Preparing for Our Ancestors to Come Home
The Kainai High School’s Blackfoot Warrior Shirt Project

RAMONA BIG HEAD

In 2010, Ramona Big Head was a teacher at the Kainai High School. She and several other teachers developed a special project for students so that they would understand how much the shirts meant when they came home for a visit: “Preparing for Our Ancestors to Come Home.” Ramona is now the principal of Tatsikiisapo’p Middle School at the Kainai Nation.

The initial motivation for the Blackfoot warrior quillwork shirt project came from the impending arrival of five Blackfoot warrior shirts from the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford. The Pitt Rivers Museum acquired these shirts in 1893, so you can understand and imagine the anticipation among the Blackfoot community members of having these shirts come home for a visit for the first time in 160 years.

The shirts were scheduled to arrive and be put on display between March 2010 and June 2010 at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, and at the Galt Museum in Lethbridge, Alberta. The UK project team, Laura Peers and Alison Brown, had already been in touch with many Blackfoot people, including various entities such as the Kainai Board of Education on the Blood Reserve, and were looking for ways in which these shirts could be incorporated into our existing curriculum.

Thanks to a grant from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, approximately twenty Kainai High School students were able to gain hands-on experience with hide tanning and traditional quillwork in January and February of 2010. These students were more than prepared with the necessary traditional knowledge pertaining to these Blackfoot warrior shirts when they arrived in the respective museums in Calgary and Lethbridge. In addition, Kainai High School sent bus-loads of students to both museums when the shirts arrived.
The students’ hands-on experiences with tanning and quillwork were just the beginning, however. There were other layers of traditional Blackfoot ways of knowing that were beginning to unravel for the students, teachers, and elders.

LESSONS IN PROTOCOL: QUILLEWORK

Initially, my goal was simple. We would get an artisan to come into the classroom and teach twenty to thirty kids how to tan hides and do quillwork. I must admit that I was very naïve about the whole concept of quillwork. I assumed that finding an artisan to teach quillwork to the students would be an easy task. I soon realized, however, that traditional Blackfoot quillwork is a rare art form, and finding someone who actually does quillwork was not as simple as I had originally thought.

Not only was it important to find an artisan but we also had to find someone who would be willing to work with students at Kainai High School. Fortunately, we were able to find a talented artisan from the Kainai community, Winston Wadsworth, Jr. He was the perfect fit for our purposes. He quickly developed a positive rapport with our students and his expertise was unsurpassed. He always acknowledged his grandmother as his teacher. She taught him all the traditional ways of hide tanning, beadwork, and quillwork.

In addition, I soon came to realize that there are specific Blackfoot protocols that need to be adhered to before anyone can commence with quillwork. Thankfully, I had some traditional ceremonial leaders and colleagues at Kainai High School, teachers Delia Cross Child and Martin Heavy Head, who gently guided me on this project. They proved to be an invaluable source of information and guidance throughout this process.

We eventually went to our elders within the Blackfoot community for additional guidance and to provide us with the historical background of these shirts. The elders in the project were given an opportunity to share their knowledge regarding quillwork from a Blackfoot perspective. Throughout this project, I would sit and listen to the elders share their knowledge. I became fully aware of how fortunate we were to be in their presence. For example, as I sat with
ninety-two-year-old Kainai elder Margaret Hindman, reality hit. Her time with us was not long, and it was an honour to visit with her.

Mrs. Hindman’s teachings about the Blackfoot warrior shirts included the following:

- It was only the boys who went out to acquire the quills from a porcupine.
- A porcupine was never killed in the process of acquiring its quills. There was a specific way of trapping the animal with the fork of two sticks in order to hold it down while it was de-quilled. And, the animal was let go after enough quills were taken.
- Not just anyone could do quillwork. A quillwork artisan had to be transferred the rights to do quillwork, in a special ceremony. Historically, quillwork was done only by women.
- Only the most honourable men would be transferred a Blackfoot warrior shirt. These men had to have accomplished an outstanding feat, such as a victorious battle or an honourable leadership role.
- Usually, the transfer of a Blackfoot warrior shirt resulted from a dream someone had.

As a result of working with the elders and the artisan, my students, my colleagues, and I developed a deeper appreciation and respect for the ancient art of quillwork.

In fact, I was amazed at how much Winston Wadsworth’s hands-on teachings on traditional quillwork were validated by Mrs. Hindman’s historical knowledge and memory. For instance, Mr. Wadsworth taught that the porcupine is an animal that is just as revered as any of the others; as a result, he informed us, he has never killed a porcupine simply for its quills. He added that most of the quills are acquired by trapping the porcupine and de-quilling it. Since the quills grow back, there would be minimal harm done to the animal during this process. One would simply have to quickly get away from the animal as soon as the de-quilling was done, because, as you can imagine, the animal would be extremely agitated by this time. Mr. Wadsworth also mentioned that he acquired a lot of his porcupines through the local road department that cleans up “road kill” on the highways.
The students were taken through the entire process of making tobacco pouches with hides that they tanned, complete with their original beadwork. They were also shown the art of dyeing quills in both traditional and contemporary methods.

