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Taking Action II: Art and Aboriginal Youth Leadership for HIV Prevention

“It’s the fact that we are working towards making a difference in our communities. Well I know that’s what I am working towards. I like to help people.”

Youth Leader Johnny Mianscum, Cree, James Bay, Northern Quebec.

What is Taking Action II?

Taking Action II is about building Indigenous youth leadership in the HIV/AIDS movement. We are a group of Indigenous youth leaders, Indigenous community-based organizations and university-based researchers. We wrote this report to share the amazing work that our youth leaders have done.

We want to create awareness around HIV, sexual health, and decolonization in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across Turtle Island (Canada). Our goal is to support and inspire Indigenous youth leaders to affect positive change. We did this by helping a group of 18 Indigenous youth leaders make and share digital stories (short movies). We want to encourage youth to tell their own stories, and connect with communities, cultures and each other.

“[T]his experience is one that is definitely going to resonate within my spirit for a very long time. Everybody has touched me in their own way and has inspired me in their own way. You know I am very humbled by everybody involved... even though we are geographically separated we have a lot of the same history.”

Youth Leader Kiera-Dawn Kolson, Gwich’in/T’so T’sine Dne, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories
Taking Action II understands that Indigenous sexual health is an issue best understood by Indigenous peoples —ourselves. With this in mind, Taking Action has centered diverse Indigenous leadership, Indigenous participant involvement, and traditional Indigenous understandings into health promotion.

The amazing Taking Action II youth leaders were brought together through a call for Indigenous Youth Leaders to apply to participate in our project. Our call went out on listservs, twitter, online and in person. We even made a little video we put on YouTube to recruit folks. We were overwhelmed with the incredible youth that stepped forward. We have partnered with them, Aboriginal community organizations and communities across Canada, as well as allies at several universities, to make this project happen.

“I came here to learn about [HIV] ... to prepare myself more to advocate... Everyone is connected ... like my family is part of this country, is a part of the same world... When people struggle that’s like everyone’s struggle [it’s] not just that person or their demographic... That is why I became involved.”

Youth Leader Alexa Lesperance, Whitefish Bay First Nation (Naotkamegwanning), Ontario.
How Did Taking Action II Begin?

Before Taking Action II, we completed Taking Action I. Indigenous youth leaders looked at how HIV is related to Indigenous communities and cultures and to see if art could be used to talk about HIV/AIDS and mobilize action.

What did we learn from Taking Action I?

1. Indigeneity is important for success
2. The links between colonization, structural inequities and HIV are significant
3. The power of youth’s voices!
4. Art is awesome!!

We learned so much from the Taking Action I youth leaders and their communities that we asked them to help us shape a new project, Taking Action II. We wanted to continue to support and inspire each other to affect positive change around HIV and sexual health across communities.

We have a whole report and youth story about Taking Action I on our website. 
If you want to see it visit: www.takingaction4youth.org
Respecting the principle of Indigeneity helps us succeed in four major ways:

1. It enables our Indigenous project coordinators to build trust and talk about very sensitive topics with Indigenous youth participants while using traditional teachings. Our elders and councilors work hand-in-hand with our youth to make this happen.

2. As Indigenous people ourselves, we understand that we are not all the same; we come from different nations. This understanding of diversity creates an excellent environment for youth participants (and their nations) to tell their stories, in their own unique voices, in their own unique ways.

3. We are building on a long history of using storytelling and the arts as an important way to communicate messages and values.

4. Finally, by infusing every aspect of our project with Indigeneity, we cooperatively fight the effects that colonization has had on our peoples: young and old.

“Taking Action is decolonization in effect. We work together towards understanding HIV within our own communities and fight it. That is why it works — we’re working together.”

Jessica Danforth, one of the project’s co-leads.
WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN COLONIZATION, STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES AND HIV?

The realities Indigenous peoples face with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections are related to a variety of historical and ongoing factors that impact the social determinants of health.

The ongoing impacts from the past are not only told by communities but also through statistics. Indigenous people are “over-represented” in HIV statistics in Canada and around the world. Aboriginal people experience HIV at rates about 3.6 times higher than other Canadians. Even though the Aboriginal population only represented 3.8% of the general Canadian population, Aboriginal people represented about 8% of all people living with HIV and AIDS, and about 12.5% of new HIV and AIDS cases diagnosed in Canada in 2010 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

Aboriginal women and youth are particularly vulnerable. This means that we need to pay special attention to looking at how we can prevent the transmission of HIV for both young men and young women, and those who are trans or two-spirited.

However what’s most important to note is that being Indigenous or being a young person is not a “risk factor” by itself. In fact, being ourselves can be empowering. What actually puts our lives at risk are things like colonialism, racism, and not having access to culturally safe care.

“Yeah so I just one day sat down and we talked about some statistics and they were pretty scary because this was all in my community... where I am located, just thinking about how many friends I got and how many people I know and care about are exposed to it.”

Youth Leader Jake Lachance, Flying Dust First Nation, Saskatchewan.

BEING OURSELVES CAN BE EMPOWERING!
Those are some pretty concerning numbers... how does Taking Action II deal with HIV? What is different about Taking Action, than say... a doctor or teacher telling us this stuff?

