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Allyship: Braiding Our Wisdom, Our Hearts and Our Spirits

Denise Jaworsky and Valerie Nicholson

Denise Jaworsky, MD

Denise Jaworsky is a settler physician and health researcher living in Northern British Columbia on the unceded territory of the Tsimshian peoples.

Affiliated Clinical Instructor, University of Northern British Columbia.

PhD Student, Institute for Health Policy, Management & Evaluation, University of Toronto.

Valerie Nicholson

Valerie Nicholson is Mi'kmaq, Haida, Gypsy and UK Islander descent, living in Vancouver on the unceded Ancestral Traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the *hex^wməθk^wəyəm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* (Squamish) and *mi ce:p k^wətx^wiləm* (Tseil-Waututh).

Indigenous Peer Research Associate.

British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

AUTHOR CONTACT

Denise Jaworsky

500-4634 Park Ave. Terrace, BC V8G 1V7

Denise.jaworsky@unbc.ca

Phone: 250-615-5088 / Fax: 250-615-5085

ABSTRACT

This is a story about our relationship – a front-line warrior/Elder/community researcher and a settler physician/student/researcher. We would like to share our history with you as an example of how relationships form the foundation of allyship. We present our joint history, weaving our voices together throughout this paper.

INTRODUCTIONS

Valerie

My name is Valerie Nicholson. The name given to me four days after my birth is the One the Eagles Watch Over. I have been gifted the name NoDe WenDa (wolf eyes), and Auntie from the Torres Straight Islanders (Australia). I am of Mi'kmaq, Haida, Gypsy and UK Islander descent. I am a mother of four boys and five grandchildren. I live on the unceded Ancestral Traditional Territories of the Coast Salish peoples, *hex^wməθk^wəyəm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* (Squamish) and *mi ce:p k^wətx^wiləm* (Tseil-Waututh). I work in community-based research as a peer Indigenous research associate. My learnings and teachings have come to me through my ancestors and living experiences. I grew up with *we are all one people of many colours*. I am a

history teller, speaking to our histories through story telling. Today, the history that we tell is one of a relationship and allyship between two people working together in community-based HIV research. The name ally is gifted to someone that practices allyship every day. I have gifted that name to Dr. Denise Jaworsky.

Denise

My name is Denise Jaworsky. I am a settler of (half) Japanese-Canadian heritage. I am fortunate enough to live in the unceded territories of the Tsimshian peoples where I work as an internal medicine physician and health researcher (Jaworsky, 2018). I am also a mother, wife, daughter, and sister. I first met Val as an internal medicine resident at the University of British Columbia in 2012. Prior to this, Dr. Mona Loutfy who works closely with Indigenous communities impacted by HIV in Ontario, had mentored me and provided me with the opportunity to be a part of her work. Early in my training, I was fortunate enough to learn from the late LaVerne Monette who was the executive director of the Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy (OAHAS) and receive guidance from Renée Masching, the Director of Research and Policy at the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN). These two inspirational teachers helped me to understand the complexities of Indigenous-settler relations in research and the importance of supporting Indigenous self-determination in research. Their teachings helped me develop into the person I am today and gave me the capacity to enter into an allyship relationship.

Our reflections on allyship

When we talk about allyship, we define it as understanding and honouring diversity, culture and ways of knowing while working together on a shared goal. Allyship is a lifelong journey that is practiced every day.

CONNECTING THROUGH CONNECTIONS

Valerie

Everything is connected, and we discover these connections on our life's journeys. I begin this journey with a visit to my specialist's office at the Downtown Community Health Clinic with Dr. Mark Hull. He wanted me to meet with someone who want to develop a research project that involved people living in the DTES (downtown eastside) of Vancouver, British Columbia. He wanted to connect us, as he felt that any research done in this area must be guided by someone that lives there and would bring the living experience. As this research would involve Indigenous data, Dr. Hull wanted Denise to connect with me. Our first meeting went well, yet I was cautious—Indigenous peoples have been hurt by research in many ways: by not involving us, by not giving back the data or by just using us. I listened first to learn. Like in any relationship, you must build trust and a strong foundation. Like a rock in the river, you don't step to the next one if the one you are standing on is unsteady.

