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On April 1, 2009, AHS brought together 12 formerly separate health entities in the province: nine geographically based health authorities (Chinook Health, Palliser Health Region, Calgary Health Region, David Thompson Health Region, East Central Health, Capital Health, Aspen Regional Health, Peace Country Health and Northern Lights Health Region) and three provincial entities working specifically in the areas of mental health (Alberta Mental Health Board), addiction (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission) and cancer (Alberta Cancer Board).
Spirit of Living
Vision of Hope

An Inspiring Storybook for Alberta's Aboriginal Youth and Communities
O Great Spirit of our Ancestors, I raise my pipe to you, to your messengers the four winds, and to Mother Earth who provides for your children. Give to us as you give to them, in love, in respect, and to be kind to each other so that they may grow with peaceful minds. Let us learn to share all the good things that you provide for us on this Earth.

- Chief Yellow Hawk

The stories and teachings presented here, on what is working to help our youth embrace life, are dedicated to our ancestors and to all of us who strive to help our young people in a climate of the past, skills for the present and direction for the future. Through all of our work, we capture the wisdom of our elders and the spirit of our youth as we create a vision of hope to inspire our people to embrace their spirit for living.

This storybook is also dedicated to the most important part of who we are regardless of our political, social or professional positions. This work is dedicated to the mother and father, grandmother and grandfather; aunt and uncle; brother and sister; friend and colleague that each of us are.

This dedication is made because the stories told are not about constituents or clients—they are about our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, our sisters and sons, our brothers and sisters. We must not forget this and must honor our sacred relationship with the storytellers in this book. The stories are a testament to this sacred relationship and how each of us working with our hearts has made a difference in the lives of those we care for and love.

This storybook was created as part of the Honouring Life: Aboriginal Youth and Communities Empowerment Strategy (AYCES), formerly known as the Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (AYSPS). In 2009, the strategy was revised to be more aligned with resilience, empowerment and holistic wellness approaches, which are more culturally appropriate in addressing risk factors of Aboriginal youth. This shift continues to focus on protective factors and building community capacity to address Aboriginal youth issues, such as suicide prevention, mental wellness, work experiences, employment opportunities, educational achievements, substance misuse, violence, and healthy lifestyles.

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Acknowledgements

CONTRIBUTORS

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Purpose of the Storybook

The purpose of this storybook is to further inspire those who have a vision of wellness for our youth, and to encourage all those involved with AYCES to remain alive with passion and commitment. The following stories, poetry and artwork have been collected from various individuals and communities throughout Alberta.

As the Creator's messengers - the four winds - bring to us different teachings, so the stories told here. Like the four winds, these stories provide us with different ways of understanding how and why storytellers' participation in their community youth initiatives made a difference in their lives. In this way, we will come to understand what is working and what is possible.

Traditionally our stories were not interpreted for us—once told, it was for each of us to find our own meaning. Whatever meaning you find, we only hope it inspires you and you act upon that inspiration. With passion and commitment that gives birth to new stories of hope.

We have chosen to place the stories within one of four themes that reflect a protective factor against suicide. The theme within each story will highlight a specific teaching. As the storytellers tell their stories of hope, we will learn how the intricate weaving of events and relationships create interconnectedness in people's lives. We will also learn how various protective factors, as described through the telling of events and relationships, have supported resiliency in many youth; increased their likelihood of making healthy choices; and helped them to stand tall in the face of many life challenges, making them true warriors.

From the stories collected, the following themes or protective factors emerged:

• Hope
• Courage
• Relationships
• Purpose/Meaning

Stories of Hope

Hope is about believing in something so much that it is. Did you know that studies have shown the risk of suicide is greater in those people who express a higher level of hopelessness than it is in those people who express a higher level of hope? This is new ground for many people. Let's explore these stories that highlight hope and the impact it can have on people.

That is great news, because the stories suggested hope is not something we can see or hear. But stories do provide us with a different perspective on our world. This is a gift we all have.

Faith – in your own beliefs
Faith – in yourself
Faith – in your family
Faith – don't let people treat you bad
Faith – just be happy you live on planet earth.

Hope and Faith

Written by: A Youth

Hope – what you do is right not wrong
Hope – don’t make the wrong decision
Hope – do what’s best for you
Hope – go get the help you need
Hope – be happy where you are
Faith – in your own beliefs
Faith – in yourself
Faith – in your family
Faith – don’t let people treat you bad
Faith – just be happy you live on planet earth.

A Proud Community

In 2002, my young handsome nephew died by suicide to the disbelief of his community and to the heartbreak of his family and friends. He left behind a little brother who looked up to him, probably even idolized him. Well, this little brother went through the same tough times in the years following his brother’s death and drinking—drugs, even quitting hockey, a sport in which he excelled. A few short years, my younger, just as handsome nephew got involved with the encouragement of some good friends in a local community play on suicide. He was very nervous, very, very nervous, but he did it. He stayed involved, participated in the play, and even spoke at the end, telling the audience through tears about his brother’s suicide.