Lots of public health folks think HIV prevention is just about loading people up with information and supplies (e.g., condoms or clean needles). We’re not knocking their method of HIV and sexual health education or anything. That stuff is really important too. We just noticed that “the talking at people approach” wasn’t really working—especially with Indigenous youth and their communities.

So we decided to try a different method: we shifted the focus of the project to the youth involved and centered our project to their strengths -- ambition, enthusiasm, imagination, open-mindedness, vibrancy, and, above all, creativity! Realizing their limitless artistic potential was one thing, but applying it was something else altogether. After much brainstorming, Taking Action decided that digital storytelling would be a great creative platform to evoke the spirit needed for HIV prevention.

Like young warrior-artists, our youth leaders were free to create, and tell their stories about what could be done to combat HIV, or why they got involved, as they wanted. That’s what’s different about Taking Action II compared to the standard sexual health approach: the messages, the stories and the approach all came from youth. The adults involved checked their egos at the door and let the youth lead. In Taking Action II youth are the teachers, the educators, and the message!

“The] main message of my story was... about me getting into sexual health and my culture but it was kind of supposed to be an encouragement thing to other people because I am telling other people my story... If I forced myself into it, I probably wouldn’t enjoy it. But it was because I enjoyed learning about my culture through music... rather than throwing all these pamphlets about sexual health and stuff, saying ‘read this, read this, blah blah blah.’”

Youth Leader Adrian Morris, Algonquin of Piwakanagan, Nova Scotia.
What is Digital Storytelling?

Digital Stories are short videos which are similar to Youtube clips; in fact, many become Youtube clips. But, they are much more than simple YouTube videos because they are the result of a lot of intensive work and are personalized to the storyteller’s vision. Central to the video is a story that is read or sung or told out loud. The audio is then coupled with pictures and videos.

Digital Stories can be about anything and made by anyone, but they aren’t like feature films. This is because they are usually relatively short in length (about 3-5 min). The short length makes them accessible, and easy to share (upload/download/transferred) so that lots of people can watch them in different places. They don’t have huge production costs or lots of personnel. One more thing, to make them you have to have access to a computer, smartphone or tablet, and, have some video editing software. It also helps if you are good with computers or know someone who can help you use the video editing program if it is your first time.

“What got me interested was the fact that it said we could edit footage...And I’d like to know more about HIV ’cause I basically came here to learn about it.”

Youth Leader Johnny Mianscum, Cree, James Bay, Northern Quebec.

What does storytelling have to do with Taking Action II?

We chose Digital Storytelling because it is a great way for young people to tell their stories, and share them over and over again. We thought it would be a way to bridge traditional Indigenous storytelling with contemporary storytelling technology. Youth could be creative about how they wanted to show and tell their stories. Then, the movies they created could be screened all over the country. The process to make a digital story was pretty easy for young people familiar with computers. For those with less experience, we helped them along and they caught up very quickly.

“I think that this project is going to open the door for many generations to come because we are at that age now where it’s no longer adults that are doing all the teaching, you know, youth are doing all the teaching too, and that’s going to open the door for you know younger generations, my grandchildren, if I have any.”

Youth Leader Jake Lachance, Flying Dust First Nation, Saskatchewan.
Eighteen youth leaders from across the country came together for a fun-filled week (July 8-15, 2012) to create their stories. We all stayed at York University in Toronto, Ontario to learn how to make digital stories and support each other through the process. During that time, members of Taking Action II discussed, listened, and recorded stories about the sensitive issues around HIV within their own lives and communities and what could be done about them. The digital stories provided participants with a safe way to present very personal information to potentially large audiences (e.g. friends, family members, home communities, and beyond).

“My digital story is the idea of why I am a leader and what kind of inspires me to be a leader. So I use my family members and like our issues... our everyday problems and how that inspires me to become a leader.”

Youth Leader Echo McLeod-Shabogesic, Nipissing First Nation, Ontario.
**Getting ready to tell our stories**

“Well to be honest I came here with like a whole concept and not really sure where I wanted to go with it... ‘why as a person am I here to do this?’”

Youth Leader Megan Kanerahtenha:wi Whyte, Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, Quebec.

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**Watched Examples of Digital Stories**

To prepare participants for the digital storytelling process, Taking Action II asked everyone to watch internet clips and videos of short films and other examples of digital stories at home. This step helped get our participants ready for the movie making process. It was the first step in the remote preparation and media gathering process. It showed them what was possible as well as gave them an idea of what we were trying to achieve. We asked them to watch many different kinds of digital stories, among them were: An Intergenerational Story by Six Nations, a project done in Nunatsiavut about climate change and Digital Storytelling with South African Youth.

“Well HIV, I feel that sometimes I get so overwhelmed with the topic because I feel like since I am only one person it’s really hard for me to make a change but seeing everyone else’s videos, I am like, ‘okay I can do this. I just have to believe in myself.’ But I think maybe that’s a message that other people can take away too—believe in yourself.”

Youth Leader Renée Monchalin, an Algonquin/Huron/Métis from Fort Erie, Ontario.

