# YOUTH CAN BREAK DOWN BARRIERS AND BRING BALANCE TO COMMUNITIES

**Gabrielle Fayant** is a young, Indigenous woman, originating from Fishing Lake Metis Settlement in Alberta. She spends much of her time with the Indigenous community in Ottawa, ON. Gabrielle is the co-founder of a youth-led, youth driven organization focusing on youth empowerment, who launched their first pilot program in the fall of 2014 with Digital Opportunity Trust and the City of Ottawa. Gabrielle is also the Vice-President of the Odawa Friendship Centre and sings traditional songs with the O-Town Boyz and a women's hand drum group Spirit Flowers.

It is important to engage youth in anti-discrimination work because, as cliché as it sounds, youth are our future leaders and are leading the change in the social norms of today. In order to live in a community, country and world with less hatred, we must share our knowledge of love, peace, and understanding with future generations. While discrimination can be blatant and visible, it can also be hidden, embedded in everyday lifestyles, history books, legislation, and language. In my experience, discrimination is often not evidence-based or logical, and can be based on ignorance. Sometimes it stems from misleading opinions passed down from generation to generation or something that was falsely represented in the media. In the latter case, CBC reporter Duncan McCue (2014) wrote: "An elder once told me the only way an Indian would make it on the news is if he or she were one of the 4Ds: drumming, dancing, drunk or dead.[1]" This kind of exposure has great impact on the way Canadians perceive Indigenous people. Youth need to be able to dispel these myths and recognize false information and propaganda in an attempt to advocate change.

Technology is having a significant impact on advocacy as more young people open dialogue about what they see in the news. But, we are also seeing people exposed to more violence, over-sexualized images and videos, and drugs and alcohol. Technology is changing the world very quickly, and this can be both a good and bad thing. For this reason, youth need positive role models to guide them to be successful, thoughtful, and considerate. It is possible to do well and work for the common good at the same time, and anti-discrimination work is a great example of this.

The ability to recognize discrimination is a big step in the right direction. Imagine if the entire population was able to recognize whether an action or comment was discriminatory and, therefore, be able to prevent it from happening. This is the key to stopping racism, homophobia, and gender discrimination, just to name a few. That is the world I see young people bringing us towards, the more we engage them in these issues.

In the medicine wheel teachings[2] I have learned that in the life stage of youth individuals express characteristics of being energetic, showing eagerness, and learning lessons the hard way. The most important teaching of the medicine wheel is balance, and therefore the youth stage of life, (along with childhood, adulthood, and the elderly stages) should be equally respected and recognized in order to instill balance to communities, cities, and countries. This is also necessary for policy work at the municipal level, political engagement, and

providing proper services to the public. Two key traits that all levels of government can learn from youth is a pace of change and an eagerness to help.

It is up to the youth to bring the issues and voices of those marginalized to the forefront. Democratic governments must react to the voice of the people and not the other way around. Many municipalities often don't recognize that they are operating with discrimination embedded into their policies and procedures until it is pointed out and the public takes a stand. Youth can start these movements, if they haven't already. Many social rights movements around the world have been initiated by youth and they will continue do so until youth feel heard and understood. I am reminded by my Elders that we are in the time of the 7th fire and it is said that during this time the youth will be the ones to lead change to either a time of harmony or chaos[3]. Because of traditional teachings and prophecies, it is essential that young people of all nations engage in anti-discrimination work so that we, as people, can reach that place of harmony that was talked about by our ancestors.

## NOTES

[1] McCue, Duncan. 2014. "What it takes for aboriginal people to make the news" Ottawa Citizen, January 29, 2014. Acccessed September 2, 2014. www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/what-it-takes-for-aboriginal-people-to-make-the-news-1.2514466

[2] A medicine wheel is set of teachings, which are represented in a circular structure marked by rocks, which represents the four dimensions of the human being. The Wheel represents the life journey of an individual and brings them through reflection on both the self and outside world. Medicine wheel teachings are about taking a path that is peaceful and good.

[3] You can also read more of Gabrielle's work on Urban Native Magazine at http://urbannativemag.com/?s=Gabrielle+Fayant or you can follow her on Twitter at @GabrielleFayant