I was proud of him. I think the whole community was proud of him. No, I am proud of him. The whole community is proud of him.
An Inspiring Poem
Written by: A Y outh

I want to sit alone with you.
I want to sit alone near the old house.
The house that stands by the river of memory.
Where voices rang out and that’s all I remember.

Because we do all things together:
All things improve even weather
Our daily meat and bread tastes better
Trees are greener, Rain is wetter
It would be better to be comforting
To be cheery, to make little joke
Or even just to say how sorry I am.

When I was past such thinking you come as a song.
When I had finished singing you come.
When the sun has just passed you were my evening star.

What is Hope?
Told by: An Elder

We talk about having hard times, we talk about loss, and then we talk about something good. The daughter that I lost, she was just a little girl; she was three and a half at the time. I was diagnosed with colitis; I was told I had six months to live. And there I was trying to look after my kids. I had five kids. It was in the spring, so you know how dandelions bug everybody; we have to get rid of these dandelions.

Well to me, dandelions are beautiful. So I went outside of my house—all the kids were playing outside in the morning, and I was in as much pain, I just stood there. There was a bumble bee, so real to this day, every bit of that comes to my mind as I'm sitting here.

This bumble bee was flying around me and I was listening to it, and I thought to myself, this time next year I won't be here. Just then my little girl came running to me with a whole hand of broken dandelions, and she said, "Mommy I'm going to give these flowers to you." I took them, I was holding them and right there—I don't know how long I stood there—I was thinking about my poor kids and with my whole being I asked the creator, "Let me live to raise my children or take me now so they'll forget me."

At that time, I will always remember carrying that handful of broken dandelions into the house. I put some water in a bowl and I remember later on, when she came back in, she said, "Mommy, my flowers." "They were all broken up." "No, Mommy, they were all beautiful." "I believe we're always taken care of, no matter what, through the power of the creator if you really believe."
This story comes from a woman who knows all too well how suicide affects everyone. As a young child, she lost two uncles to suicide, and though she did not fully understand suicide at the time, it was the sadness of her father that hurt her deeply. Today, working as a member of the AYCES Committee and as a community member, she tells us of finding hope in the darkness:

Many days and nights, I often wonder what the world would be like if it was perfect, but perfect is not a vocabulary in this world. As a member of the AYCES Committee and a member of my home community, I see and face all the challenges in this world. As I look around, I see from generation to generation all the changes taking place for our youth. Nowadays it’s harder to face the world as there is such a wide variety of youth challenges on the rise: drugs, alcohol and low self-esteem. While there are many ways a person can be destroyed, there is only one way they can overcome the challenges, and that is by having the courage to hold on to the hope and dreams of possibilities.

I received a story of a kid being bullied in school. He was cleaning out his locker so his mom didn’t have to after his suicide. I printed it off and asked one of our youth members on the AYCES Committee to see if he could come up with a skit or play from this story.

Within a few days, he had written a play and added some Cree words to it. He was then able to recruit some other youth as the cast. They rehearsed the play and came up with some wonderful props. They performed in the local community with tons of nerves floating around. However, with a prayer and God’s guidance, they were able to overcome the challenge, and it was having the courage to hold on to the hope and dreams of possibilities.

The feedback was overwhelming, and now this group of youth is able to find hope and change.

When some youth are struggling, trying to find themselves, I say to them there are some wickedly, awesome relations out there—deers are a powerful role model and their blood is running through your veins. Their genes are part of you too. So whatever they had that made them special and unique, you have the ability to do that too. You just have to aspire to be like that.

But if you have nobody obviously nobody take the time to research and look back at your family history, your relations. Find something there that you can grab and say “I am that woman, the man, they are pretty awesome. I want to be like that guy.”

If you don’t have that, it is really hard to wake up and be positive, especially when you’re down. You’ve got to go back to those kids and say research your ancestors, research your brothers, research anybody in your family because we all come from ancestors, we all come from warriors, we all come from rich, rich, rich deep-rooted cultures. We all have something, we’ve just got to find it and grab it and use that as your tool to get through the tough times. For me, as far as my own experience, my grandfather was probably my most influential person in my life just because of who he was. He was an Elder, a spiritual leader, a medicine man, powerful, powerful looking, a huge man. When he walked into a room, you felt his presence. People respected him, his lifestyle, the way he was brought up. That’s what I use as my savior to get through. For me, he’s my spirit, my great spirit, the guy who keeps me going.