**Created videos, pictures and images from our home communities**

The next step was to encourage youth to collect video, pictures and other images from their home communities. Long before any of the participants ever came to Toronto, we sent out handheld video cameras asking each to record footage, take pictures, and conduct interviews with people they thought relevant to their future digital story or storyboard.

**Tried to capture the essence of community and culture**

We also encouraged everyone to try and capture the essence of their community and culture, as they understood it, with short 30 to 40 second clips of their home and surroundings. The video and image gathering step, apart from preparing participants ahead of time, also allowed for personal and intimate information to be recorded without outside pressure or intrusiveness. It allowed each participant to be themselves, on their own terms, in their own communities, surrounded by their family and friends. This was key, as it gave each member the support they needed in dealing with the heavy issues surrounding HIV. This step was especially important, because so many of the youth were travelling long distances to participate.

**Gathered images that already exist**

We also encouraged youth to bring old photos to the Toronto retreat; ones that captured what they were trying to tell us about HIV, and ones that carried specific meaning for them (e.g., family, friends, neighbours, and anyone or anything else that might be of importance to them or their story). We also understood that many youth might not have old or sentimental photos and we assured them that it was alright if they didn’t have any to bring to Toronto— it was no big deal. For those that did not have time to gather material in advance, we were often able to grab great pics from their facebook feeds and other online spots.

**Took audio recordings**

We also asked each participant to take audio recordings of things around them (e.g., machines and technology, nature, animals, humans, sound and music). We advised them that brief twenty second sound bites worked best for short films, but that if they wanted to they could choose longer clips. Many arrived in Toronto with a rich variety of sounds, noises, music, and speech bites.
“I was really busy ‘cause I was graduating and I was doing this and that and I didn’t really have a partner to help me but I took a lot of recording. I used some of it.”

Youth Leader Justen Peters, Okanagan First Nation, British Columbia.

Thought about how to narrate our stories
Another step in the preparation and gathering process was getting youth to start thinking about how they wanted to narrate their stories, or how they wanted their storyboard to be told with words. We asked them to bravely consider the real issues behind HIV; how they saw it in their community, how they understood it, and how it related to them, and then write it all down. Specifically, we asked five tough questions to help everyone get going:

1. Can you tell us a story about a time when HIV/AIDS impacted your life?

2. What was a moment when you realized that you cared about HIV/AIDS?

3. What have you done to address the issue of HIV/AIDS in your community?

4. How could using culture have an impact on HIV/AIDS?

5. Why is it important for Aboriginal youth to become involved with HIV/AIDS issues?

Tough questions indeed, and there is no doubt in our minds that digging deep and getting down to the nitty gritty while writing was very hard work, but we had confidence in our youth leaders. The quality and depth of the work the participants produced surpassed even our own expectations.

“Can you tell us a story about a time when HIV/AIDS impacted your life?”

Finally, the remote preparation step allowed each participant to take their time; they had roughly four months before the retreat to gather their thoughts and media. Taking Action II did not want to rush the project or its participants in any way. We wanted each member to have the time they needed to think about, and record their thoughts and feelings. We understood that the sensitive information surrounding HIV and their stories could not be recorded over night or under tight deadlines. We also understood that it takes time to create a quality product, and the four months we gave youth proved more than adequate for the task at hand.

Flew to Toronto to meet each other at the Taking Action II retreat!
The results were spectacular; almost everyone arrived with tons of valuable images and ideas for their stories. Some even conducted interviews, recorded songs, made artwork, wrote poems, and created clips that resembled mini-stage productions — all were impressive.

“I had no chance to [interview anyone]... So I brought a bunch of stuff down here for me like pictures and stuff like that.”


Summer 2010
March 2012
Spring 2011
TIMELINE

Work with youth leaders from Taking Action I to develop Taking Action II

- Apply for funding

Receive funding

Create detail project plan, Submit ethical review, Create recruitment video

Put out recruitment call for Youth leaders

Applications are due

Send out acceptance letters and instruction kits with a manual and flip camera

Hold group conference calls to get everyone ready, book travel and start collecting material for our stories (pictures, sounds, and ideas)

Everyone meets in Toronto for a week to create digital stories.

Check in with youth about their stories and make sure that they are OK to share them widely. Support youth to host local movie nights in their own communities to screen the digital stories and talk about HIV in our communities.

Reunion in Montreal to celebrate National Aboriginal Day, evaluate our work, plan for next steps.
DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN TORONTO

“So there is not a lot of people willing to go to the outskirts of their community, to the outskirts of their safety zone, and come to Toronto for a week. So I feel like I’ve been given the opportunity to start something positive within the community.”

Youth Leader Echo McLeod-Shabogestic, Nipissing First Nation, Ontario.

Taking Action II’s retreat was hosted at York University in 2013. Facilitators from the North York Community House worked with us to help youth create their digital stories. Before jumping into making the digital stories, we did lots of icebreakers to help everyone get to know each other and talked a lot about HIV in Aboriginal communities in Canada. We wanted to make sure that everyone had all the right facts and info they needed to protect themselves and to feel safe.