I talked to my partner James Raven (now in the Spirit World), who had been in and out of the hospital for months, about this project and the passionate young doctor. He told me about a

doctor that had been caring for him and how much her care meant to him. He described how there was no judgement, and she had the courage to ask him questions about his culture and what protocols were to be used around his care. We came to realize that we were talking about the same person and James had already built a trusting relationship. James thought it was awesome that I would have the chance to work with her and gave his blessing. This relationship is like the weaving of a basket. As the basket is woven, you add layers and weave your knowledge and relationships and continue to fill the basket with those that you connect with. The outside of the basket is protection for everything you have put in it, especially your allies.

Denise

When I first met Val, I thought it was just another research meeting. It took several years of learning and self-growth before I realized how important that meeting had been, and how much she had changed my life. I had previously worked on several community-based research projects and recognized the value peers bring to projects. I genuinely believe that all research should be guided by the principle, “*nothing about us without us.*” “*Nothing about us without us*” is a term that was first adopted into HIV activism with the Denver Principles in 1983 and recognizes that people with living experience of a disease must have a voice in decision-making that affects them (Pacific AIDS Network, 2020). I recognize that peers or community members bring essential knowledge to research projects and frequently base projects around co-learning models where academic and community partners each come to the table with something to learn and something to teach. I entered into our relationship eager to learn from Val, but could never have expected that over the next several years, she would become one of my most important mentors. This process was lengthy and required the dismantling of the power relationships that I had become accustomed to. I was used to being the doctor in the doctor-patient relationship. I was the researcher in the researcher-participant relationship. As I allowed these constructs that had been ingrained in me throughout my training to unravel, I was left with materials to use to weave a new basket.

Our reflections on allyship

For us, allyship has been, and continues to be a beautiful journey. Taking in all the experiences and taking the time to get to know each other has been one of the most rewarding parts.

BUILDING OUR BRIDGES

Denise

We have worked together on a series of research projects over the last eight years. These projects focus on working with and supporting Indigenous people living with HIV to develop research questions and direct HIV research. This work first began as Building Bridges (led by Dr. Mark Hull, Dr. Mona Loutfy and Renée Masching). Val and I were part of the team in Vancouver which was guided by Elder Roberta Price. We worked together over a series of four gatherings which we named, “Voices of Wisdom” gatherings. Through this process, we identified that unplanned breaks in HIV medication use was an important issue for Indigenous people living

with HIV, and we moved forward to conduct a study on this topic using data from the Canadian HIV Observational Cohort (CANOC).

Valerie

Working with Denise on Building Bridges added many more rocks in our river, as we built our bridge to work together. What I loved the most was the learning and teachings. We gathered together in a circle where, as teachers we were learners, and as learners we were teachers. In our circle there were many teachings. Denise gave teachings on epidemiology methods and I gave teachings on Indigenous teachings and protocols, including the teaching of doing our work in a good way. In a good way is a law of the land, teaches us to not harm, and to do our work with respect, love, courage, wisdom, truth, honesty and humility. This is what I believe to be a great foundation for allyship. As we worked together using these teachings, our allyship strengthened and a great friendship was forming. Through this research, I was able to see how our allies respected and honoured our traditions. When we introduced ourselves, we took time to honour our name, the land where we were born and our families. Never once were we rushed. Throughout our work, we came together to do ceremony and Elder Roberta provided teaching on medicine pouches and tobacco ties. To see the acceptance and the willingness to learn from our non-Indigenous team members strengthened the relationships.

Our reflections on allyship

By honouring and respecting each other's wisdoms, we have both learned new ways of looking at the world and this allows us to braid our strengths together in the work that we do.