Remember, we still have our own way—our ancestors from three or four generations back saw that. You’re Blood Indian, here’s your way here. Take this, this is who you are. That’s what I try to tell kids. Find someone who is powerful in your family, grab that and use that as your power.
The third part was independence and the last part being together somehow. So we came together and talked about how we could bring some of that back to help our people. The fourth step was generosity, and that is giving of yourself, giving to your community, your family, your loved ones. So we got together and we started doing that healing journey. There were these times we were together that we didn’t happen, but then something happened for our community.

It was a Saturday; we were in the community having a memorial for all the people who had passed away that previous year when someone came and said, “Hey guys, come and look.” So we went out and in that small town by our community there are two bars and two liquor stores in that little hamlet. At the training, a lot of people talked about that healing. They talked about how it had an impact on their people and their ways.

We looked at the animals and how the environment was interconnected. We looked at our physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual ways of knowing. So we did that and called it the GOSH training. We trained the people so that they could help other people to heal as well. So that started the healing process, and when we started the GOSH training two days later in the Monday, we were successful. So from that, we had the GOSH training. We trained the people in that the people were empowered to heal themselves, so that they could help other people to heal as well. At the training, a lot of people talked about alcohol and the impact of alcohol on our people and our culture, on our ways.

We trained the people to see the strength of their rich heritage. The people started to recognize their strength in their own genogram, their family belonging, ‘who are you and where do you come from’. They also talked about how alcohol and drugs were a factor in how things happened to our people. From the training, good things started to happen because the people started to recognize the strength of their history their ancestors who they were related to. They started to look at their rich heritage. They talked about what were their strengths in their community and what was happening in their community. And what happened from that is the community collaborated and discussed what issues were and we developed action plans to address suicide among our youth.

We approached the Chiefs in Alberta at a chief’s forum and discussed the issue of mental health in Aboriginal communities and the lack of access to mental health services to rural communities. When we approached the Chiefs on this issue, this was apparently the first time they heard “First nations mental health was an issue” in the community. And at that time there were issues in our communities and that suicide was a crisis. After a number of discussions with the Chiefs, it was decided we would bring three initiatives to the UNDR. Nations and a working committee was developed to write a position paper.

My community was appointed to bring the position paper to the UN and to present on behalf of all of Alberta, that is how the Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, now called AYCES, was born. I am on the AYCES coordinator. I didn’t know it was going to come back to me later on to lead that. It was a Saturday; we were in the community having a memorial for all the people who had passed away that previous year when someone came and said, “Hey guys, come and look.” So we went out and in that small town by our community there are two bars and two liquor stores in that little hamlet. We talked about what were their strengths in their community and what was happening in their community. And what happened from that is the community collaborated and discussed what issues were and we developed action plans to address suicide among our youth.

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I would like to say that the relationships you have with the person—having someone to go to to talk to about stuff—that is what helps, because it gives you hope.

Before the program, the kids used to react to someone attempting suicide by saying the person was weak or stupid. I have seen a big difference since the program came onto the reserve. My daughter was happy the presentation was given in her school, because if it wasn't for that, she wouldn't have known what to look for.

My daughter had recently attempted suicide, and I just happened to be there at the right time. I heard her say, “I can't do this anymore, I just want to die.”

I turned out the light in the girls' bedroom, went to get a pillow, and she panicked. She came to the office to see me. She had a comb, a razor, a can of gasoline, and she tried to make herself disappear.

The thing that turned out really good was, because the friendship had the courage to reach out to her, she actually turned around, she got counseling. She found the courage to reach out for help, and her friends were there and she thanked her best friend for that.

My daughter was happy the presentation was given in her school, because if it wasn't for that, she wouldn't have known what to look for.

I've seen a big difference since the program came onto the reserve.

I think it is good to have these stories told, because they will help other people.
**Courage to Share a Story—Why I’m a Grandfather**

Told by: An Elder

I think sometimes it’s very hard to share the story about yourself to a young person or to your own children. I think sometimes we’re still afraid what they might think of us. It’s pretty hard to go and say I felt like doing this. I think when that shame goes away and we accept that we are human, it is easier and it will help our young people do as well.

This is a story of a grandfather. He was twelve years old and had decided he had enough. He said, “I got punished for something I did, but what I got punished for I didn’t mean to do, and I really thought that’s it.”

Then he said, “I went out and I made a place. This is where I’m going to put an end to myself. I wanted to do this, because I wanted to make my parents cry for what they did to me.”

And then, he told the story of how he nearly took his life, but changed his mind in the end.

So I asked him, have you ever shared this with your children, and he said to me, “Should I?”