Apart from the hard work of recording the digital stories, we had opening and closing Anishinabe fire ceremonies, healing circles where participants orally told their story and shared (in some cases, complete with a traditional talking stick), and fun excursions to downtown Toronto as well as Yorkdale and Eaton’s shopping centers. We visited the Six Nations community to gain inspiration from the amazing sexual health promotion work they are doing. We also had art and bead-work supplies ready for spontaneous outbursts of creative genius—which many used quite often. We sang traditional and non-traditional songs together and played games. The activities created a sense of community and camaraderie among youth and facilitators alike.

Taking a break

“Eaton’s square. That was amazing. As soon as I walked out of the subway station, it just blew my mind...Yeah it was my first time being in Toronto. It was just a different experience and I just loved it a lot.”

Youth Leader Dominic Prince, Nak’azdli First Nation, British Columbia.

Taking a break daily from the digital storytelling process was very important to Taking Action II’s success. We really wanted everyone to feel at ease while making the videos and took extra steps to decompress daily. We understood that the best work is produced while everyone is having a great time and this philosophy guided the Toronto Retreat, making it a memorably fun experience for all involved.
“I think what brought my attention to like trying to get the awareness of HIV and AIDS was when I actually stepped foot in Toronto and I actually got to know the statistics and all this information that I didn’t know before... I wanted to bring that back home with me and to share it with my community because like where I live is such an isolated community.”

Youth Leader Diane Andrew, Innu First Nation, Labrador, Newfoundland.
"I knew from the get go ... that we were going to need that spiritual guidance all day cause all those students, especially myself, we put so much effort, we put our hearts, let out our secrets. Some of those kids were carrying secrets since they were born and now they get to have that release and that’s hard especially on young people...and I knew the spirits were there from the next world...watching over us...”

Youth Leader Michael Keshane, Saulteaux First Nation, Regina, Saskatchewan.

It was important to have facilitators and organizers at the retreat whose primary concern was to support youth. Creating the right kind of environment was also crucial. We began the retreat with an Anishinabek fire ceremony lead by Fire-Keeper, Traditional Knowledge Holder and Teacher Robin Cavanagh. Starting with ceremony was key, as it set the tone and laid the spiritual foundations. This was vital for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the participants while they worked through the digital storytelling process. Robin encapsulates his life’s work, and Taking Action II’s spirit, in one sentence: “As knowledge keepers we must pass on the unbroken chain of traditional knowledge to the next generation, we must help them connect to the old ways, to their creation stories.”

“Let’s do good, let’s work together, let’s just do that and let’s just get this done.’ Instead of having the title or the hat on ‘Oh I am the leader.’ No, it just comes naturally, you just do it and you get people to join on with you and work for the better.”

Youth Leader Scosha Diamond, Metis, Goose Bay, Labrador, Newfoundland.

During the hard work, DJ Danforth from the Oneida Nation acted as the “Youth Mentor and Cultural Support” for the project. With great kindness and understanding DJ listened, worked with, and guided participants who found the storytelling hard. His background in counselling and traditional healing helped participants feel safe. With gentle patience, DJ walked with the participants every step of the way, making sure everyone could turn to him for whatever was on their mind. In addition to DJ, every facilitating member of the Taking Action team acted as an ear to listen when things got tough for participants.
“The ceremony of Taking Action II is that 18 youth from across Kanata came together to grow and support each other’s education and knowledge of HIV and the effect that it has on their own territories, communities. The amazing work they did together will echo through many generation.”

DJ Danforth, Youth Mentor and Cultural Support, Taking Action

Another key support built into our itinerary was the healing and sharing circle. This forum provided a safe-area to release anxiety, stress, and emotion before the digital storytelling piece began. It allowed for participants to hash out ideas, introduce themselves and share with each other, and also to see that they could turn to one another for support as they were all “Taking Action” together.

“Someone would be there talking, giving their presentation and they start crying cause they were touching on a really, really sensitive subject... a lot of us would jump up, give them a pat on their back, rub their back, you know, comfort them. So I thought that was pretty powerful.

Youth Leader Jake Lachance, Flying Dust First Nation, Saskatchewan

Another amazing outcome of the week was the support that youth were able to provide for each other. Over the course of the week, the youth leaders bonded and took care of one another. At the end of the week, when things were hard, the youth decided that we needed to close with a singing and drumming circle. Youth took turns leading and sharing their traditional songs and approaches.

“They all got into my heart ...Some of them are trying to find their identity. Others are trying to find their culture, and, yeah. They are all just amazing.”

Youth Leader Alexandria Leon, Nak’azdli First Nation, British Columbia
We sought consent from youth (and for those under the age of 16 – their caregivers), at multiple points in the project. First, youth had to apply to participate. So, they were self-selecting to tell their own stories. Once accepted, youth had to fill out a detailed consent form that outlined their (and our) roles, responsibilities and the parameters of participation. They were reminded that they could stop at any time. They were also advised to ask permission before including anyone else (images, videos, words, songs) in their stories.

Once they finished their stories, we sought permission to screen them to the group. Everyone wanted to participate. We then reminded all the youth involved that they owned their own stories. We sent them all home with copies of their digital stories. We then followed up with them at multiple points over the course of a year before sharing them more widely. Some youth (after reflection) decided that they did not want to share their story after all. The things they talked about felt too personal for wider distribution. Other youth wanted to make some edits before sharing. A few youth actually decided to create whole new stories. In each case, their decision was respected and supported by the project team.

