knowledge holders from the community would meet regularly with the youth and do some sort of structured mentorship activity in the community."

Brownscombe reiterates the importance that these activities happen in the community, as a big part of the vision of the program is to "bring kids home" and break down common barriers that make it difficult for kids and their

caregivers to feel comfortable coming to the communities.

"We know that when kids age out [of care] they go home; that's where they want to be," says Julie Scoble, who coordinates the program. "It's good to try and have those healthy relationships for them when they do go home."

The Youth Services team piloted the program in Saik'uz First Nation, identifying the natural leaders and knowledge holders in that community, while simultaneously working with numerous agencies in the area to identify which Saik'uz children were in care throughout the greater region. The program has since expanded to the Lake Babine Nation, and, due to its great success, CSFS has plans to continue to expand it to all of their member nations throughout Carrier and Sekani territory.

The elders and children in both communities meet about twice per month, doing a variety of activities, such as ice fishing, berry picking, cooking traditional foods, and teaching the Carrier language. Barby Skaling, coordinator for the Cultural Program, has been instrumental in helping to facilitate these activities, as a knowledge holder herself, who speaks her Carrier language fluently.

The elder mentors have taken a lot of ownership of the program since the beginning. "The elders have so many ideas for how they want it to go and what they want to teach," says Scoble.



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As Brownscombe explains, "Unlike many middle-aged people who are too busy, elders have time and they want to share and they want to be involved in something." Moreover, the program has helped to address loneliness among the elderly population by providing them with an opportunity to hang out with a group of youth twice a month.

"For some of the elders, these youth were their grandkids and their families, who had not been in the community for years," she says.

This has been an unexpected blessing of the program: numerous family connections have been strengthened, and some children are getting to know their parents and grandparents. Caregivers are also becoming more comfortable in the communities, which, in turn, helps children to feel comfortable and to gain ownership of their own land and heritage.

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