I said to him, “It’s that thought of not doing it that came to you at that instant, that is why you’re a grandfather today. That thought doesn’t come to everybody.” He said, “I don’t even know why I’m sharing this today. Why I’m sharing this today. I’m talking about this today. All of a sudden, I just thought about it. And after all these years, I thought I should tell someone.”

I think the reason there’s a reason I didn’t do this.

Sometimes we do not want to talk about what’s really there, but somebody has to do it.

**Courage to Be a Role Model**

Told by: A 15 Year Old Girl

I would like to share something. I have a little cousin, and the just turned 15. She was telling me about her friends—this is the thing, they all talk about it (suicide) amongst other. But really, she was not talking about a friend; she was being indirect and was really talking about herself. I know it was hard, because her mother had been talking about it. But she didn’t know how to say it or was afraid of her.

Anyway, she and I started talking. We were just talking about teenage suicide. She was talking about how she thought about it. And I just told her, “Well you know you’re a role model.”

She said, “Yes, but you know you’re a role model.”

I asked her how she would do it at an hour just took her life. And I told her, “What you would you want her to grow up and take her own? Would you want that for her.” And she said, “No.”

I said, “You always have to realize those younger people look up to you and they’re always watching you. You are totally their world.”

She really thought about it and she thanked me. She never realized how deep the impact would have been. They don’t realize how much it hurts other people. She’s a role model now.

There is always somebody who looks up to you, even if you don’t know that.
There were two suicides in our community, both women, and one was pregnant. At any other time I would have asked, “How could they do that to their kids? How could they do that to that unborn life inside of them?” But because of the place I was at, I completely understood how these women must have felt. I feel you have to go through those times in your life, the hardest times. When those two women took their lives, it was the hardest time in my life too. I was at that point too, I didn’t want to die because I had children. It was just so hard to get up in the morning and go through the motions, go through the routines. I had to make money for my kids. I feel I completely understood how those women felt—if I didn’t have the faith in the creator or the skills that I have, their story could have very well been mine.

So now when I do my presentations, I tell them don’t judge because you can never completely understand where that person is at. Things can seem fine, but do they have the skills or the capacity to make it through? Don’t judge! You never know. Whether it’s an elder, whether it’s a youth, whether it’s a professional person, if they are struggling, stop and take the time and ask them, “How are you really doing?” You can never tell anyone “I know how it feels” until it happens to you, and then you can honestly say I know, I know.

What I reinforce is that people care, you’re never alone—people care and there’s always help and always hope to get through those rough times. You are stronger than you think, people care.

It’s okay to feel how you’re feeling at that moment. If you’re feeling like crap, it’s okay to feel like that. If you have that person at that time, it’s okay to feel like that as long as you know that’s how you’re feeling and you are working it out. You don’t need to be apologetic for how you feel at that moment. Just have an awareness of what you are thinking and feeling and allow it to work out.

I had never thought of myself as suicidal. Sure, as a teenager thoughts of “what would happen if my life was over” would pop into my head. “Would people miss me?” I would wonder. However, these were single flashes that dissipated as quickly as sugar in a cup of coffee. It wasn’t until I was twenty-two, living on my own, faced with nothing but reality, that I was one night pushed to my limits. The incident was tiny, some would think insignificant, that made me want to end my life. But building up over time, one little thing was all I needed.

In the end, I know what I would have done, I called the only person I felt would not judge me, in a time where judgement was what was pushing me down. I knew that I needed company to keep me from making a terrible decision. Thinking back to that night, the lonely nights leading up to that one, I am filled with pain and sadness and shame, all because I cannot believe I ever let myself think so lowly. I had/have an amazing life, and no-one should have the power to make me think otherwise. The days after that night were not easy—it was not as if I picked myself up right away. I spent many nights even more lonely because I had this dark secret, a secret I have not shared with many people, my parents included. There was no one defining moment when I told myself “enough is enough.” I simply grew up, and eventually, I could look at myself in the mirror and say that I once again had everything to live for. The loneliness was overcome and I am filled with hope at this moment.

I wonder why people think about dying by suicide. The person thinking about suicide is probably thinking no-one loves him or cares about him. Maybe he’s getting bullied, has no friends, or he thinks his life isn’t worth living. Maybe something bad at home is happening and he doesn’t want to be a part of it anymore. He’s frightened because his dad is never home and he always has to watch his brother and sister. He doesn’t go to school because he read all the time at his dad. He is in a gang now so he wants to die faster. He drinks to take away the pain but it doesn’t just get him drunk.

He went to school on Monday, a teacher talked to him, he realized his life was worth something to his about. He has a chance to restart.
A good relationship is when someone loves you and cares for you and when someone can trust you with secrets and enjoys spending time with you. He lets me be first when we are doing something safe and when I got something to say he will listen to me. A good relationship has to have happiness and take responsibility for what they are doing. He will remember little things that are important to me and we will be loyal to each other. We will talk about our interests, fun activities and belief. We will respect, consider, understand and talk about thoughts, feelings, and ideas and communicate with each other by talking on the telephone and having a good conversation. We try to make our wishes come true and together help each other to reach our full potential.

STORIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

STORIES OF
RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are very important to our people. They are many teachings and stories that tell the relationship to all things. As we listened to the stories of hope, of courage and the human will to live that have grown out of the community pilot sites, they share in one way or another how respectful, caring relationships keep us make a difference in the lives of people. These stories also contain the programmatic—story from the heart of the people.

In fact, relationships and hope are essential in creating things and raising the human spirit. We need to talk to one another in a relationship re-creation where we are valued, understood and welcomed. The great news is that we can create healthy, caring relationships.

A Youth

The best time of the season of my life is the fall. It’s nice and cool and doesn’t rain. When you wake up early in the morning you hear a lot of birds, for the last time of the summer. And there’s a lot of things you can do in fall—if you let the youth go hunting. If my friends are feeling low, I take them hunting, let them have fun and what I like to do. Sometimes I help them as a friend. If they feel bad, I just tell them we’ll go hunting and they say okay. When I had my quad, sometimes my friends would feel bad they aren’t going anywhere, so I’d tell them who cares, I have room. They’d hop on and I’d bring them along. We’d go hunting and it’s early in the morning and you spend your whole day with them. Bring them somewhere if they’re mad or something. If they don’t get over it, I just let them do what they want. I don’t let them ask. I just let them go. Then after they’ve calmed down, I go along with them, and if I feel like it, I let them have fun and just look at them. Then if they start having their fun, I can see their fun has been riding around on their own. It gets to the point where we both have a lot of fun. Especially on a quad. It shows you can stay fast because you want to go mud bogging and having fun.

And at the end of the day, they’re all happy. They’re okay. They get along with their dad. So pretty much, that’s what I like to do to help them.

A Good Relationship

A good relationship is when someone loves you and cares for you and when someone can trust you with secrets and enjoy spending time with you. He lets me be first when we are doing something safe and when I have something to say he will listen to me. A good relationship has to have happiness and take responsibility for what they are doing. We need to talk to one another in a relationship re-creation where we are valued, understood and welcomed. The great news is that we can create healthy, caring relationships.

We will talk about our interests, fun activities and belief. We will respect, consider, understand and talk about thoughts, feelings, and ideas and communicate with each other by talking on the telephone and having a good conversation. We try to make our wishes come true and together help each other to reach our full potential.

Relationship with Self-Personal Identity

I had been away for so long and saw many different things, but I just wanted to come home. When I went back to the reserve, it was like a struggle. The struggle was hard for me; it was between who I was and how the people on the reserve saw me. They saw me as an ‘Apple,’ after living off the reserve, even though I could speak my language fluently. I just was not accepted into the community because they saw me as different, having lived off the reserve and seeing different things.

I remember I was also stereotyped by the white people, but I used to fight them. I never drank or smoked, because I didn’t want to be cast as a bad Indian. I only fought to protect others. I still fight but in a different way. I remember when I used to fight on the street and in the bars. The people on the reserve that turn away from me now, I used to fight for them. It’s because I try to bring home the old ways, stuff like that. So I’m considered wrong. I love the reserve life; I’m free there to hunt, fish and trap.

If someone is struggling, I tell them my story—get in touch with yourself, believe in yourself. Get in touch with your Indian culture and go out in the real world. My Blackfoot language, my sweet grass, my smudging in the morning, living in the real world helps me do that. It all comes back to our culture. That’s what got me through the toughest times and in touch with myself. Culture is the main part before you can go ahead, because once you have that culture, you can do anything. You can set your mind to do anything. Don’t let anybody or anyone say you can’t, not even me. That’s what I tell the person. If someone is struggling, I tell them my story—get in touch with yourself, believe in yourself. Get in touch with your Indian culture and go out in the real world. My Blackfoot language, my sweet grass, my smudging in the morning, living in the real world helps me do that. It all comes back to our culture. Culture is the main part before you can go ahead, because once you have that culture, you can do anything. You can set your mind to do anything. Don’t let anybody or anyone say you can’t, not even me. That’s what I tell the person. If someone is struggling, I tell them my story—get in touch with yourself, believe in yourself. Get in touch with your Indian culture and go out in the real world. My Blackfoot language, my sweet grass, my smudging in the morning, living in the real world helps me do that. It all comes back to our culture. That’s what got me through the toughest times and in touch with myself. Culture is the main part before you can go ahead, because once you have that culture, you can do anything. You can set your mind to do anything. Don’t let anybody or anyone say you can’t, not even me. That’s what I tell the person. If someone is struggling, I tell them my story—get in touch with yourself, believe in yourself. Get in touch with your Indian culture and go out in the real world. My Blackfoot language, my sweet grass, my smudging in the morning, living in the real world helps me do that. It all comes back to our culture. Culture is the main part before you can go ahead, because once you have that culture, you can do anything. You can set your mind to do anything. Don’t let anybody or anyone say you can’t, not even me. That’s what I tell the person.
Before this program started, there were communication barriers in this community. Now there’s actually a place where people come to us beyond just youth council where they come and participate in these events. They actually come and speak on that level where we can do an intervention and a safe plan and put that kind of training really into use.