Mr. Wadsworth was fully aware of the fact that, traditionally, women did the quillwork, so he shared his personal journey of how he acquired the rights to do quillwork from his grandmother. His story is not mine to tell; therefore, I cannot share it. Suffice to say, if it weren’t for Blackfoot men like Mr. Wadsworth keeping this tradition alive, we would be at a tremendous loss.

It should be noted that not all the students acquired the rights to do quillwork, but all participated in the hide tanning and beadwork. We felt that, by following protocol, it would be more appropriate for the students, along with their parents, to approach Mr. Wadsworth if and when they chose to pursue the art of quillwork. Nevertheless, we all learned an important lesson on how it is to be done according to Blackfoot ways of knowing.

**EXPERIENCING THE SHIRTS**

In March 2010, we had the opportunity to see the shirts at the Glenbow Museum. At this point, our students had been immersed in the quillwork project for about six weeks. A special day was set aside so that our students could visit the shirts before they were put on display for the general public.

When the shirts were uncovered and we saw them for the first time, there was a breathless silence that overcame us. We were simply in awe. It was almost as though we could feel the presence of our ancestors who made those shirts. As the students took a closer look at the intricacies of the quillwork on the shirts, they were amazed. We all were. One thought that came to my mind was that it was amazing, with their rudimentary tools, how our ancestors were still able to create exquisite pieces of work. Again, Mr. Winston Wadsworth, who was with us on this visit, was able to provide a more detailed perspective on the shirts. In fact, even the Blackfoot Shirts Project team soon began asking Mr. Wadsworth questions to help fill in the gaps in their research into the shirts.
These past months, I learned how to tan hides; how to stretch them out; how to smoke the hide. I learned that tanning hides is hard work. From the smoked hide we learned how to bead. I learned that porcupines don’t shoot their quills.

CYNTHIA WOLF CHILD

I have learned a few new things. Skinning and tanning hides is one of them. I have also learned how to bead. Winston Wadsworth Jr. started me off on beading. My mom and stepdad helped me with the rest. I am now starting a project of my own at home. Beading has now become my new hobby.

DUSTY MELTING TALLOW

The past two months we were working on a project called the Quillwork Project. As part of our curriculum, we learned a lot more on and about our culture both past and present. Winston Wadsworth Jr. showed us students how skinning and tanning are done. This had many students, along with myself, understand how our ancestors worked hard to do everything they did. De-quilling the porcupine was a great experience for me, as I learned how to do the actual quillwork, which for me is a valued work of art. I am glad and very fortunate to have been a part of this project. Even taking a trip to the Glenbow Museum to see the actual Blackfoot shirts that were brought from the Pitt Rivers Museum. This whole project is valued by me and others. Hopefully, it stays in our curriculum.

DAKOTA WADSWORTH
One of the crowning events of the project and of the entire exhibit of the shirts was the transfer of a Blackfoot warrior shirt to Kainai elder Pete Standing Alone. This event took place in early June 2010 at the Galt Museum in Lethbridge, Alberta.

As if to illustrate Mrs. Hindman’s teachings, this transfer took place because of a dream that I had. In the dream a Blackfoot warrior shirt was transferred to Pete. I attribute this dream entirely to this project of working closely with the porcupine quills and the visit of the five Blackfoot warrior shirts from the Pitt Rivers Museum.

The significance of this traditional transfer is that, at that time, many of the elders from Kainai had not witnessed a Blackfoot warrior shirt transfer for many generations. This transfer revived a ceremony and songs that had not been witnessed or heard for a long time. As I sat with the others who were there to witness the transfer, my colleague and friend, Delia Cross Child, leaned over to me and whispered, “You made this happen!” I smiled and thought to myself, “No, it was the shirts that made this happen!”

As a mother, a grandmother, and an educator in my community, I am indeed, grateful to the Pitt Rivers Museum and to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. Because of this project, we, the Blackfoot people, have been able to revive a valuable part of our ancestral ways of knowing.

Because of this project, our Blackfoot children were able to fully appreciate the 170-year-old Blackfoot warrior shirts when they arrived in traditional Blackfoot territory. Most important, we learned so much more about the deeper traditions and protocol of our people. These are life lessons that you just don’t get in an ordinary school setting. This project enabled us to immerse the current curriculum in Blackfoot pedagogy.