The vast majority of our youth leaders were excited to share their final products. We held launches in their communities where they invited friends, family, neighbors and others out to participate in watching the films and talking about what could be done to support youth leadership around HIV prevention. After each launch, we asked youth whether they would feel comfortable sharing their stories more widely. If they said yes, they were posted online: http://www.takingaction4youth.org/digital-stories/

We found it very important to think about consent for participation as being distinct from consent to share. While some youth were happy to create a personal story, they were not quite ready to share it publicly. Furthermore, seeking consent at multiple time points over the course of a few months allowed youth to really reflect on what it might mean to share their story and gave some youth the space to change their minds. This is really important because once you put something up on the web it is very hard to take it down.
In this section, we highlight the young leaders who boldly and bravely shared their stories through digital storytelling. Each story had specific messages and themes. At our reunion retreat in Montreal (one year after the youth made their stories), we worked on creating bios, summaries and identifying themes. We have summarized these here for you with key quotes and descriptions. The digital stories can be found at: http://www.takingaction4youth.org/digital-stories/

Movie title: The First Step

Adrian’s digital story is about connecting with his cultural roots, identity, and the effects that colonization has had on him. He uses music to tell his story.

Adrian Morris is an Algonquin of Piwakanagan. Currently he lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he works as a musician. He was introduced to Taking Action II by his mother. “I wanted to get more involved in my culture and learn more about it.” His story is about, “connecting to my culture and sexual health through music.” Adrian believes that young people can be effective in sharing information to their peers about HIV/AIDS because when the information comes from a peer “it hits them closer to home.”

Themes: remembering, reconnection, colonization affecting identity and growth, connecting to culture, history and elders, identity, music as creation and outlet
Movie title: Survivors and Thrivors

A story of discovering identity, healing, and decolonization through education; the connecting and changing generation.

Renée Monchalin is Algonquin/Huron/and Metis from Fort Erie, Ontario. She connected to Taking Action II through Aboriginal Student Services at Brock University. Renée has been doing research on HIV and AIDS within the Aboriginal community in Canada, and felt that the project could lead to further opportunities to enhance health in the Native population. Renée believes that there is still a lot to accomplish and quotes, “I want to give back to my community.” Renée is confident that finding out about her ancestry helped her to make positive changes in her life. One message in her story is, “believe in yourself...and define your own story.”

Themes: finding identity, colonization, owning culture and identity, healing and decolonization, resilience, the connecting generation.

Movie title: Life through Love

A moving and motivational story about the importance of tradition, sexuality, and loving and respecting yourself.

Kiera-Dawn Kolson is a Gwich’in/T’so T’sine Dne youth from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. She is a multi-disciplinary artist and uses art and music to educate and empower people. Kiera is also an environmental activist and is employed as an Arctic Outreach Campaigner for Greenpeace’s Save the Arctic Campaign. She believes that it is “important to create a better awareness in our community surrounding the truth and we need to let our people know that it’s ok to talk about these things ... we have to care about our younger generation enough to educate and empower them with the understanding of the true detrimental effects of unprotected sex and drug use.”

Themes: healthy relationships, sexuality, importance of traditional knowledge, love and respect for yourself, journey, historical trauma, women and lifegivers
Movie title: Tradition is Common Sense

A story focusing on the importance of culture, tradition, connection to the land and health.

"Honor yourself and honor other people"

Justen Peters is from the Okanagan Indian Band of the Syilx nation. Before to Taking Action II, he had been educated about sexual safety and trained on how to facilitate workshops on STI prevention by the Okanagan HIV/AIDS society. Justen believes Taking Action II was an excellent opportunity to network with people from far and wide as well as learn the similarities and differences between each community; but more so to share and learn ways of helping and protecting ourselves from sexual threats.

Themes: culture, tradition, teachings, health, sexuality, self esteem, strength, cultural identity, we live like the land; connection, spirituality

Movie title: Life on Two Row

Megan’s story explores the cultivation of an indigenous identity through political, cultural, and creative lenses. Using concepts such as the four directions, the two-row wumpum, and matrilineal education, Megan links sexual health and HIV prevention to identity as a young Mohawk artist.

"We are all Mohawk because we chose to live in a good way"

Megan Kanerahtenha:wi Whyte is an artist and art educator from the Mohawk Nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in Quebec. Through her artistic and academic endeavors, her goal is to create a growing curriculum of multimedia visual art and exploratory processes that address issues of Indigenous rights, cultural traditions, and hybrid identities. She believes that sexual health is a crucial part of our identity, which drove her to participate in both the Taking Action I and Taking Action II projects. Megan wanted to gain new knowledge about HIV/AIDS to bring home to her community and to lend her artistic insight to the communities she helped to create through these initiatives. She acknowledges that: “today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders” and “if we learn to listen to each of our stories and lend each of our strengths to a cause, we can work together to be of one mind. We can make change.”

Themes: culture, two row, four directions, strength, ceremony, respecting and protecting yourself, body, mind; spirit, heart, disconnection, gender, sexuality, journey, hiv prevention through cultural lens vs. biomedical lens
Movie title: Time for Change

This story describes the importance of cultural pride, family, community, and how these things as well as education are the key to HIV prevention.

