**Research project to highlight Kainai women’s activism and build historical literacy**

In line with the recommendations that flowed from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), a research project led by Dr. Carol Williams, a professor in Women and Gender Studies and History at the University of Lethbridge, will assemble diverse historical and contemporary accounts about Kainai women’s community reform work from 1968 to 1990.

“Our goal is to generate a history of southern Alberta Kainai women’s grassroots activism for social change,” says Williams. “We want to expand historical literacy to illustrate how women have positively transformed their communities.”

Williams will collaborate with Hali Heavy Shield (BA, BEd ’06; MEd ’12), vice-principal at Aahsaopi Elementary School on the Blood Reserve; Linda Weasel Head, the library and learning coordinator at the Kainai Public Library, and Faye Heavy Shield, a nationally exhibited independent artist and Hali’s mother.

“The process of the project demonstrates Indigenous epistemology because it’s a coming together that will give youth, women and us, as a community of researchers, a chance to collaborate,” says Hali Heavy Shield. “In a sense, that’s the traditional way of knowing and learning for Kainai. We’re very much being authentic to the family systems of learning.”

The project, titled *Kainai Women’s Activism in Treaty 7 Territory 1968 to 1990: Contemporary Histories of Social Change*, has received more than $121,000 over three years from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

“This research project is very timely, given the 94 calls for action that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” says Hali Heavy Shield. “We had two residential schools in Kainai, St. Paul’s and St. Mary’s, and so now is a time for the process and a call on our federal, provincial and even our community leadership to first tell the truth about our own history.”

Students will be involved in every step of the research, including creating a preliminary display consisting of historical articles, photos or government reports to be used as a starting point for conversations at community gatherings. Williams says many historical documents have not been accessible to community members and the research project is committed to repatriation of a range of relevant records.

The study will use a variety of methods to engage with community. Williams says her previous research on Indigenous women’s social and educational activism has indicated that the health and education of children has been a key motivation for action. For example, Faye (Heavy Shield), Hali (Heavy Shield) and Linda (Weasel Head) were part of the community group that was instrumental in building the partnership with Blood Tribe Chief and Council, Kainai Board of Education and Chinook Arch Regional Library System to get the public library on the reserve. The library was crucial in building literacy through access to books and the Internet.

Linda Weasel Head speaks to these ambitions: “Our goal in creating a library was to offer an essential service on the reserve as many people were unable to get to services in surrounding communities. The bigger picture is to offer an opportunity to increase literacy skills and that reading, writing and numeracy skills assist over time in lowering poverty. Our library’s motto, *Okstakit* (read), reflects what our people did to survive, thrive and pass on knowledge or *pommotsiiysinni.* Our library is a facet of all those purposes or *ihpipototst* and opportunities, or *aksistoiypaittapiisini,* while demonstrating kindness or *kimmapiipitsinni*, and respect or *innakotsiiysinni.* Most important is *aasimmoiyihkanni*, as we are all spiritual beings who must look out for each other through prayer and positive actions.”

Faye Heavy Shield reflects on how making art can also be part of women’s activism, as it was artists who kept traditional songs, ceremonies and beadwork alive, despite federal prohibitions against cultural and ceremonial life: “As a child, through the stories told me by *Sommitsikana,* I experienced an immersive adventure into the fantastic where animals spoke and a hero came to life from a blood clot. Later, I recognized the more profound impact of maintaining language, imagination, and the aspiration to values of kindness, courage and creativity and, not the least — time spent with a grandmother.”

The Kainai women’s project will include a series of cultural and historical workshops for all age groups. The workshops might take the form of using art to make graphic histories, sessions of storytelling, archival scanning of historical family photographs, talking circles or other small conversational gatherings.

“I am an educator and I hope to use my experience in the classroom to bring about and encourage and inspire members of the community to tell stories and to be inspired themselves, to tell their truth and to share,” says Hali Heavy Shield.

“One central motivation for this project is to expand historical literacy about women’s labour and social and community activism,” says Williams. “Another of the major eventual outcomes will be a sustainable website that will become a legacy for Kainai educators teaching kindergarten to Grade 12, but also for university students and other researchers.”

Williams said another important goal of the project is to mentor and train Indigenous students so they can continue to build Kainai community histories and develop marketable skills for their future careers. Several research assistants have joined the project to assist in reviewing and assembling archival documents, helping with design of workshops and contributing to the thematic organization of the project.

Charlene Oka (BA ’17), *Ii’ni’skin’akii* (Buffalo Stone Woman), is a member of Kainai, mother to five children and grandmother to two grandsons, with a granddaughter on the way. She is working toward applying to graduate studies and is exploring and learning more about Kainai and its historical roots.

Sonny Brewer was raised with Blackfoot traditions and ceremony and brings an understanding of cultural practices and protocol to the Kainai Women’s project. As a third-year music (composition) student, Brewer offers a different perspective on the project, through a lens rooted in the aural realm.

Erin Turner, a fourth-year history major at the U of L, will lend her expertise as an archival researcher. Her travels abroad have given her a greater respect for cultural diversity in Canada and around the world.

Rachel Hoof, *Sootaaki,* (Rain Woman), is a fourth-year social work student studying at the University of Calgary’s Lethbridge campus. Hoof wants to help youth, women and families as they work toward healing and recovery from the historical impacts of colonization.

Cherilynn Blood, *Puhksikaki’ihkitsikimuhksaki,* is a member of Kainai and the mother of one. She is working towards becoming a teacher of Social Studies and Native American studies. She’s an advocate for Indigenous peoples and looks forward to working on the Kainai women’s project to learn more about Blackfoot history for future use in classrooms.

“Our commitment is to collaboration, reciprocity and challenging the colonial character of the archives with alternative stories and histories,” says Williams. “We will find our path as we go.”