STANDING TALL FOR OUR WORK AND EACH OTHER

Valerie

Denise asked me to co-present the CANOC data on antiretroviral treatment interruption with her at her University of British Columbia (UBC) Internal Medicine Research Day. I believe this is the first time that they had a presenter who was not a UBC internal medicine resident. This was a heartfelt honour. This also exemplifies the practice of allyship—by inviting me to co-present data which included Indigenous participants, she did not claim to own the Indigenous data as a settler. We interwove our findings together with the teaching of *etuptmunk* (Two-Eyed Seeing). I honour the teachings of Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall. Denise and I use Two-Eyed Seeing teachings to guide our work. Two-eyed seeing is a principle where together we learn to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with settler ways of knowing. We help each other to see the value of both ways and weave these ways together to strengthen and honour work that we do (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012). The allyship that Denise has built with me and our work together touched my spirit. With ceremony, prayers, and offerings my Ancestors guided me to honour Denise: at our presentation, in front of her peers, I presented her with an eagle feather, which represents the highest honour and gift.

Denise

Every year the UBC Internal Medicine department hosts a resident research day where residents present research that they have been working on. I had been working on the Building Bridges project during my residency, so this was the project that I wanted to share. However, I knew that it was not my place to be presenting this alone. I invited Val to join me for the presentation and asked my department for permission for her to join as a guest presenter, and for her name to be included in the program. We presented the CANOC treatment interruption data together which showed that Indigenous people living with HIV had higher rates of antiretroviral treatment interruptions compared to non-Indigenous people. At the end of the presentation, Val gifted me with an eagle feather. I was moved and immediately started crying in front of all my colleagues, teachers, and classmates. In that moment I felt vulnerable, displaying emotion in an environment that is meant to be objective and scientific. However, standing there with Val gave me the strength to know that it was ok to be emotional, and that our research is not about numbers – it's about people.

Our reflections on allyship

Allyship is challenging and hard work, but it is also a celebration: a celebration of our togetherness, a celebration of our differences and a celebration of each other.

WEAVING OUR WORDS

Denise

Our co-writing began with a paper from the first Building Bridges study. Peers/Indigenous research team members recognized that Indigenous peoples with HIV were disproportionately impacted by treatment interruptions and that addressing this was a priority for Indigenous communities affected by HIV. The community research team formulated this into a research question as part of the Building Bridges project. Once the results were available, the team decided to share the findings in an academic manuscript that honoured living experience as a form of knowledge. We received research ethics board approval to use team members' stories as knowledge in both the introduction and discussion sections of the paper. We supplemented this knowledge with findings from peer-reviewed publications to articulate why this research topic was important, and how the findings related to other knowledge on the issue of treatment interruption among Indigenous people living with HIV (Jaworsky et. al., 2018). I invited Val to my apartment in Vancouver for dinner so we could work on the first draft of this paper. The mutual trust that had developed allowed us to share food together in my home. This brought us closer together and closer to the collaborative work we were doing.

Valerie

As in a circle, no one is above or below: all are equal, carrying their knowledge and truths and sharing together. Before work is to start, ceremony is first, acknowledging the Ancestral Traditional lands and waters, prayer, smudge and feast. Preparing food in a good way with good

thoughts and laughter is what our body absorbs. To honour the work we do with our traditions is a feeling of love. I feel this is breaking down the barriers of mistrust through hundreds of years of mistreatment. We were building those bridges so that we can walk side by side.

The next writing we did together was a chapter entitled “Ethical Issues in the Care and Support of Women Living with HIV” which was in the book, *Ethical Issues in Women’s Healthcare* (Shanker, 2019). Denise was invited to co-author this chapter and she felt it was essential to include a community voice, so she advocated for this to the editors and was able to invite me to be a co-author. As we worked well together in person, Denise invited me to her home which was now in Terrace, British Columbia. We wove our wisdoms together, wrote, and spent time on the land, travelling to many villages along the Highway of Tears where we felt the impact of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. She knew how important this was to me and this, to me, honours true allyship.

