

## **New Westminster Police Department & Indigenous Relations**

In the last week of June, the New Westminster Police Department (NYPD) invited me to spend some time with them. I went on a few ride-alongs, and sat down with most of their units for brief overviews of the work they do.

### **Truth-Telling**

As Indigenous people, our relationship with law enforcement has been challenging to the say the least. 'Violent' is a more accurate description. Historically and as mandated by the Crown, the RCMP were the agents of genocide. I recognize that the NYPD is a municipal department and therefore is not attached to the RCMP, however in order to understand this relationship it is important to recognize that the style of uniform is irrelevant. It is the power, and the abuse of power behind the uniform that has been and continues to be the problem.

This history permeates into our present reality with the continued use of force to remove Indigenous people defending their lands from corporate interests such as pipelines. A more recent example of this is a raid on the Unist'ot'en camp on Wet'suwet'en territory which was created as a means to defend the territory from the Coastal GasLink pipeline project. <sup>1</sup>On January 9, 2019, the RCMP broke the gate of the Gidimt'en checkpoint and created a temporary exclusion zone preventing media and the public from entering. Those arrested are alleging an inappropriate use of force from the RCMP.

This violence also extends beyond land defenders as noted in the report, <sup>2</sup>*The Toxic Culture of the RCMP: Misogyny, Racism, and Violence against Women in Canada's National Police Force (2022)*. Indigenous women and girls face higher rates of police violence. Indigenous land defenders and human rights advocates, many of whom are women, are vilified, surveilled, criminalized, and subjected to violence by the RCMP. Additionally, four major reports have documented a pattern of police failures regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. It is also worth noting that an <sup>3</sup>Indigenous person in Canada is more than 10 times more likely to be shot and killed by a police officer than a white person.

Now, I share this because it is important in order to understand why Indigenous people fear and in some instances, hate the police. 'Hate' is a strong word but when considering the horrors inflicted by law enforcement onto our children, our communities and ourselves, it isn't difficult to understand why. While the NYPD is not a faction of the RCMP, historically, New Westminster police were the primary method of removing Indigenous people from their land and homes within the city limits of New Westminster when deemed a nuisance to City Council's

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kairosCanada.org/what-we-do/ecological-justice/coastal-gaslink-pipeline>

<sup>2</sup> [https://fafia-afai.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FAFIA\\_RCMP\\_REPORT.pdf](https://fafia-afai.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FAFIA_RCMP_REPORT.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/24/the-indigenous-people-killed-by-canadas-police>

vision for public spaces, public health, public sanitation, and when faced with the preferences of white property owners and business owners. Historically speaking, this means that local law enforcement were agents of colonial violence against Indigenous communities in and around New Westminster as well. But now that we have that out of the way, let's talk NWPD 2022.

## **New Westminster Police Department**

I met with a cross section of units that included:

- Forensics
- Prevention Services
- Special Investigations Unit/Domestic Violence
- Victim Assistance Unit
- The Senior Management Team
- Civilian Staff
- Crime Prevention
- Professional Standards
- Finance
- Major Crime
- Mental Health

I will be sitting down for further discussions with the Training Department for a more in-depth look as to how the Training Unit can better participate in Truth and Reconciliation.

I also participated in two ride-alongs. The first was with Indigenous <sup>4</sup>Constable Lindsay Soo-Chan. Lindsay has vast experience ranging from the Department of Citizenship & Immigration Canada to Correctional Service Canada. She is a member of the Marine Unit as a Police Boat Operator and works closely with community partners such as New West Fire & Rescue and By-Laws in Homeless Outreach. Lindsay is not the only Indigenous officer with the NWPD and we should consider ourselves very lucky to have them. As you can imagine, law enforcement is not the most popular vocation amongst Indigenous people so to have Indigenous officers in our community is a privilege.

