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Distinguished Alumni recipient encourages Indigenous engagement

Edmonton – Cheryl Whiskeyjack—who graduated from the Child and Youth Care program in 1995—is the recipient of MacEwan University’s Distinguished Alumni Award.

Whiskeyjack is the executive director of Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society where she helps urban Indigenous people live in two worlds: the City of Edmonton, with its particular laws and norms, and the Indigenous world of ceremonies and beliefs that have existed on this land for millennia.

“We have a community of people who have been on this land for thousands of years and sometimes they don’t feel connected to it,” says Whiskeyjack. “They feel displaced—even though they live here—so public engagement is a way to re-engage the people we serve.”

Whiskeyjack has been with Bent Arrow for 25 years and oversees 18 different programs and services. The organization’s programming connects Indigenous clients to the city around them, and helps them build skills and resilience that they can use in other parts of their lives. “People are sitting straighter in their chairs by the time they are done their program,” she added. “Community partnerships are the most important factor that allows us to work together to provide positive community services and end homelessness in our community.”

Engagement is important to Whiskeyjack’s work, even if it means she doesn’t always get her way. When the provincial government made a policy against parents co-sleeping with their newborns, Bent Arrow pushed back, arguing that co-sleeping is commonplace in many Indigenous communities. After consulting with the government, Whiskeyjack’s argument was ultimately rejected.

“But you know what? I could live with that decision because there was a process,” she said. “They still said co-sleeping isn’t allowed in programs that they fund. We didn’t change their minds, but I still felt like we had a really good dialogue and exchange. Being heard and considered can go a long way.”

Whiskeyjack will receive MacEwan University’s Distinguished Alumni Award during the spring convocation ceremonies on Thursday, June 21 at the Winspear Centre.