Before I was here, I worked with youth in another community and I’m finding I’ve had the opportunity to deal with a few of them on that level now. Talking about how things are meant to be—I didn’t start off in the mental health. But starting off slow, I learned that I work pretty good with youth and I’ve gained a good relationship and rapport with a lot of youth in this community. And there’s a lot of people that have come from leadership development and youth to store of a service position of mental health—I guess you just end up where you’re supposed to be at that time, because I have a lot of youth that I really care for, and five years ago, my heart was broken for the youth in our community. I didn’t know where I would end up and how those skills just started developing and you can end up in a position where you can really help.

I think that a lot of times it’s not the event or the program, it’s the relationship that you get with that person. Because I didn’t have those relationships, I never really thought about it until 2005, when my uncle did that, and more or less going through the same emotion and seeing the same people, it started flashing back all of the sudden. But I just put it away and I kept working. About two or three months later, one of my bosses died by suicide. I don’t know what it was—I can’t tell you—but I just disconnected myself from everyone and everything. I enjoyed away from my family and more or less did my own thing—misery loves company. Now that I’ve worked myself out through that dark time, I realize I was grieving and going through the motions of everything else again. So sometimes I think people have to be aware that this thing might have happened in your life, but it might not hit you until years later.

After that, I was sort of in an up and down time in my life and then I got this job. I was talking to my sister, and she was saying she didn’t know if she could have the same type of bravery in taking this job, considering everything that had happened in our family. I don’t know if it’s bravery—I don’t think of it as that I have a cause or an ambition. It’s more or less, let’s work on it and let’s work out our community. Because to lose two people in one family, that’s just too much, and we need to have a connection somehow. And if we can get to younger kids, how can we achieve that? I’m still making those connections out there and working through it.
Tell Them
Told by: A Youth

Suicide is something no-one wants to hear about or see, especially if it is someone they love. If you don’t want people to die by suicide, you have to know what to say and do to help them stop doing what they are trying to do. You have to know the right time and how to say that everyone around them loves them and cares about them. If something is wrong, suicide is not the right thing to do. You can talk to someone about what is going wrong and somehow they can help you with what’s going wrong in your life.

The thing that’s very valuable is you and the people around you.

The Valuable Thing
Told by: A Youth

My auntie is 16 years old. She’s from out of town. She’s my dad’s sister. When I went to visit my dad, we went to my Kookum’s, my dad’s mom’s place. I went into my auntie’s room. She had stuff on her to attempt suicide. I ran to my dad and told him she was suicidal and that she ran away. My dad and my uncle went to go look for her. She had been beaten by my dad and uncle found her. She was just about to kill herself but my dad stopped her. He took her home. My Kookum was worried but my auntie was okay. She hasn’t done that ever since that time she tried to die by suicide. She was happy with her life because me and my dad talked about trying to kill yourself. We said to her that we loved her a lot and everyone she knew and they loved her and cared about her a lot.

The people who try to die by suicide don’t like the way their life is. Help them out and tell them how much their family cares for them and loves them.

Tell Them
Told by: An Elder

I want to share a story about two old women, and this is a true story. A long time ago, tribes did different things, and in this tribe when the person grew really old, they became a burden. So if they were traveling far from the land, well, to make a long story short, they left the two old women who were going to be a burden while they were traveling.

They both had grandchildren. One granddaughter took a small axe, and she hid it and let her grandmother know where it was, as this was going to be a survival tool. And the other granddaughter, she took what we call Babish. She also hid it and told her grandmother where it was hidden. Babish is what we call it when you cut raw hide into really narrow strips, instead of using nails to make building things. You can use the raw hide, and it’s a life-saving thing. You can do anything with raw hide.

So the granddaughters left that hidden things there for their grandmothers, and the tribe moved on and they were gone for a year. And these two old women survived with that little axe and the Babish that was there for them. They set snares, made their own fish nets and reels, and they caught fish. They were living pretty well. A year after this, the tribe was coming back that way again and they were starving, but the two old women were healthy—they had done all this.

