

Holding Space for Stories: Tillicum Lelum's dialogue project in Nanaimo

Successful dialogue requires organization and a skilled facilitator who knows how to hold space for people to be their authentic selves. These skills were the gifts that Bryn Tuba brought to a series of six dialogues, hosted by Nanaimo's Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre throughout 2019.

"The intention of our Opioid Dialogue Community Engagement Project was to simply provide space for meaningful conversations," says Bryn, whose background includes social work and substance use counselling. "Hearing each other's perspective and experience is the best way to raise awareness and build community."

The first two events were small gatherings that allowed participants to get comfortable with one another and express their feelings about affordable housing and local services. The next dialogue, aimed at uniting diverse people and identifying service gaps, was a large event with 55 participants seated in a community circle.

"There were people with lived and living experience, service providers, the mayor and a member of city council, and others," reflects Bryn. "This dialogue was the one that had the biggest impact or indication of the possibility of change in our community."

There were challenges, admits Bryn. Organizing a large event has its own set of stresses. But navigating a mixed crowd, and ensuring people feel safe to be themselves, can be especially tricky.

"We wanted to find out what people thought was going well in Nanaimo, so we can avoid duplicating services," Bryn explains. "I was a little surprised by some people's reactions. You really see a different side of people when you talk about substance use. And not everyone could show up in the way I was expecting they would."

But even more surprising was the degree of commitment among participants to sit and listen, even when things got uncomfortable.

"There was great diversity in terms of identity and power, yet no one was talking over another. And there were lots of opportunities for people to react to what others said, but no one did."

As meaningful as that third event was, Bryn and her team decided against the idea of following up with an even more public event.

"Most people aren't ready to see or hear that this is essentially a systems issue. They want instant gratification and a tangible solution right now. So it would be difficult to keep the space as open and safe as we'd want it to be. We're not quite there yet."

Instead, Tillicum Lelum hosted two smaller dialogues and a closing ceremony to build trust and forge friendships between people who would not otherwise have the opportunity to share their stories.

"There are some stories that change you," says Bryn, adding, "We need good leaders who want and know how to listen. It makes such a difference to people when they feel sincerely listened to by those with influence."

It's clear that Bryn herself is one of those leaders—a person skilled at holding space for people, a person good at listening.

Through Tillicum Lelum's efforts—and those of others in the community—a stronger foundation based on respectful relationships is being laid for Nanaimo, as citizens work more collaboratively in responding to the challenge of opioid use and related issues.