Alexa Lesperance is from Whitefish Bay First Nation (Naotkamegwanning). She is educated about HIV/AIDS but participated in Taking Action II to learn how to be a better advocate for youth. Alexa believes that history plays a role in how people handle the issue of HIV/AIDS and wants them to be aware that it is directly affecting the community. “I feel that when people struggle that’s everyone’s struggle... I saw a video and I saw people who were Aboriginal and how they had felt and I guess that they had got it from unsafe practices and they told their story and when they started talking about how they were feeling: unwelcomed and feeling really disconnected with these really terrible feelings of hopelessness, I really couldn’t help connecting to those people, not because I had HIV, but because I knew what it meant to be disconnected.”

Themes: family is culture, education is prevention, community, we are connected; country, nation, world

Movie title: The Kon’s First Ever Movie

Dale’s story focuses on the negative impacts that alcohol had on his life, and how he takes action to make a change.

Dale Ward is a Mi’kmaq from Red Bank, New Brunswick. He was not very educated about HIV/AIDS and attended Taking Action II to learn: “I didn’t really know too much... now I know a lot...[It] was a great week, but it went quick.” Dale’s story highlights an important turning point in his life of when he “began to go down the wrong path.” He uses his life as an example that substance abuse affects your ability to make good decisions.

Themes: sports, alcohol/partying, negative influences, making positive changes, education, healthy community
**Movie title: Dead Life Acknowledged**

Michael’s story discusses personal experiences, moving forward, and educating and motivating youth for positive change.

*Take a step forward in a new direction*

**Michael Keshane** is Saulteaux from Regina, Saskatchewan. He came to Taking Action II to learn more about HIV/Prevention and to meet new people. He uses his story to educate others about HIV/AIDS, “I have a job to do and I’m not gonna quit now and I’m not gonna quit later. I do this because it’s something I can do and I know it’s a good cause...[I’ve] learned that you never stop growing... I’m very honoured that I got accepted for the project, I learned so much and I’m amazed. Like I said this is only the beginning.” Since participating in the Taking Action project Michael has gone on to do presentations for the Native Youth Sexual Health Network and partake in the Empower: An HIV Capacity Building Project for Youth by Youth.

Themes: life changing, wanted to escape, sobriety, motivational speaker, educating youth

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**Movie title: Dii Giia-hlgalang – My Story**

Shyla’s story speaks about connection and respect to the land, the waters of Haida Gwaii, and taking a stand, like the Elders, in resistance of pipeline development.

*Water is our resource*

**Shyla Cross** is an 18-year-old Haida from Skidegate, British Columbia (Haida Gwaii). She applied to Taking Action II to learn more about HIV/AIDS and to share the information with her community. Her story is a message to the youth in her community, it highlights positive activities and shows there is more to do than drinking and doing drugs. Shyla learned a lot from the training and especially enjoyed connecting with her peers.

Themes: community, connection to the land, drugs and alcohol, tradition, elders, nature, water, pipeline
**Movie title: Sparkle in the Russ**

Scosha’s story discusses the struggles, and negative influences that impacted her life. She speaks about finding her identity, love, acceptance, and giving back to your community.

Scosha Diamond is a Nunatukavot member from Happy Valley- Goose Bay, Labrador. She works as the HIV AIDS Project Coordinator. This project provides education and awareness throughout the region on Sexual Health, Mental health, and other Determinants of Health. Scosha believes when people come together as a whole, it makes for a much healthier world: “We are all one spirit...why not treat everyone and everything with respect?” Her passion is conveyed through her storytelling, her strong spiritual connection, and her love for life. “This universe is filled with beauty and magic, why not embrace it?”

Themes: physically, mentally, emotionally hurt, drugs, alcohol, sex, community, family, acceptance, love, finding your identity, spirituality

**Movie title: Expectations**

Echo’s digital story focuses on family, living up to expectations, pressure, and being an active youth and role model in her community.

Echo McLeod-Shabogesic is a 16-year-old Nipissing First Nations youth who wants to make a difference. She participates on a youth council in North Bay that raises awareness of HIV/AIDS. Echo stated that educating herself more on HIV/AIDS will enable her to discreetly educate friends and peers. “Everybody has problems in their life, although, some might be a little harder to overcome... working through those issues and situations you become a better person for yourself but also you become a leader”.

Themes: family, education, knowledge, leadership, expectations, pressure, success, future generations
Movie title: My Inspiration

Diane’s story discusses how her grandmother was her inspiration, and now she wants to be a role model for her daughter. She talks about finding her inner strength, loving yourself, and making positive life changes.

“People always focus on the negatives of our community and not the positive aspects”

Diane Andrew is from Innu First Nation in Labrador, Newfoundland. Taking Action II was her first experience learning about HIV/AIDS and she sees the importance of sharing the information with others in her community. Diane’s story is about her grandmother and the strength she showed in trying to protect the rights of her community. “I just wish I could have those moments where she was still here with us… she was a really good woman.” Her message to other young women is “you don’t have to have a guy in your life to be happy.”

