

LEGACY OF HOPE FOUNDATION

PODCAST EPISODE FEATURING MIKE MITCHELL

Gordon: Hello and welcome to the Voices from the Land: Indigenous Peoples Talk Language Revitalization Podcast produced by the Legacy of Hope Foundation. Tansi, I'm your host, Gordon Spence, from the Tataskweyak Cree Nation in northern Manitoba. I also am the community facilitator for the Legacy of Hope Foundation. Today I am joined by my colleague and co-host, Andrew Bomberry, a Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. Andrew is a curriculum developer, writer, researcher, and teacher. Welcome.

And today our guest is Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell. He's one of the most respected First Nations leaders in Canada. Born in Akwesasne and raised by a traditional family, Kanentakeron had the benefit of a strong cultural and spiritual upbringing.

Fluent in the Mohawk language, he has successfully applied traditional diplomatic skills in solving today's challenges to first nations on local regional and national levels in all areas of development renewal. For three decades Kanentakeron has served his people in a political capacity, as chief and grand chief in one of the most volatile yet progressive First Nations communities in Canada.

His vision to help restore the independence of the Mohawk people of Akwesasne is based on applying the best of both Haudenosaunee philosophy and modern democratic government systems.

In 1982 Kanentakeron was elected as district chief to the Mohawk council of Akwesasne, representing Kahwenoke Island District. In 1984 he became the Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, then with a membership population of ten thousand. He held the position until 2002, when he retired from 20 years in politics.

In the summer of 2003 the community brought him out of retirement to again serve as District Chief of Cornwall Island for one more term. Afterwards he resumed his position as Grand Chief until 2006, when the membership population had increased to 14,000. In 2009 Kanentakeron returned back to his position as Grand Chief of the Mohawk council of Akwesasne and held this position until 2015 when he decided to take a break from politics to devote more time on his book on nation building.

In 2018 he began working for the Assembly of First Nations in Ottawa, acting as advisor to the national chief, as well as resident elder for the AFN national organization.

Prior to politics Kanentakeron has also worked as an ironworker (local 440), filmmaker, national film board and director of cultural education at the North American Indian Travelling College. Kanentakeron was recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Award Medal for the Aboriginal community and regional national leadership.

In 2015-16 Kanentakeron was awarded the Inspire Award for Indigenous political leadership in Canada.

He's also had two publications: one was called traditional teaching of our people, and the second publication was on Lacrosse: our national game. Kanentakeron has also been involved in movies through the National Film Board, and he was also involved in several award-winning documentaries that focused on Indigenous issues.

Welcome, Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell, and thank you for taking the time to do our podcast. I am going to read a little bit about the description of the project, so you have a clear understanding of what we're talking about and we're going to be focusing on in our podcast.

As part of the Legacy of Hope Foundation's mandate and mission, we are working to promote Indigenous language revitalization as a critical step in the healing of generations of survivors and their communities from colonial policies and practices which robbed Indigenous people of their first language. The goal of this project is to help support Indigenous language reclamation through interviews with Indigenous language teaching experts. The target audience for this work are Indigenous language teachers. We hope that by sharing accessible podcasts of interviews with people doing interesting and relevant work on language promotion, we can help facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas and practices that are relevant to the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages.

While there are many contexts that are particular to specific nations and dialects within their regions, we are hoping to provide additional tools and platforms that can help with Indigenous language revitalization, despite the many differences. As part of our efforts to promote discussion and reflection on the impacts of being able to express yourself in your traditional language, we are reaching out to speakers or others who can provide context and elaboration on the insights, values, worldviews, that come along with being able to understand and express oneself in their own language.

Our hope is that these interviews will help foster interest and action in those listening to pursue their Indigenous language, or invigorate those who are teaching it to share these insights with their learners, to further motivate and increase learner success.

That said, we'll just get right into the questions and discussions we will have with Mr. Mitchell. The first question I have for you is: how does speaking your native language with your family members make your lives better?

Michael: I was actually raised by two families very early in my childhood. I lived with my grandparents on an island east of Cornwall Island across from the village of Saint Regis, off the St. Lawrence River. My grandfather had a farm; probably had about 30 head of cattle. No electricity; no paved

roads; no cars. Probably the best memories I've had. Stayed with them maybe three years. Probably was about maybe around seven years old before I moved to live with my real parents on Cornwall Island.

