



Maggie Hodgson is photographed by Craig Richards for Peter Poole's collection of portraits of Indigenous Elders across Canada. Maggie is wearing her shell blanket of the Frog Clan of the Carrier peoples from the northern interior of B.C.

Healing

SPIRITS WORLDWIDE

A REFLECTION ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF MAGGIE HODGSON,
A CHAMPION OF INDIGENOUS WELLBEING IN CANADA AND BEYOND

BY CHARLENE BEARHEAD

"NOBODY EVER, ever, ever does anything on their own." Carrier Elder Maggie Hodgson will remind you of this important lesson over and over if you have the honour of spending time with her. As the driving force behind Indigenous grassroots movements like National Addictions Awareness Week, National Day for Healing and Reconciliation, the Nechi Institute, and Healing Our Spirit Worldwide, Mags, as she is affectionately known, has dedicated her life to addictions awareness and improving the health and wellness of Indigenous people, not only in Canada but the world over.

The health of most Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada plummeted after colonization. Measures of health have since continued to be worse for Indigenous people than the rest of the population. Forced assimilation, systemic racism, displacement from communities and traditional lands, genocidal practices meant to erase culture and traditions — including traditional holistic health practices — and chronic underfunding of community infrastructure and supports have all led to this disparity. Included in this worse

health is a disproportionate burden of addictions on Indigenous people. But a growing body of research is showing that Indigenous people and communities benefit when they are able to take back control of their traditional healing practices, which include emotional and spiritual healing.

I've had the honour and joy of participating in all of Maggie's movements towards greater health for Indigenous people, but one initiative, in particular, has had a huge impact on my life and the lives of my children. Since it began in 1992, the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide gathering has brought together Indigenous peoples from around the world who are committed to the wholistic health, healing and well-being of their communities and nations. Born from the need for Indigenous-led solutions to substance misuse, the gathering celebrates and shares global Indigenous Knowledge around healing, welcoming delegates ranging from youth to leaders, traditional healers to community healthcare professionals, Elders to educators. The gathering, held every four years between Turtle Island (North America),

Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia, has grown to a five-day event with as many as nearly 4,000 people in attendance. In September 2023, the ninth gathering was held in Vancouver, on the unceded and ancestral territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) People. The 10th gathering is slated to be in 2026 in Washington, D.C.

And while, as Maggie says, it takes a community to bring initiatives like Healing Our Spirit Worldwide together, it's undeniable that she was the driving force.

MAGGIE HODGSON was born 80 years ago in "the bush" to a Carrier mother and white father in Nadleh Whut'en First Nation in the central British Columbia Interior. Although she was raised in the ways of her mother's people, Maggie says, "I was never white enough for the white people and not Indian enough for the Indians." She grew up in poverty, was raised in a home with an alcoholic father and was subject to hostile and harmful behaviour within her own community — what's known



as lateral violence. As a very young woman, she married and started her own family, something she describes as her escape route. But the reality of her past trauma weighed heavy, and shortly after she started down a path of her own healing and a lifelong journey to support other Indigenous peoples seeking the same.

I first met Maggie in 2001 on the planning committee for the fourth gathering of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide to be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the following year. I was there as the representative for the Assembly of First Nations' health technicians committee. I had heard about Maggie, this legendary fireball, through my work in advancing Indigenous education, but this was my first time meeting her in person. She lived up to her reputation, every bit as passionate, committed and

fearless as she had been described. It was a gift to learn from her and work alongside her as this movement grew and spread around the world.

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In fall 2002, I took all four of my children to Albuquerque for the gathering. It became abundantly clear that for my First Nations children being raised in their culture and community, it was incredibly important for them to

grow up in this movement. My youngest daughter, Seneca, was just seven years old at the time; although too young to participate, she helped me host the older children. She loved it. I can still see her being taught how to weave by a Pueblo weaver and then teaching it herself to the subsequent groups of youth. She was so proud, empowered and honoured to be trusted with such an important role. That is what Maggie lives for, creating spaces where the youngest community members to the oldest of Elders can find joy, healing, purpose and community within a safe environment. Over the years, Maggie has become an older sister to me and my husband, Wilson Bearhead, a Nakota Elder and Wabamun Lake First Nation member in Treaty 6 Territory, a beloved auntie to Seneca and now a kokum to Seneca's son, Bud.



Seneca is now 30 and a mother. Born Saulteaux-Assiniboine from Treaty 4 territory, raised Nakota in Treaty 6, she works as an Indigenous education specialist in schools in central Alberta, carrying on the teachings of her people, her ancestors and the Elders in her life, including Maggie. From that small but empowering beginning at her first gathering, Seneca now supports Indigenous students and parents, guides non-Indigenous educators in their efforts to respectfully incorporate Indigenous history and knowledge into the curriculum and develops Indigenous-grounded education resources.

The collaboration and information-sharing at the gathering has yielded excellent results. Like Seneca, countless other delegates who attended their first gathering as children are now participating and presenting their work in the fields of health, healing

and self-determination. I know families from around the world that are on the third generation of their families attending the gathering and working in addictions treatment, family wellness, healing and education.