Themes: inspiration, grandmother, daughter, love, loving yourself, role model, family, land and environment

Movie title: Coming Together - Strong Youth Are a Strong Future

Dominic and Alex’s story speaks about how drugs and alcohol have a large influence on honest people, and how it can bring out the worst in anyone.

“People always focus on the negatives of our community and not the positive aspects”

Dominic Prince is from Nak’azdli First Nation, British Columbia. Dominic recognizes that there are positive aspects to his community as well as challenges and Taking Action II “can be the spark that ignites the flame.” He partnered with another participant, Alexandria, to create a story that captures real life experiences in their community. He believes that awareness and leadership campaigns that target the younger generation can help to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS in his community.

Alexandria Leon is from Nak’azdli First Nation, British Columbia. She participated in Taking Action I and felt that it was “amazing.” Taking Action II is an opportunity for her to do more in her community. Alexandria worked with Dominic to create their story. Their main message is how “to stand up as a community.” She enjoyed meeting youth that were doing the same thing for their community. “I’m not the only one… trying to change for the next generation.” Alexandria feels that it is important to build on the relationships that were formed at Taking Action II, as this was an opportunity to stay connected and support each other’s work. “The workshop was truly amazing… meeting all these incredible youth was memorable.” She leaves Taking Action II with “strength, love and hope.”

Themes: alcohol abuse, substance abuse, family, leadership, strength, future
**Movie title: New Beginnings**

Jossée speaks about struggles in her family while growing up. Everything she has gone through is a result of who she is today as a strong leader.

**Jossée Bernier** is a Metis youth from Oujé-Bougoumou, located in the James Bay region in northern Quebec. She has been an active participant in youth programs, forums and symposiums, but Taking Action II was her first opportunity to participate in a youth program about HIV/AIDS prevention. Jossée shares a life changing moment from her past in her digital story, “I wanted to make my video about something that youth can relate to.”

Themes: Courage, family struggles, depression, suicide, alcohol, healing, strength

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**Movie title: From Boy to Man**

Jake’s story focuses on growing, and learning. When he learned about HIV and AIDS, he became inspired to educate his community.

**Jake Lachance** is from Flying Dust First Nation in Saskatchewan. Jake got involved with the Taking Action II project after a friend’s mother, who was a nurse, made him aware that his community, and those surrounding him, had very high rates of HIV. Jake’s story is about awareness and choice. He believes as long as people in his community have both, they can affect positive change in their life towards ending the spread of HIV and other sexual health diseases. He hopes to carry that message to his people in his digital story: “I want to bring my story back to my community and showcase it in front of a good chunk of the people there so they could see it and they could see that it’s me and it’s not some person that they hired to come talk to the community. You know, it’s one of us. It’s a youth leader… I want to see this help a lot of people and you know maybe not just my own community, maybe my neighboring communities.”

Themes: teaching, learning, growing, healing, strength, community
Movie title: My Mentor, My Teacher, My Mother

Johnny’s digital story focuses on his mother, and how, because of her, he is a leader and striving for change today.

Johnny Mianscum is Cree from the James Bay region of Northern Quebec, where he is also on the Youth Council. He came to Taking Action II to learn about HIV/AIDS and film making. His story is based on the appreciation he has for his mother: “She has always told me to get active in the community to help others and raise awareness.” He strongly wants to educate people in the understanding that “HIV sees no race, sees no age, so you got to raise everyone’s awareness.”

Themes: family, mother, leadership, substance misuse, strength, history, role models, respect

Movie title: Let’s Take Our Culture Back!

Talasia’s digital story is about the Inuit youth today, and how colonization has affected them.

Talasia Tulugak is Inuit from Puvirnituq, Quebec. She was first introduced to Taking Action I three years ago by the Community Wellness Team and became a Youth Leader. She then became interested in Taking Action II. Her passion is to make a difference and to stand out in her community.

Themes: protection, language, ancestors, alcoholism, empowerment
WHAT DID WE DO WITH OUR STORIES?

We helped each youth leader that was interested to organize a movie night to share their films. They each had a $500 budget for food, venue rentals and prizes. Youth got permission from each other to share each other’s films. At any given launch, 3-4 digital stories were screened.

Several youth hosted events in their own communities. These celebrations were a terrific opportunity to spark conversation about community mobilization, HIV prevention, and supporting Indigenous youth leadership. In several places they were also opportunities to partner with local youth-lead initiatives and activism.

Other youth decided to screen their films at local, regional or national forums and conferences. They saw these public venues as a terrific opportunity to get their message out to wider Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.

In addition, our team has been screening the films in classrooms, youth centres and even homes around the country. Audiences love them. These stories talk about the realities of HIV in the context of Indigenous youth’s lives with courage, passion, humour and care. They contextualize the many issues surrounding and connected to HIV in people’s lives and communities and offer a sharp counter-narrative to conventional public health messaging that only focuses on individual behavior change.