So that time that I got to spend with my grandparents was when I learned the language, reinforcement, hunting, medicine, gathering, living off the land; everything that would equip me later in life. And when I went to Cornwall Island to live with my parents and my two other brothers and sisters, I went to a public school. So that really was a changing of the mind because there were a lot of – a lot of students; there were cars; there was highways; there was a sudden jolt in everyday life for me.

But my parents, both my parents, were Mohawk-speaking, so everything in the household was in Mohawk. The only change for me when going to school: I didn't speak a word of English. It took a while, and I might say most of my other fellow students also were in the same situation. We really didn't speak any English. So I was kind of starting right from the very beginning.

But it was kind of like what you read about now with Indian day schools and residential schools, because it was kind of rough. The teachers spoke with an accent and hard to understand. But all in all, I mean, I finally was able to learn the language, appreciate the school somewhat – mostly from being reinforced with being with other students going up to the grade system et cetera.

So up until grade six I was a student at the union day school in Akwesasne before I went to Cornwall Public School for seven and eight, before I went to high school. And went as far as grade 12 before I became a ironworker.

And that's a little bit of a fast look at my youth history.

Gordon: Right. So you speak Mohawk, learn it from your parents, your grandparents. And when you speak your language, how does it make you feel? Do you feel different than when you speak English?

Michael: Well, they try to teach you that speaking your own language is wrong, first of all. You know? Sometimes you get the strap; sometimes you get penalized. And you can't help it if that's the only language you know. At the same time because you know your own language, they give you confidence – confidence to stay strong, confidence to speak whatever small portions of English you know, confidence to stay in school and learn because you have confidence in yourself as a human being.

My grandfather always taught me: he said don't ever be ashamed when they try to do things to you because you speak your language. And that clearly became evident as I went through the grade system.

But yeah, and it wasn't just my language. Living with my grandparents I learned the ceremonies that went on in the longhouse that I learned the

songs; I learned the speeches. At a very young age. That's the comfort and the wisdom of elders that used to visit my grandparents is I had an another type of education, which was all based on ceremony, and the spiritual life of traditional walkways.

So I had that confidence as a human person in school. When they try to break you, that's what you had to rely on to stay strong and even fight back at times – that you didn't really want to get pushed around. But all in all it did serve me well because I saw a lot of other students that broke in and they lost their confidence; they failed in school; they didn't do well. If that was a goal then they probably succeeded but we held each other up. Those of us that spoke the language, held each other up and made sure that we helped each other in school. That's the way it began.

Gordon: OK. When we're talking about revitalization of languages there's been a lot of communities that are further behind than others and more likely communities that are isolated are still speaking their language fairly strong, where others that are not so remote and have been influenced by the outside society have begun to lose their language and in some cases have completely lost their language and only speak English in their communities. Has there been, like, a conscientious effort in your community about ensuring that the language is revitalized and to remain strong and to continue to grow?

Michael: I guess to a certain degree I'm a product of that. I always, as a leader, spoke my language first; let people know I'm proud to be Mohawk. I'm proud to know the language of my ancestors, to know the ceremonies. And even though I'm in a modern-day elective system where things are run by Indian affairs and laws are governed by RCMP and provincial authorities, in the midst of all that I made it my own personal decision that I would never vacate the importance of our culture, language, community values. So I stood up very proud of my background and let it be known.

And to an extent it affected the school system because within one year the Indian affairs was responsible for education in Akwesasne. My first year we took over education from Indian affairs and set up our own Mohawk board of education. And then we made language part of our school curriculum. We made the curriculum [meeting? 00:12:44] with our history and made more of our community events more acceptable, more understandable.

So the big switch in doing that, it had a lot to do with keeping kids in school – the desire to do well. The graduation attendance went up. And so everybody knew. The parents in the community knew that there was something, a release that made us stronger as a people. And so I got a lot of support from the community in taking that – charting that course of saying we should never be ashamed of who we are; we should never be ashamed of not speaking our language.

And so every time I've had a meeting I made sure my language was spoken first.

Gordon: Yeah. I remember the first time I saw you speaking you were running for the national chief – the AFN national chief as you're one of the candidates running and the first thing I remember. I noticed that your first words that came out of your mouth were in Mohawk. So I always remember that time and I was quite impressed as well many of my friends and colleagues at the time were saying who is this guy. You know? He's speaking his own language. He's taking, you know –

Michael: Well, I tell you.