I wanted to share this with you because it teaches the relationship between our youth and our elders. The compassion and care shown by the two teenagers gave the elders the will to live. In this story, the elders were never left behind again. We must do the same for our youth.

Compassion and care—that was survival. These two old women wanted to live.

Human Spirit Will to Live
Told by: An Elder

The people who try to die by suicide don’t like the way their life is. Help them out and tell them how much their family cares for them and loves them.
To Be Young
Written by: A. Youth
 Too young to know, too young to understand, too young to work, too young to love, too young to be old, I’m always too young.
 Too young to do anything they tell me. I’m not old enough to know what they’re saying, what they’re doing. I’m too young to understand all the knowledge I have, all the things I see, hear and do. I’m not mature enough or responsible enough to work. They have no faith in me and therefore cannot trust. I’m too young to love; I don’t understand what it is. My emotions run wild; hormones control my every feeling and emotion, blinded by the annoyances of youth. I’m too young to be old, I’m not the right age, I haven’t matured. I’m an incompetent child disabled by youth.

Unilateral for the lack of my age; yet all of this is true, then why does my brain ponder on all that they say I am not capable to do. I question their authority and I challenge their reign, the length of which they sustain. They say that to be inquisitive is not right of mind. But I can’t help wondering if they are the ones distorted by time. Someday soon they will come to see that by being so inquiring I’m not what they see. I’m old enough to know, to think on my own, to decide my own path and to learn what I know. They are the ones who are too close minded to see that the ones that they discriminate are people like me. Someday soon I will show them that those who are supposedly incapable of so many things are really quite capable to do all of these things.

STORIES OF PURPOSE AND MEANING
There comes a time in most people’s lives when their experiences accumulate and their begin to wonder “What is my purpose and how do I tap into it in my life, work and relationships?” The activities we engage in are leading to a life of simplicity which often have meaning for the young and for adults alike. A meaningful life is one which is purposeful, passionate, productive and inspiring. The activities we engage in lead to a life of simplicity and authenticity. An authentic life is an emotionally authentic expression of the person’s true gifts and power. Stories of Purpose and Meaning help people find purpose and meaning in their lives by providing examples, inspirational messages and raising thought-provoking questions that motivate deep introspection and self-realization.
That’s My Story – Past One

Told by: A 20 Year Old First Nation Youth

I don’t like to talk about it that much. I think it was this year, before April or sometime, the project coordinator called and asked me to go to this youth conference, a conference for part of the youth project in our community. She told me that another person and my cousin could come with me, just as she called, right at that time. I was trying to get rid of myself because I felt nobody liked me and all my family hated me. It seemed that everyone was putting me down. I had tried to do it three times before, but I guess it wasn’t meant to be those times. That day though, I was going to do it, really do it. That’s how I felt that night when she called me. It seemed like no one was listening, that someone was telling me what to do. At that time, I was really mad, I was going to do it, but it seemed like someone didn’t want me to. I just wanted to get out of there, I just didn’t want to stay there, I was just mad. My grandmother didn’t even know I was that depressed. I didn’t tell anybody. I had everything planned. The call from the coordinator asking me to go to the conference gave me another way out.

The conference was good because it talked about healing yourself, and this girl was talking about suicide and that helped me think about things. It was the talking at the youth conference that helped me a lot. I told all of them what I was planning to do when I got the call to come to the conference. Talking to them taught me not to think about doing that ever again. Going to these conferences, they helped me to move on.

I always think back there—if she hadn’t called me I would have just done it in the night after that—I just get scared now. Every time I think of doing that, I go for walks now, go visit my cousins, clean up and watch TV. I don’t want to do it ever!

I talked to my grandmother about it after when I got back, and she was wondering why I was thinking about that. I told her it seemed like all you guys didn’t like me. I was saying this to her and she said, ‘No it’s just that I’m getting old and I get grumpy due.’ She told me not to think about that stuff my family didn’t even know I was going to do that, and, they tried crying, I said I didn’t cry. I’m all hard, totally. I’m all mad, but she kind of read me for a while, but then she came and talked to me. Now she tells me not to do that. After that, when I started to think about it, I guess I felt stupid.

I can laugh about it now but before I couldn’t. Now when people put me down, I don’t listen to them. I think about the next day. I just go for a walk and don’t listen to them. I listen to music or do anything to get it out of my head. Or sometimes I call the project coordinator and ask her what’s happening. I call these AFL (Alberta Future Leader) workers sometimes.

I also go to pow wows now. I always heal from the pow wows. They teach me a lot.

I used to really put myself down. There’s nothing good that comes from putting yourself down. You know, talk to whoever you’re close to, your grandma or grandfather, or just phone home, your social worker, or go for a walk. Reach out to someone if they’re willing to listen to you.

That’s my story!

