THE DIALOGUES PROJECT – AN ABORIGINAL POINT OF VIEW (INTERVENTION)

Wade Grant is co-chair of The *Dialogues Project* and Counsellor with the Musqueam Indian Band which is now located at the south end of Vancouver at the mouth of the Frazer River.

ABSTRACT

Testimony of Wade Grant, co-chair of the project and councillor for the Musqueam Indian Band, from the National Metropolis Conference in 2011. A Métis himself (Chinese-Musqueam), he led discussion sessions with urban Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people and newcomers. In his testimony, he intimately sets out the reasons that prompted him to join this initiative and the experience he gained from it. He saw the *Dialogues Project* as a unique opportunity to learn and understand cultural differences, to forge relationships, to overcome prejudices and to acknowledge the similarities between different stories, personal journeys and aspirations.

"…Our traditional territory encompasses all of the city of Vancouver and much of Metro Vancouver and I was asked, as a part of the Musqueam chieftain council, to sit on the board of directors of the *Dialogues Project*, as a chair person for the dialogue sessions with the city of Vancouver. I have led the dialogue sessions between urban Aboriginals, Aboriginals and new immigrants. I'll speak a little bit about why I joined and my experience with this initiative."

As I stated, I was born in the Musqueam community, but I was very keen to join this dialogue session, because a lot of people say when they see me: "Well, you don't look native, what are you?" I'm actually part Chinese: my grandfather immigrated from China, and in our community, back in the early 20th century, there were a number of gardens, market gardens in the Musqueam community. And my grandmother fell in love with my grandfather and had my father. So I have a connection with the interaction between first nations and immigrants. We've always had that welcoming feeling, but over time, the immigrant community sort of left our community and the connection was lost. But me, growing up in the city of Vancouver, one of the most multicultural cities in the world, I always wondered; why did we lose that, why did we lose that connection with the new immigrant population? And as I went off to university, I went away from Vancouver, and I realized a lot of people don't have the opportunity, or aren't able to find an education about Aboriginal people, and vice-versa with our community. We don't go out and learn about these new communities, these new members of society coming into our country, and I think that we are losing out a lot in that aspect. So, I joined because I have that connection, but I also have another connection; my wife is an urban aboriginal, so I have a connection with the three. My wife is actually a Cree from Northern Ontario, but I met her here in the city of Vancouver. My son and my daughter are Cree, Musqueam and Chinese, so they have a very big mix. And I noticed last year during the 2010 Olympics, while I worked at the Aboriginal pavilion, that we had over 300,000 people walk through our doors, and a lot of those people were from outside Canada. And their representations of Aboriginal people are those images they see in the movies or on the television set with headdresses and drums on the prairies. What we wanted to do was address that and show that, like anyone else, Aboriginal people right across this country are very diverse; whether they are Blackfoot, Cree, Micmac, Maliseet, they have their own history and they have their own culture, and they have their own teachings. So that really piqued my interest in this project. What we wanted to do was bring together urban Aboriginals and the local First Nations: the Squamish, the Tsleil-Waututh and the Musqueam.

We wanted to bring together as many people from the new immigrant community as we could. The first part of the dialogue session was to get together and create these dialogue circles right across the city of Vancouver. We had different places where these circles would be held. One was Musqueam, one was in the downtown east side, and one was in south Vancouver. And we brought together urban Aboriginals who lived in that area, local First Nations, and the immigrant communities. They came together, told their stories, and they talked about them; and it was an opportunity for first nations to give these histories, the

histories that aren't told in the newspapers, the histories that aren't told on the television sets, the histories that aren't told in the books at the library. It's the personal histories, what these people have experienced. Not only what they've experienced, but their ancestors as well. These are the histories they wanted to share. And vice-versa: we wanted to hear from the immigrant communities about why they came to Canada, what brought them here, why they want to learn more about aboriginal people. We want to learn about their cultures. From my perspective, as a young Aboriginal person, I want to learn more about the people that live in this country, I want to be a part of the solution in bringing together all of our cultures. So when we completed that last July, I believe it was very successful: we had almost 500 people throughout these dialogue sessions come together and learn from one another. In the process of cultural exchange visits, we also wanted to go to different areas of the city, whether it be the Britannia center in east Vancouver or the Jewish community center (where we're going next week). We had one session in Musqueam, where we went on a tour of the community; we wanted to show them where we lived. We brought them to our longhouse and we shared with them some of our cultural practices. We shared with them where we gather for our winter ceremonies and wanted to show them that we are still strong culturally, but moving forward both economically and socially. We are also putting together some elders and youth initiatives, where we want to go to the elder's communities and have the elders share their stories and the youth share their stories as well. And we're creating a legacy project from this initiative, so that we can share with the rest of the people we weren't able to bring in. So we're creating a document, a book that chronicles this whole initiative, and a DVD that will share interviews and different stories with people. The total project cost almost 600,000$ over 19 months. So, like I said, we have a number of cultural exchange visits coming up, and then at the end, in July, we're looking to wrap up with a final celebration, but we want to continue this project because we feel that it's very successful. We've had a lot of great feedback, not only from the participants, but from the leaders in the aboriginal community. I'm good friend with the National Chief and I talked to him about it; he's very interested in it. Grand Chief Edward John, who's a very prominent person at the First Nation summit here, visited us once. He's actually my stepfather, so he's kept very up to date on this. We're hoping that we'll be able to generate enough interest from cities across the country, like the city of Winnipeg, where there's a tremendous aboriginal population. And we hope, too, that in the future, it grows and grows and that it's not just nine dialogue sessions, that it's hundreds of dialogue sessions across this country. It's been a great opportunity for me to learn, but it's also been an opportunity for some of the band members in my community, and some of the communities across the city, to learn about all the cultures and how much we share, how much we're not so different, we are quite alike, we have similar histories, similar pasts and similar aspirations. I want to thank Baldwin for allowing me to be a part of this, and I hope that we can spread this right across the country".

Intervention by Wade Grant
At *Aboriginal-Immigrant Relations* Round table, organized by S. Kasparian at the National Metropolis Conference in Vancouver, March 2011.