IT ALL STARTED in the early 1990s, when Maggie was working at the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (now the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction) — the only Indigenous person employed there at the time. The centre hosted an international meeting of mainstream addictions experts, and Maggie remembers listening to the musings of non-Indigenous “experts,” offering up “scientific” responses to addictions issues that plagued Indigenous communities around the world. As a member of the Canadian delegation, she had a seat at the table. But she was the only Indigenous person there. Why,

she wondered: why did these so-called experts from other countries not see the value of having their own Indigenous representation as they discussed Indigenous communities?

“They had no value for our ceremonies, our practices or our knowledge,” she says, “and they had no interest in committing some of their government funding to bring Indigenous peoples with them. It’s a matter of choice. That’s all it would [have taken] ... just for the non-Indigenous organizations to include that cost in their budgets.”

OPPOSITE: COURTESY HEALING OUR SPIRIT WORLDWIDE. THIS PAGE: BUFFY GOODMAN PHOTOGRAPHY



Fired up, Maggie immediately sated working on an Indigenous-led gathering to heal individuals and communities. And she looked to her community for help.

"I was only one person, but I had relationships with the Sámi, the Māori, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and of the United States," she recounts. "I wanted to reach out to them to come together to share our experiences and our solutions, but I knew they had no money — and I had no money."

She enlisted the help of Richard Jock, a member of the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne and head of the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program for Health Canada at that time, to help her find funding. She also asked her employer, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, which saw the value in supporting Indigenous leaders working in alcohol and drug prevention programs in their respective countries. And Maggie tapped Rod Jeffries, who was running the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program's treatment

centres and became a founding member of the gathering, to help her organize the first gathering. When Maggie and Rod saw the logo — an eagle with its wings wrapped around the Earth — they decided on the name for the gathering: Healing Our Spirit Worldwide.

"We came together as the very first gathering of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide in Edmonton in the summer of 1992," she remembers fondly. The first gathering "was so different from other conferences about addictions. There was so much singing from the Maori, singing and drumming from our people here in Canada and so much hope. In mainstream conferences it had always been about intervention and academic research, but we came together to celebrate our cultures and to find joy in who we are: community development, community joy, community strength alongside research."

MAGGIE'S SPIRIT burns as brightly now as it did when I first met her. Just before Christmas two years ago, my



family and I met with Maggie, now long retired, to take her to dinner. We pick her up at her new home, a supported living residence in Edmonton for individuals struggling with mental health, addictions and other issues. After Maggie's husband passed the year before, she moved to the facility so she could support the residents as an Elder (even though she often tells me, with a cheeky grin, "I'm not an Elder, I'm an Older, because I swear.")

As I enter the foyer, I see Maggie greeting the pizza delivery person who arrived just ahead of me. She starts to joke lovingly with the residents milling about the lobby, handing out pizza to them. Maggie's mobility isn't what it used to be, but there she is, slow but steady, making the rounds to make sure everyone has what they need. She gives me a sideways glance. "Okay, my girl. I'm almost ready. I just need to make sure these guys eat, and then we will go."

Charlene Bearhead is the vice-president for Learning and Reconciliation at Canadian Geographic and a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. She coordinated the youth track for Healing Our Spirit Worldwide in 2002 (4th gathering) and the children's program in 2006 (5th gathering). Charlene also served as education days coordinator for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, education coordinator for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and more.

As Maggie reflects on the importance of reconciliation in healing work, she describes one of the many powerful presentations at the most recent gathering in Vancouver. Darlene Auger, a Cree woman from Bigstone Cree Nation, received a healing method from her grandmothers through a vision during ceremony. Auger is now working with neurophysiologist Kelvin Jones from the University of Alberta to prove that "swinging" (a lateral rocking motion) can heal trauma.

It is "the coming together of science and spirituality for really deep and meaningful change. We have always known that swinging our babies is medicine; it's our healer. Water is our medicine; it's our healer," says Maggie. "When I was first involved with the non-Indigenous people working in the field of addictions 35-40 years ago, they had a very difficult time seeing the value of what we did in our ceremonies and our community building. They didn't see it as having any substance. But that's changing."

Clockwise from OPPOSITE LEFT: Maggie celebrates her 80th birthday with friends and family, including Jack Freebury, whom she worked with to help establish the National Day for Healing and Reconciliation; Michelle MacIsaac, long time friend and mentee; adopted daughter Darlene Auger; and adopted brother Frank Large.

Maggie has been at the forefront of that change. I'm reminded of another winter day, more than a decade ago. Maggie and I were travelling from Edmonton to Red Deer, working on an initiative to educate non-Indigenous Canadians about the realities of Indian residential schools. As I was driving, Maggie sat in the passenger seat, making us snacks. We talked about the slow progress in the education system. I was feeling frustrated that I couldn't open some of the doors I needed to. Maggie stopped building her cheese and cracker sandwiches, gave me that sideways look and told me, "That's when we kick the door down." 🍷