That’s My Story – Past Two

Told by: A Project Coordinator

I never knew this, I just phoned. I thought we would take a few people from the reserve over to this conference. It was a family violence prevention conference, and I encouraged this one young man to come with two others. They were College students; three of them we encouraged them to represent the reserve. At the conference, they had sharing circles. We kept encouraging them to talk. On the first day the young man I had encouraged to come didn’t really say anything. The next day he shared a little and thanked the presenters. We thought right on.

Then, on the last day at the closing circle, all of our youth spoke. I was really surprised and happy how well they did.

The young man I had encouraged to attend seemed really nervous about talking at the end. I think the young man I had encouraged to attend seemed really nervous about talking at the end. He then got up and talked—he admitted that, before this conference he was thinking about suicide and now that he had come and met everyone, he just shared it all. He was just wonderful, all of us. We never knew, all of us. I think he helped everybody in that room by being there and actually sharing that. People there were just wonderful, and they were all saying we like you that way. I didn’t know he was planning to do by suicide until that last day, until he shared that.

You never know, you just never know by any acts of kindness who you’re going to help or how any of these programs help people. You just never know when you reach out, I could not tell before that he was thinking of suicide.
Told by: A Community Member

I’ll tell you, you have to take care of what you’re doing. Setting up this teepee, I’m not going to touch these poles. I’m not even going to touch that canvas. I’m just going to direct you on how to do it. You’ve never set up the teepee before, so make it a good experience. I teach them to remember that there’s an elder coming later on, and that elder is going to sit in this teepee. If you take care of what you’re doing, you’re going to have a nice teepee. It will look good because you gave your heart into it and you really tried to do a good job. On that because your hard work is going to show — your attitude shows on your work.

And as a First Nations person, I’m proud of our heritage, and the teepee is a part of our image. The elder will point out mistakes, because you learn from your mistakes. If the elder is quiet, you’ve done your job. But most importantly, the end result is your work — it’s like a brand. That’s my work. It makes me feel good. You need that praise, and in order to get that praise, you have to make sure you do a good job.

I also try to come up with things for the youth to do, like our drum group. Those guys wanted to drum, and first we were drumming using our drum kit upstairs, the base drums. Then we bought a big drum and put duct tape around the base. They went through all that trouble to buy the drum, and we wanted to reward their effort and get them a drum. So I ordered a drum, and now they’re proud to hit their drums.

There are the kinds of positive things for youth, because with the drums comes responsibility. Someone has to be the keeper of that drum — there’s protocol surrounding that drum. If I’m going to give this drum, you have to take care of it and you’re responsible for it. If you’re a worker in a program, it’s not a one-hour program — it’s a commitment. To me, that’s youth work.

Long term planning, development programming, seeing them through those tough times, that’s youth programming. The work that is being done through AYCES is part of that bigger picture.
Pilot Sites

- Aatsitaapiiksi Partnership (Lethbridge)
- Piikani Child and Family Service
- Kainai Wellness Centre – Blood Tribe Services, Standoff
- Napi Friendship Association
- Medicine Tree – Siksikasoki Friendship Society
- Aboriginal Youth Wellness Project: Urban Aboriginal Mental Health Program, Population Health Department of Alberta Health Services - Chinook Health
- Our Journey to hope, healing and a safe community - Eden Valley
- Maskwacis Justice Society – Essex, Lacombe, Edmonton, Poplar River, Samson & Pigeon Lake
- Abaakwes Tri-Settlement – East Prairie, Creti Lake & Prairie
- Dene Th’Oojem – T’aa Nee (Health Living) – Barrie River, Cameron River, and Church

Government Ministries and Agencies

- Health & Wellness
- Children’s Services
- Aboriginal Relations
- Education
- Seniors & Community Support
- Solicitor General & Public Security
- Alberta Health Services - Alberta Mental Health Board and Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission
- First Nations & Inuit Health Branch

Storytellers and Readers

These stories could not have been told if not for the courage of each storyteller. It is their courage to embrace life and their kindness to help others choose life that has helped them share their stories of hope.

We would also like to thank those of you who will be listening to these stories with care and respect. We are reminded the stories told here have been offered to us so we can learn what is working and what is helpful and from their exchange find guidelines for the decisions and directions we must set for the future.

What is important is that these stories have been given to you. They are now yours. Do with them what you will. Tell them to others. Find hope and inspiration in them. Make them the topic of a discussion group. Create your own story around them. Add to them or take away from them, but you can’t say you never heard them.

We would like to offer our deepest appreciation to everyone who has made this storybook possible. In acknowledging the pilot sites, their ways of knowing have been honoured by using, where possible, the traditional names they have given to their projects. The traditional language used is a Language of hope and wellness. It is a way of knowing – how to embrace life.

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