Gordon: Go ahead.

Michael: It was quite an experience at that time to run this national treaty but it was politics – it was fairly new to everybody. But they asked me to run, based on the success I've had in Akwesasne. But, at the same time, you know, Akwesasne was always engaged in turmoil. And we had to find our own solutions within. Lawmaking, policing, education were all instruments to have law and order society but on top of that the backbone of a strong community is the culture and the language. And I promoted that to every opportunity I had. So when I ran for national chief the people had heard me somewhere and they were – they liked the idea that I'm strong on culture and language but they were also other chiefs across the country were also very scared that I might start a war with Ottawa –

Gordon: Right.

Michael: – because they had seen bridge demonstrations, blockades, taken over islands in the Saint Lawrence. Well, [unintelligible 00:15:14] and fire and I was that [unintelligible] as well. And a lot of the youth movements. And I brought that back to the political scene because the time for being herded around by Indian affairs, it has – it's got to end. We can stand for ourselves. Leading the way in the resurrection of our culture and awareness of who we are, and standing up for ourselves; we're all the same ingredients of being proud of. And never been ashamed any longer of who we were.

And so with me, starting with taking over education from the government, from the provinces, setting up our own, and then, over time, seeing the change. The graduation went up a student on to high school, college, university. The mood changed. Even among our young people, when they went to hockey or lacrosse national championships, they carried their own flag, they sang their own songs. And even with whatever language they were able to muster, they spoke it proudly. And then they began to feel that this is the best way of identifying who we are – is to be proud of who we are.

And so in that decade and in the short time I was a leader, that came into presence. And so after we had a – and we took over the election. We

made it our own. The Election Court of Akwesasne was decided if there was any protest, appeals that was done by the committee and not by Ottawa. And the same thing with education; the same thing with justice and policing. We started a trend of actually taking over. We took over just about every aspect in health.

And involving elders. We set up our own traditional medicine program to work alongside with the doctors and the nurses. And in that medicine program they were teaching people, young families, about ceremony and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

All these factors came in as a matter of great importance to our societies, our Mohawk society, and to our daily existence. And so it changed a lot of things back to a good way. And that's a product or the experience I've had as a leader.

Gordon: OK. What are some challenges that a community might face when deciding to revive their, like, their traditional language? What are some obstacles that a community can expect to face?

Michael: Well, the mindset is that everybody has to, on the outside, whether it's government or federal, provincial or township, school system, outside the territory, outside the reserve. They're used to a certain criteria, the example of what is deemed success. And for us the success had to be built within ourselves, recognizing who we are and that at the time we're not included. We're not including the history books; we're not included in geography; we're not included in any way that acknowledgments need to be made.

And so our balance was off. We didn't get the reinforcement; we didn't get the confidence. So part of our involvement as a community was changing that and thinking better for ourselves, becoming more aware of who we are as a people.

And so a lot changed in the short time because people felt that they were going in a good direction. The bureaucracy. You always had somebody from the outside coming down, whether it's Indian Affairs or Health Canada or social or what have you, with a briefcase and saying this is what you can do. You need to apply here. You know? We need to look at it and make decisions from the outside.

We didn't accept that. You know? We felt we should be accountable to our people. We asked Indian Affairs – well, I asked, and lobbied the Minister of Indian Affairs to take his staff and let our own people take over the administration.

I took these courses in Arizona called native nations institute nation building. And part of the thing that I found out was you can do all this with your own people: seek out, build confidence. And so the majority of our staff were all native; were all Mohawk. And so that began a process of accountability. You know? We came to report our annual budget

report, our administration report, went to the committee instead of to Ottawa. Everything that we learned, separating politics from administration. Don't get into micromanagement. Be respectful of your political office and what you got to do. Build an encouragement within your school system, within a community.

And so all those factors came in. It had a lot to do with the turning around. Because when I come along the council and the committee itself were in a deficit situation. And so the nation-building process started.

Within a few years we went a long ways to gain the respect from outside, from government, from the communities at large, from the school system, that we could do these things. And the formula wasn't anything that we derived from teachings on the outside – non-native system; the confidence building that we did was drawn from our own identity as Onkwehon:we people. And the turnaround, even the churches came onside. Even the people who were strong Christians in the community started working alongside, recognizing that the traditional people and themselves are not enemies. You know? They need to recognize each other.