Our reflections on allyship

Allyship requires the formation of equitable and reciprocal partnerships where the contributions to the work are shared.

AN INDIGENOUS-SETTLER TEAM: NAVIGATING IDENTITY ISSUES

Denise

Val and I have had to navigate challenges about identity and representation together when trying to speak as a collective voice. We are both co-Principal Investigators on a project entitled Building More Bridges. This knowledge translation project aims to engage Indigenous people living with HIV as research team members to identify research questions relevant to Indigenous communities affected by HIV in Saskatchewan. We are co-leading this project together, and in doing so have become a part of a research team including Indigenous people living with HIV from across Canada (but predominantly Saskatchewan) and academic researchers. It carries forward our work from Building Bridges, but also includes more time on the land and some new team members to our team.

Our team was asked to provide advice on an unrelated project as it looked like it would have findings significant for Indigenous communities. As a non-Indigenous person, I was upfront in explaining that I could not represent the interests of Indigenous or other racialized communities. I did, however, want to give our Building More Bridges team members the opportunity to be involved in this process if they were interested. Val and I talked on the telephone to discuss how we would present this opportunity to the team and we both agreed on an email response. I sent the email and indicated in the signature that it was from both Val and me. This led to some confusion and also accusations that I, as a settler researcher, was trying to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities. Up until this point, Val and I had not explicitly discussed how to communicate that we are working together using a Two-Eyed Seeing approach and had not considered the challenges with this approach. We had grown so accustomed to writing together that we did not think to provide others with context around this.

Valerie

There is still much teaching to be done. I see meetings where I am not included until the last minute because Denise has been asked to be there to represent our work. I get emails for meetings and then almost as an afterthought they ask, “should we invite Denise?” We both bring different strengths to our work and our own knowledges. This should not be separated but held together—the best work that can be done is seen through our different, but complementary lenses. We are showing the way of how allyship is to be held.

Our reflections on allyship

At times, we forget that our shared journey has been long and that onlookers are only seeing brief snapshots. It is our responsibility to be transparent about how we work together to help our team members navigate collaborative Indigenous-settler work.

OUR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIONS ON ALLYSHIP

Denise

Val had honoured me with an eagle feather early in our relationship. This was one of the greatest honours that she could bestow on me. Later in our relationship, I honoured her in one of the greatest ways that I knew how: by asking her to be a grandmother to my daughter, Maya Tomiko. As we continue on our research journey with a shared goal of supporting Indigenous communities impacted by HIV, we do so now as colleagues, friends and family. Allyship is complex. Although I try to approach my work through a lens of allyship, I cannot claim to be an ally to all (or any) Indigenous communities. I do know that I am an ally to Val and the good work that she does.

I recognize that this is a reciprocal relationship. I have gained so much from our relationship and I appreciate how we bring different but complementary strengths to our work. Val has taught me so much about research, and her insights have been invaluable. Val and I work together towards a common goal of increasing Indigenous leadership in HIV research. We work together towards a common goal of decolonizing settler researchers, starting with myself. At the root of it all, we work together against the impact of colonialism on academic research and the role of research in furthering colonial agendas. In doing so, we practice relational accountability. I am accountable to our relationship and the work we do together. If one of us struggles with an aspect of one of our research projects, we carry that burden together. When we celebrate a success, we do so knowing that we reached that goal together. When I look at our work together, I feel overwhelming pride. I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this work and honoured that Val chooses to continue to work with me. I also know that Val has been kind enough to speak favourably of me to some of her colleagues and I must continually strive to be deserving of this.

Valerie

We have formed our circle, work colleagues, friends, allies, family and they are all woven together, building, growing, teaching and learning all in a good way. Relationships start before

we are born, connected by Mother Earth, and nurtured by the wisdoms of our Ancestors. On our life's journey it is our responsibility to form allyships and to have the courage to stand together. True allyship honours and respects the relationship and has the wisdom to teach others. I have been given the most special gifts: a true ally in Denise and grandmother to Maya. All my Relations.

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