

Embracing the Guiding Circles of Change: The Miziwe Biik Initiative

For many Aboriginal people, the question of “what do you do best” is a difficult one to answer. Some may not be sure of their individual talents or strengths, others might be too modest to say and some may be convinced that they have none. Fortunately, nothing could be further from the truth than the latter statement.

“Everyone has something they do well or something to contribute...everyone is an elder,” says Joseph McQuabbie, an employment counsellor for Toronto’s Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training center.

As a former OPP police officer of 11 years, Joseph McQuabbie now spends his workdays helping others gain the life skills necessary to ‘live by example.’

“I’ve taken my policing career and applied it to being a life coach,” says McQuabbie. “The OPP is a fine organization and, through it, they brought out my true character. I learned the four R’s – *respect, restraint* and *responsibility* which then leads to *resilience*,” says McQuabbie.

Working as a police officer in Ontario’s Lake of the Woods area, McQuabbie decided to embark on his own personal journey of self-discovery to understand his hidden potential.

While he agrees that his former law enforcement job was rewarding, McQuabbie says he loves his new one because it allows him to show Aboriginal clients that, despite multiple barriers and challenges, they can also be in charge of their futures.

“It’s about giving them power...if they don’t know how to deal with the behaviours of the past, then they don’t know how to go forward. There is only one way in and out of a teepee,” he says.

Bringing hope into the lives of “the homeless, the hidden homeless or the borderline homeless” or those who have been institutionalized in prison is one of McQuabbie’s main goals.

To help achieve this, McQuabbie began incorporating the *Guiding Circles* program to help his clients discover their hidden talents and reveal the best career choices for them, based on those strengths.

“It grounds people and brings them back to their roots,” says McQuabbie. “Every time I use it (*Guiding Circles*), I learn something about myself as well,” he adds, with a chuckle.

By combining traditional Aboriginal teachings with contemporary career exercises, the *Guiding Circles* program works by awakening a client’s sense of self-esteem. Through specific activities, participants are able to relate their individual life experiences to career planning – allowing them to make choices based on natural talents and interests. The storytelling activities also help to establish personal vision and to help set goals.

As a counsellor and facilitator, McQuabbie specifically uses the *Guiding Circles* program to help clients explore and better define their self-identity.

One of the many *Guiding Circles* activities is an exercise called “Connections” – a tool that allows clients to choose how they express their perceptions of family, community and self.

“They can color in the circles or write words or draw,” says McQuabbie.

When they use dark colors, draw rough edges or use no color at all, the choices can be insightful for both client and counsellor.

“I had one lady who didn’t color certain circles because she felt she was disconnected from her culture and from the natural world because she lived in a world of concrete,” McQuabbie says.

Currently, McQuabbie uses the *Guiding Circles* program individually with clients but, hopes, to start using it with groups in the future.

“In the end, it is all about taking ownership and becoming more self-aware.”

Today, hundreds of people have successfully worked their way through the Miziwe Biik life skills (personal development) program and it’s no wonder that Toronto Social Services calls this program the most successful life skills program in Ontario.

A Brief History

In 1991, Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training centre was created to meet the unique training and employment needs of Aboriginal people in the urban Toronto area.

Formerly known as the Greater Toronto Aboriginal Management Board (GTAMB), the name *Miziwe Biik* was given to the organization by Jim Windigo, a respected Ojibway elder. This new name is associated with the female water spirit and means “water which flows all around us.”

With its ability to reach out and make positive changes in the lives of urban native people across the Greater Toronto area, Miziwe Biik has been compared to a body of water where a ripple effect has been created.

Its mandate is to counsel its clients on career paths and opportunities, to work with employers to secure employment opportunities, to deliver federal and provincial training programs and to work with both groups and individuals to achieve these endeavours.

With three employment counsellors on staff as well as a job development officer and onsite resources, the facility is able to offer a number of services including:

- Employment counselling
- Assistance with cover letter and resume writing
- A computer resource centre with internet access
- Mail out, photo copy and fax service
- Referrals to employment supports network, health and other aboriginal agencies
- Information about living in Toronto, referrals to social services
- Information about training, education and wage subsidies