Throughout the week, several common themes emerged. Some of those are systemic challenges that need changing on a grand scale, while others are more actionable by the NWPD, which are below:

1. *The need for records analysis, both historical and current*

In order to fully understand the depth of the internal issues, one first needs to take an honest look at the structures that are problematic. We can't change what we don't know. This process

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<sup>4</sup> [https://bcwle.ca/team\\_members/lindsay-soo-chan/](https://bcwle.ca/team_members/lindsay-soo-chan/)

does not require Indigenous participation and can be acted upon immediately. The only thing that is required is the willingness to be unreservedly honest.

## *2. Understanding how to ask the question around Indigeneity*

This theme is a common challenge amongst a cross-section of institutions. The choice to self-identify is deeply personal but it is also vital for the collection of accurate statistics. For those of us working in government, we know that those statistics translate into resources. The more accurate the statistics, the more funding is provided to meet those needs. When it comes to law enforcement asking the question around Indigeneity, it is a double-edged sword. On the one side, they need to know in order to provide more accurate numbers, as well as to have the ability to offer culturally appropriate resources. On the other side, Indigenous people continue to be racially profiled, facing discrimination by police based on their Indigeneity.

So, how do we do this while ensuring that the disclosure won't be used as a weapon of discrimination? This is an issue that, as of yet, I don't have a clear answer. This is where subject matter experts come into play. I believe it will require some creative thinking including perhaps a standardized question to all clients such as, "we have culturally safe resources available for our clients who identify as Indigenous. Is this something you need?" which leads us to our next theme:

## *3. The need for Indigenous-centered resources and individuals, such as liaisons, advocates and Elders*

Indigenous folks need to see themselves in these institutions and they need to be supported by community. Indigenous advocates are becoming more common in places like hospitals and schools. We need to ensure that they are available in law enforcement agencies as well. Providing that support is vital to the health and wellness of Indigenous clients. Providing Elders in residence for example, is a wonderful and simple way to provide culturally safe spaces to vulnerable Indigenous people. For an Elder to be available for Indigenous staff who may feel isolated in their position; or to sit with someone who might find themselves in the jail cells; or one who has to make a statement or disclosure around sexual or domestic violence will provide the kind of safety and healing that could not be achieved in any other way. Just by being in the room, Elders heal us as Indigenous people. This process will also naturally extend outward to non-Indigenous staff who have the opportunity to build relationships with Indigenous Elders as well. This kind of exposure to our ways, to see how and why it works provides an education to those who are on their learning journeys and I know that the NWPD would profoundly benefit from this process as well.

## *4. Training. Training. Training.*

This is always the big one. We need more education and training for law enforcement. Right now the NWPD does receive some trauma-informed training but there is a need for trauma-informed training from an Indigenous perspective. In order to ensure that harm will not come

to Indigenous people as a result of police policy and processes, a clear and meaningful understanding of generational trauma, the impacts of the residential school system, the Indian Act and the differences between stakeholders and rights holders from a community standpoint will be necessary as a long-term and ongoing element of the strategic plan.

### **Final Thoughts**

My experience with the NWPD was a positive one. I know that we tend to be on our best behavior when an Indigenous person in a position of power walks into the room but I believe in my heart of hearts that the NWPD genuinely want to be agents of the community. I believe they genuinely want to be better and to participate in their own healing as it relates to Truth and Reconciliation. I don't say this lightly because the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous people in this community depend on my honesty and sense of discernment. I like to think I am a good judge of character but I also recognize that I tend to seek the goodness in people. That said, I didn't have to go looking for that goodness last week because I saw it there like a light in a dark room. This relationship, so fraught with pain and mistrust and injustice has to be healed and I believe that with some hard work the NWPD could become a positive example, and guide other agencies out of the dark. *That's a bold statement*, you might think but now is the time to be bold.

As Indigenous people, we are so used to keeping our expectations low because we are always disappointed. But low expectations don't get us anywhere and I call on the NWPD to be bold. To take that genuine desire and turn it into real action. Fearlessly face your own history, as well as your current discriminatory practices, policies and procedures. Truth must come before reconciliation because we can only change when we know where we are failing. It is painful but it is humbling and with humility, we are empowered to be so much greater than we were before and so much more than we would be without it.

We can embark on this journey together, one bold step at a time.