

Who are our Elders?

By Ernie Sandy

“A draft working document on selecting community elders”

Before developing a list of personal and ideal qualities of an elder, outlining what some their duties and responsibilities would be, plus asking the universal question, how does an individual become an elder, there are some important facts that need to be stated.

- ∅ For the past twenty-five years or so in Nish country, there has been an immersion or ‘awakening’ of elders, some escaping from the clutches of alcoholism and poverty, some coming off the skid row of major Canadian and American cities, others from troubled, emotional background or childhood. They are only human and may have lived a different lifestyle. The important thing is they are here to help guide us.
- ∅ We honour our elders by acknowledging their life long experience and wisdom, and asking them for guidance.
- ∅ An elder can be from our immediate family. While we may not call them elders, our grandparents, parents or even guardians may have that distinction. We go or have gone to them for advice and they try to help raise us to the best of their knowledge, experience and with unconditional love.
- ∅ Other family members, such as an uncle or aunt may be considered an elder; then there is the individual(s) whom the community identifies as an elder.
- ∅ The process of selecting elders must be community driven. This will help to ensure a sense of ownership and consultation; it is important to include every one in the selection process, especially the youth.
- ∅ Selecting an elder or elders is a delicate issue that requires community input. Experience tells us that there is always someone who may feel forgotten.
- ∅ An elder and a senior citizen are not necessarily the same; one has reached an advanced age, while the other has been recognized by the community as a traditional elder or spiritual leader.
- ∅ Not everyone subscribes to the concept of a traditional elder; there are other kinds of elders, for example, church elders are recognized and respected.
- ∅ There are a number of senior citizens in the community who may meet some of the qualities listed below; therefore, it is possible to have a council of elders to draw upon as needed.
- ∅ Because of the many demands that may be put on one elder, it would be wise to have a council of elders. Not only will this prevent burn out, but will allow for the other elders to participate and feel respected and included. Every one of our elders is important and valued as keepers of local history and language; and as mentioned above, we honour them by acknowledging their life long experience and wisdom.
- ∅ If we were to ask five, ten, fifteen different people, or as many as possible, what an elder is, we would get as many answers as people. The nice part of this exercise would be the variety of comments or opinions expressed. They would represent a cross section of the community. It is through these answers that a community would be able to determine who the elders are. Of course, it is always best to ask members of the older generation for their input.

The following lists were adapted from S. M. Stiebelbauer, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, study published in *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, XV1.1 (1996) 37-66. The name of the document is “What is an Elder? What do Elders do: First Nation Elders as Teachers in Culture-based Urban Organizations? It is not necessary for an individual to have all of the following suggested qualities:

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| ∅ He or she is non-judgemental | ∅ Teacher of the good way of life |
| ∅ Honest, truthful and straightforward | ∅ Ability to communicate kindly |
| ∅ Ability to identify with nature, e.g. the ecology and state of the environment | ∅ Understands Rez life |
| ∅ Well respected in the community | ∅ Ability to act as an political unbiased advisor |
| ∅ Has respect for other beliefs or faiths | ∅ Has a good working knowledge of culture |
| ∅ Humble, e.g. down to earth | ∅ Knows the local history, and is a good story teller |
| ∅ Comfortable in working with youth | ∅ Has a set of good of values and virtues |
| ∅ Does not take sides on issues | ∅ Fluency in the Ojibway language would be an asset |
| ∅ Has respect for other peoples’ feelings and opinions | ∅ Knowledgeable about traditional healing and medicines |
| ∅ Is approachable and makes you feel welcome | ∅ Ability to facilitate holistic healing and wellness circles, and more |
| ∅ Is a role model | ∅ Age is not always a factor |
| ∅ Walks the talk of the seven grandfather teachings, respect, humility, wisdom, honesty, courage, love, truth | |

The following list was adapted from: *Qualities, Expectations and Duties of Elders within the Native Canadian Centre* (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1989, Board Minutes)

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| ∅ Counselling, e.g. family or individual bereavement | ∅ Help to provide moral support to individuals on their healing journey |
| ∅ Visit ‘shut ins’ at their homes, especially seniors, and our people in the hospital | ∅ Act in an advisory capacity to management or leadership |
| ∅ Participate or help in establishing an Elders' Circle, | ∅ Facilitate conflict resolution, court and family disputes |
| ∅ Teach groups or individuals about native culture, | ∅ Be a role model for the community |
| ∅ Participate as a spiritual advisor | ∅ Be available, or make a referral |
| ∅ Open and close meetings | ∅ Facilitate women's & men’s circle |
| ∅ Smudge (bless) or cleanse homes | ∅ Participate in cultural events such as opening Pow Wows, new building projects |
| ∅ Attend or participate in elder’s conferences | ∅ Continue to learn from the youth and other elders |
| ∅ Conduct or facilitate ceremonies, e.g. sunrise, healing circles, pipe, sweats, welcome new arrivals (babies) | |

Other related questions

There are many other questions that can only be answered in a group setting, for example, how does someone approach an Elder? How old do you have to be to be an elder? Where do you find an elder? Why do we need Elders? Would they be on salary or user fee basis? What role will he or she play in council? Can the elder represent Mnjikaning in the event members of council are unable to go?