So a lot of things happened that was to the good. We got to respect, how we reported a responsible way of handling our finances, our programs, the professional manner, confident of our community and how we do business. And so there was a boom for quite a while – about 20 years of building. Even the codes. Housing codes. Everything that we could get our hands on, we looked at it and put an Indigenous touch to it, you know, so the flavour to it so that we could identify or the community could identify with it that it became theirs.

A lot of things happened that resulted in a good way. Just talking as fast as I can and remembering as fast as I can. What builds success? At the bottom of it was turning back the pages of saying why do you want to be ashamed of being an Indigenous person when the greatest impact you can have is to stand up and be proud? And that includes your language, your traditional teachings, storytelling, being aware who you are. And it had a great impact in our community and had great success. Just in reaching out and letting people know that you care, you care for your family, yourself as an individual.

We started dealing with people that came home from residential schools and the loss of identity. So everybody started working together and working with each other and helping them, ceremony, making them and knowing who they are and rebuilding them. All those things happened in – well, I can't say it's your time, but I think the biggest battle was rejecting government policy and standing up or building our own, that we figured is far more responsible, more easier for us to live under. They say we broke rules, but I don't believe we broke rules. We might have bent them a little bit but we identified things that work for the community and it builds success and that's the way it went.

Gordon: Excellent. Excellent. Excellent. Excellence. What are your thoughts on teaching Indigenous languages in public schools?

Michael: Well, that's another little project. We had the experience – our community in Akwesasne is divided in half where one half is in Canada, the other is in the United States. The part that is in Canada, one half is in Ontario, the other half's in Quebec. So we've got five government jurisdictions on the outside. We have three governments. We have the tribal government on the US side of the reserve, we have elected band council government on the Canadian side, and then we have a traditional government for all of the community that's drawn on culture, cultural teachings, ceremony, language et cetera.

And rather, before I come along, everybody was always fighting each other and because I'm from the traditional side we try to open the door of communication, listen to each other and identify things that we could work on together.

And so it had a lot to do with our success and stopping the infighting that went on inside. Now, on the US side of Akwesasne, they built a small school. It's called the Akwesasne freedom school. And everything was taught in the Mohawk language. They didn't accept any money from Washington or from Ottawa. There is – all the fundraising was done by the parents and it set a real good example because there it was the parents that had to go in taking turns from cleaning the classrooms and identifying curriculum materials, getting involved in education. And that was in – started in the late '70s. And it still exists today. It's one of the leading components of level of immersion teaching.

And I wanted to say that because what it resulted from that is we have about three immersion schools in Akwesasne at different grade levels. In the school system we have a couple of schools: one in Snaihne and one in the village. We have the freedom school. And so the kids that are going to school now are being taught their own language, and they're being taught in the subjects that you would get as if it was a non-native. And we didn't step back and say we're going to disregard this and that. They did select some important things that moved up in by degree of importance, but the committee has, along the course of the generation, recognized that you need to have your own language spoken. You need to have awareness of culture and tradition as a reinforcement to your identity. And it started from – now it's in the school system.

And so the success that has been built on has led to higher graduation levels. Young children now, students, are far more aware of who they are as a people. And so going on, there comes a time when you have to leave the community and go to school in college or university far away. And the reconnection, the reinforcement, in earlier times in school has helped them retain that connection. Whereas before, if you're going to be successful and you go to your college university, without knowing your culture or language, you just kept going. You didn't think of coming back home. All you said was if I'm going to be successful I got to make it in a

white man's world. Seldom they'd marry us and they'd leave. Occasionally they come back. It's different now. Everybody is proud of who they are and when they graduate they – first thing they do is come home and see what they can do to contribute.

And so it's been mostly positive that I have seen, as I have stepped away from politics after 30-something years, the success that I have seen is along those lines of cultural language, awareness of themselves, and it's a whole. The whole community has benefited from asserting its desire to retain itself as a nation of people.

Gordon: Right. There's a lot of communities across Canada working on Indigenous reclamation of their languages. What can communities do to support Indigenous language revitalization in their communities? What can people do to support these activities – these initiatives – of bringing their language back to their community?

Michael: Well, it's been our experience that residential school and government bureaucracy has done its – their job of brainwashing our people. Even churches had some to do of us losing our identity, you know, our confidence as a people. And so you need those people to recognize it's far better to let us maintain our culture, our language, to build confidence. And so it takes a bit.