After each screening, we always facilitate a Q&A period and a discussion about HIV and Indigenous youth leadership.
We brought the youth leaders together again one year after they made their films to help us think about what the stories all mean. Our youth leaders decided to thematically organize their films. Here are the themes that they saw across their stories, along with some discussion questions that they generated to help you and the youth you work with, think about these issues a little bit differently. We have organized this section so that depending on the topic(s) you would like to discuss or lead a workshop on, you can find the corresponding digital stories and questions to engage in those conversations. These questions and the stories themselves can also be the spark for more interactive activities and games.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title &amp; Themes:</th>
<th>Digital Stories that feature the theme:</th>
<th>Discussion Questions:</th>
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| The Importance of Family        | Scosha, Megan, Justen, Alexa, Kiera, Talasia, Adrian, Shyla, Johnny, Diane | 1. How can I learn my culture?  
2. How do I prepare to be an elder?  
3. Why are elders so important?  
4. Why must we stand up? And why now?  
5. What are the benefits of having role models?  
6. How do you distinguish healthy role models? |
| Appreciation for family and Elders, and being a role model. |                                       |                                                                                       |
| Stay Strong, Stay Sexy, Stay Native | Scosha, Kiera, Justen, Talasia, Diane | 1. What is the connection between spirituality, sexuality, and tradition?  
2. What are examples of Indigenous youth relating sexuality to self-determination and self-respect? |
| This theme incorporates spiritual sexuality in the sense of respecting yourself, self-confidence, and being a strong individual. |                                       |                                                                                       |
| Education is Prevention         | Justen, Dale, Alexa, Kiera, Talasia, Jake, Megan, Renée, Michael, Echo | 1. Why is it important for the youth of today to become educated in prevention?  
2. How did the youth in the videos take steps to become educated?  
3. What other places outside of school do youth have to become educated? And why is it important? |
| Education is key in HIV and AIDS prevention. This theme explores why education is prevention, and taking that first step to learning. |                                       |                                                                                       |
Preserving Our Past, While Embracing the Future
This theme involves examples of cultural history, struggles, healing, and rising above to make a difference.

Scosha, Dale, Renée, Justen, Josseé, Johnny, Kiara, Adrian, Talasia, Megan
1. How many resources are available in your community to access cultural guidance?
2. Who are the mentors available for cultural guidance?
3. What spiritual connections do you have access to which can assist you with your healing?
4. Who supports you?

Strength Among Us
This theme encompasses reaching out to the community, and portraying a positive outlook on the healing journey.

Johnny, Talasia, Scosha, Dale, Michael, Jake, Alexa, Shyla, Adrian, Megan, Echo
1. How do we approach HIV prevention with a positive outlook instead of jumping to the negative?
2. How does one reach out of their own community to discover others in similar situations?

Connection of the Universe
This theme focuses on preserving language, culture, and tradition, to build a healthy, holistic community.

Scosha, Megan, Justen, Kiera, Shyla, Michael, Alexa
1. What is healthy?
2. How is connection to land, culture and language, prevention?
3. How do you build a community?

Addiction has Spoken for Us - Let’s Break the Silence
This theme focuses on struggles with substance misuse, and healing through reconnecting with culture.

Adrian, Scosha, Echo, Michael, Kiera, Dale, Dominic
1. Why are we (youth) silent?
2. Why do we drink?
3. What are the potential risks of drinking? (Body? Mind? Spirit?)
4. How can youth be reconnected with their culture and themselves?

Fifteen stories are now online, along with a video about how they came to be. We hope you like them. We hope they will get you talking. We hope they inspire you to get involved in HIV activism.
WHAT SORTS OF ACTIVITIES COULD YOU PLAN?

The digital stories are great resources that we hope you will use within your communities. The various topics featured in the digital stories can be used to spark dialogue in many different group settings focusing on HIV prevention, health, and youth leadership. Some examples include:

Raising Awareness on HIV/AIDS (workshop in community):

If you are conducting a workshop on health and or HIV prevention, use the digital stories to raise discussions on the questions that are provided in this guide. Additional questions that could be asked are: What did the audience take away from the stories? What does all this have to do with HIV/AIDS? What are some examples of youth leadership in the films? What can you do in your community to make change like these youth?

Art-making workshop:

You can use the stories here as examples to help your youth create their own digital stories.

If you do not have the skills, technology or resources to facilitate a digital storytelling workshop, you could try doing collage or murals or making comic strips. The important point here is to give youth an opportunity to get creative using the resources and talents you have on-hand!

Health Unit in an Academic Setting (classroom):

The digital stories would be a beneficial peer-to-peer learning opportunity in the classroom setting. Students can learn about the struggles, motivations, and social changes that Indigenous youth across Canada are experiencing when it comes to HIV prevention and specific health issues facing them. Showing one or more digital stories, along with raising discussion through the provided questions will provide students with alternate creative ways of learning about HIV prevention. Reading the biographies may also be a good strategy for youth in the classroom to be able to relate to the youth in the stories. As a creative assignment, you can even ask students to create their own stories.

Movie Night:

These digital stories provide a great resource for hosting a movie night in your community. You could show the digital stories and talk about them over popcorn! Have the audience point out the key themes of leadership within the digital stories, and relate it to leadership qualities that they have themselves. You could also show a digital story or two before the screening of another film (i.e. as a mini-preview) as a simple way of raising awareness in the community.
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FOR MORE INFORMATION AND COPIES OF THIS REPORT
www.takingaction4youth.org

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