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BIO

Laura Gagnon holds a **Master of Arts in Communication and an undergraduate degree in Communication and Media Studies with a minor in Indigenous Studies**. She is an Ojibwe woman (*Anishinaabe*). Through her work and personal life, she instills the notion that culture and spirituality should enter doors and places where they have previously never been.

INTRO

Laura's identity, the act of connecting with Indigenous communities and building engagement at-large are integral to her role as a Communications professional. When I first met her, I immediately sensed her zestful spirit and unwavering resolve. For this interview, I set out to learn more about Laura's story and was honoured and humbled to read her every word. It is my privilege to share it with you.

1. STORYTELLING IS INEXTRICABLE WITH INDIGENOUS CULTURE. WHAT DOES STORYTELLING MEAN TO YOU PROFESSIONALLY?

Stories contain power to remind us of who we are, where we come from and where we're going. They allow me to situate myself in the world in a way that I understand it. In my paper titled *Land as Mushkiki (Medicine): A (Re)learning of the Sacred* I wrote on my experience at a Women's Culture Camp with other Indigenous women. I discussed how the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge through land-based (re)learning is a process that *recovers the sacred*. I continue to *recover the sacred* through my work as I facilitate virtual lodge teachings, sharing circles, drum circles, and commemoration events. This is where I see storytelling come to life. The Elders that share their stories in circle often remind us that our journeys are sacred and should be treated as such.

2. WHAT WAS AN EARLY EXPERIENCE WHERE YOU LEARNED THAT WORDS HAVE POWER?

I learned that words have power at a very young age, when I was taken away to Child Services. One of the foster parents' sons decided to peek at my underwear. I used my voice and told the foster mother what happened. She had words for the young boy and he did not bother me again. This deeply personal example taught me to speak up in situations that I deem uncomfortable. I knew then that my voice would keep me safe. As a young Indigenous girl, I needed to grow up fast. I knew that communicating and conscientious decision-making were means of survival to ensure the safety of myself and my younger brother.

3. IS THERE A PIECE OF WRITING THAT CHANGED YOUR LIFE?

The book *As We Have Always Done* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. It is about how *Nishnaabeg** intelligence is woven into our everyday relations, how we operate diplomatically, the ways we connect to spirit, and our scope at the community and international levels. I learned how to present ideas in ways that I understand them, and it inspired me to ignite my creative spark through *Nishnaabeg* theory.

**Nishnaabeg: "the people"; encompasses multiple First Nations people who were colonized by the British.*

4. KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE IS PARAMOUNT FOR ANY GOOD COMMUNICATOR. WHAT ARE YOUR GO-TO STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING WITH AND INFLUENCING YOUR AUDIENCE?

I tend to captivate my audience by simply introducing the idea of the sacred. I have performed hand drum songs to thousands of people, and I get nervous every time. What I do in these situations is pray. I connect to that little girl who used her voice so long ago in the child welfare agency. I recover the sacred by utilizing my traditional bundle and sacred items to perform fearlessly and with a voice so powerful that it reaches the ancestors.

5. NETWORKING HAS BEEN IMPORTANT ON YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT A TIME WHERE YOU PUT YOURSELF OUT THERE AND HOW IT HELPED YOUR CAREER?

Once, I simply followed-up with a hiring manager. I was working in the Education unit at Indigenous Services Canada for a few months until they drafted a Letter of Offer. I went back to the woman who had originally brought me in and let her know about my offer. She then hired me to work in her office on a contract basis until we found something permanent. The new position was at a higher level, and I was eventually able to negotiate to an even higher level.

In university, I learned that everything can be considered media, i.e. the clothes we wear convey messages about how we want to present ourselves; the vehicle we drive says something about us and our relationships. Networking is more than meeting people in your field, it is about adapting to situations and bringing an authentic, yet professional version of yourself.

6. WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE AS A COMMUNICATOR?

Public speaking has been one of my greatest challenges. When I was in Grade 6, I wrote a speech called, *A Day in the Life of a Gum*. It was a humorous tale about what life might be like for a chewed-up piece of gum. I recall the laughs and the undivided attention from my classmates. My class had voted for me to give my speech in front of the school – but due to my fear of public speaking, I declined. If only I'd had the practice and confidence that I have now, I would have been able to tell my entire school what it was like to be a piece of gum for a day!

7. WHAT ROLE DO COMMUNICATORS HAVE IN THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION?

Communicators have a role that is as important as the notion of Truth and Reconciliation itself. Messages can be carried in many ways, i.e. some people in my neighbourhood have orange shirts hanging outside their windows, sending the message that every Indigenous child matters and to honour survivors of the Residential School system.

We also have the power to persuade and influence people on a large scale through digital and social media. We now have instant communication that crosses and transcends borders, which gives us the ability to share unapologetically. With every step that we take and with every road we are led down, it is imperative that stories that deal with atrocities such as the Residential School legacy and other historical events are never forgotten.

8. WHAT CAREER ADVICE WOULD YOU SHARE WITH AN ASPIRING WRITER OR COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONAL?

I would share something that was not shared with me in school: Write with spirit, write that sacred story that you thought was too mythical or unsound for academia, and experience that creative journey with confidence and pride! My passion comes from my heart and spirit, and I don't believe there is any training that can teach me these intricate forms of expression. I will share a comment from a professor who praised the ways in which I presented my work. She said:

"It is hard for me to put into (adequate) words the emotional impact your writing has on me. While I immensely enjoyed reading your reflection notes, this paper took it to another level. I feel like you have presented me with a gift. Your voice is powerful yet gentle, vivid and precise, moving and calming at the same time. Your use of literature is superb, and the way you convey your ideas is disarming" (Knezevic, 2019).

So, I would say that the world of production and consumption is changing, and that an overall sense of connectivity is what we are all craving. Instead of searching for connection through our devices, perhaps we should search within – where our spirit and spirit helpers reside.