It's a struggle for some communities to recognize that, that times are changing. People are becoming more aware. And to some communities, some of them, like you were saying a while ago, they've lost the language, they've lost knowledge of who they are, they've lost the confidence, and all they are is card-carrying-status Indians. And beyond that and so they've got a ways to go.

But I think there's a trend now. The trend in this country for First Nation people to say we want to grow as a people, we want to recapture the strength that we've had before, and it's all in language. If we don't have that we're not going to be strong. And that seems to be – I mean, in political circles now, our recognition of the leaders, our recognition of communities. But you got to change the mind-set. And for many that people that I believe that if you don't speak your language you'll do well in school; you'll be better off when you grow up. It's changing. It's not like that anymore. And I think that that's what we got to keep on doing – is encouraging our people to maintain that spirit. Maintain their languages as a people; Indigenous language. And I can tell you from experience that they'll do a lot better.

Gordon: Well said. I'm going to ask you, Mike, to do a closing summary in Mohawk. But before I ask you to do that, Andrew, do you have any questions for Mike?

Andrew: No questions. I would just say I'm from Six Nations and I really appreciate and resonate with your message.

Michael: Yeah. I visited Six Nations quite a bit. I'm quite familiar with the community. We had some tough lacrosse games with Six Nations over the years. Yeah. We respect each other greatly and we always try to work with each other. So, yeah. [unintelligible 00:31:04] to all the people over there, they've picked up a few languages from the elders over there – Oneida, Onondaga. Besides Mohawk language it's somewhat of an adventure to learn as much as you can. And a lot of those elders are not there anymore to teach, and then we recognize how important they were. You know?

I worked with Hubert Buck, Roy Buck, Jake Thomas. I've had them all work for me at the travelling college in Akwesasne as we were building and we drew, because they said they wanted to inspire and they needed the opportunity.

So, yeah, we're quite familiar. I had good relations with the people from Six Nations.

Gordon: OK. I don't have any other questions and so I'm going to ask Mr. Mitchell to maybe summarize a message about language reclamation. If you can speak it in Mohawk, that'd be pretty cool.

Michael: OK. All right. Spoken in Mohawk: [Can I ask for your attention for a short while; I have been invited to address a matter of great importance with respect to our people's desire to continue speaking our Indigenous languages which our people have spoken to each other, since time immemorial. I am talking about our own language that we would normally speak today within our Indigenous communities. We have only noticed how precious and sacred our languages are only after we realized how close we were to losing it forever. Much of the loss of our languages can be attributed to being forced to go to residential school and leaving behind everything related to our nation identity, starting with the denial of our children from speaking our own languages while in school. After they finished their education in these institutions and returned home, our young people no longer spoke or understood the language of their people.

Everyone on the outside, from government agencies, churches and school systems had all tried to convince our people that we would be far better off if we left behind our identity as Indigenous people and become one with the outside society. We are now aware of the great damage that has been done to our people by taking on someone else's identity and culture, including the language that identifies the nations that we belong to.

We had to ask ourselves how important our culture and language was to the survival of our Nation identity, how we communicated with each other within our communities, to the land, to the waters, to all of creation, and ultimately in ceremony to the Creator. Today our elders give thanks to the people who have maintained their culture and language; many of our young have started to appreciate the importance of their identity as nation people and are asking how they can regain knowledge of their languages. It is now up to us to speak up and give direction of our future

path as Indigenous people. There is no greater importance and strength than speaking the language of our Nations, to be able to conduct meetings, ceremonies while adding support to our education needs and not surrendering our nation identity.

It is time for us to tell our young people not to be ashamed of their identity as Indigenous people, encourage them to maintain their language and culture, remind them that the Creator gave all the land, water and winged animals of the world their own language and songs, and that we too as humans, were given the same. This is the message that I want to pass on to all our young people, of how important it is to recognize and appreciate the culture and language of our nations. That is what I wish to say for now. Niawenkowen [Big thanks].

Gordon: Thank you very much. On behalf of the Legacy of Hope Foundation I want to thank you for taking the time to speak to us today on the Indigenous languages podcast project. Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell from the Mohawk nation, you're a good role model and an inspiration to first nations with the wealth and knowledge and experience. Thank you very much. We really appreciate your time and effort that you put in with us today. Thank you, sir.

Michael: Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure. And good luck. I hope you guys keep going. We need this, so congratulations on the work that you're doing.