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# NAWHULNA: THE TIME IS RIGHT

The Exploration Place, Lheidli T'enneh  
and the rethinking of a local museum



In 2017, The Exploration Place Museum and Science Centre, in Prince George, and the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, received a Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Community Programming for their new permanent gallery, *Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning*, which, in the words of the award citation, "serves as a model for how Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can work together to reclaim traditional spaces, protect cultural assets and promote a greater understanding and respect for Indigenous history and experiences." The award celebrated a new gallery in The Exploration Place, but it also recognized a shift in the way a regional museum thinks, works with and represents the First Nation in whose territory it is located.

When it first re-opened in 2001, The Exploration Place's *Ted Williams History Hall* exhibited photographs and artifacts depicting life during the earliest pioneer days in Prince George, the impact that Euro-Canadian settlers had on the landscape and how the landscape shaped the community socially, culturally, and environmentally. The History Hall conveyed a sense of the resiliency and determination that early Euro-Canadian settlers showed in creating the community of Prince George; however, what it failed to convey was how Euro-Canadian settler society affected the Lheidli T'enneh people whose traditional territory includes

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the Prince George town-site. While there was a separate gallery, *All the Time We Have Lived on the Land*, exploring the seasonal round and displaying some Dakelh material culture, the exhibits did not represent Lheidli T'enneh culture or portray their resiliency and determined efforts to keep their culture alive in the face of colonial oppression and loss of lands and resources. The museum was missing valuable insight and a large piece of our region's history. Realizing that it needed to change, in 2006 the museum embarked on research that ultimately resulted in two temporary exhibits, each one diving deeper into controversial and unexplored topics, namely residential schools and the first public discussion of the 1913 expulsion of the Lheidli T'enneh from their village site. The success of this work expanded the basis of trust between the museum and the Lheidli T'enneh and culminated in 2013 with an award-winning, third temporary exhibit, *Cultural Expressions*, to coincide with the Lheidli T'enneh's hosting of the Provincial Elders Gathering.

The museum, in partnership with the Lheidli T'enneh, has continued to work towards the common goal of telling a more complete story of Prince George's history by correcting the lacunae in our galleries while developing programs and deepening relationships with the local Indigenous community.



We are working together to raise the level of literacy on the sometimes-dark history of post-contact relationships between Euro-Canadian settlers and the First Nations of the area. Controversies and difficult conversations have emerged from the presentation of this information, which was new to some members of the public and challenged some non-Indigenous views of our regional history. Since a large portion of Prince George's non-Indigenous population did not have any insight into this history, these exhibits reset the museum's relationship with its non-Indigenous audience as well.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the role high staff retention played in the building and support of this relationship. The Exploration Place has focused on this relationship and made sure that individuals in permanent, core positions are the ones working with the Lheidli T'enneh on new projects and initiatives. This has allowed for a deepening of trust between core staff involved at The Exploration Place and the Elders at Lheidli T'enneh as they have continued to work together.

Opening of Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning on June 21, 2017

Photo credit:  
James Doyle

**Opposite page:** The gallery entrance to Hodul'eh: A Place of Learning is built to look like a contemporary take on a Lheidli T'enneh traditional pit-house. Photo credit: Exploration Place Museum and Science Centre





Opening of  
Hubodul'eh: Mary  
Gouchie and Our  
Living Languages on  
September 14th, 2019  
Photo credit:  
James Doyle

Beginning in 2016, the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation and The Exploration Place embarked on the creation of a new permanent gallery that would explore the Lheidli T'enneh material and oral culture. The Lheidli T'enneh Nation Chief and Council as well as the Lheidli Elders Group engaged in multiple consultations and made vastly significant contributions to the conception, content, language, and style of the gallery. We drove out to the community several times and held meetings at The Exploration Place only when more convenient for the Elders. Through community consultation we made sure that we were following protocol and asking for assistance in a respectful and meaningful manner. This included paying honorariums when appropriate.

Consultation is not something that happens overnight, and it isn't something that should be done if constructive criticism isn't going to be accepted. The timeline has always been important and neither organization wanted to rush important decisions. We made sure to take any criticism with humility. When appropriate, we laughed at ourselves; sometimes with a group of Elders laughing

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with us. We made mistakes along the way but the journey to completion was an important one. We discovered firsthand the importance of friendship, inclusiveness, and the strength of co-operation.

On June 21st of 2017, the gallery titled, *Hodul'eh-a; A Place of Learning*, was opened. This gallery is a partnership: The Exploration Place and Lheidli T'enneh opened it in celebration together. In addition to the opening of this gallery, The Exploration Place and the Lheidli T'enneh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This MOU has formalized our hand-shake agreements and has protected both the Lheidli T'enneh and The Exploration Place from potential staff turnover and policy changes. The goal of the MOU is to protect and preserve the cultural assets of the Lheidli T'enneh Nation while sharing their traditions, from their perspective. It clarifies the role The Exploration Place will play as the designated repository for Lheidli T'enneh cultural materials and establishes a protocol for access, research, display, preservation, and collection of these objects and stories.

The mutual goal of the organizations is to gradually bring Lheidli T'enneh materials into one secure space, currently The Exploration Place, under a single database and under the legal ownership of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. As expertise, time and funds permit, the Lheidli T'enneh may determine to move their collection into their own Cultural Centre in the future.

With the signing of the MOU on June 21, 2017, we began long-term repatriation work with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. The MOU transferred the legal ownership of all Lheidli T'enneh materials in The Exploration Place to the Lheidli T'enneh Nation. It also allowed The Exploration Place to assist in the repatriation of Lheidli collections from other organizations.

Both partners recognize that repatriation can be a long and complex process. Because the basis of our relationship is friendship, we are confident we can work together to develop ceremony and protocols for the repatriations that will respect traditions and celebrate our collective futures.

While the work is by no means complete, the relationship with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation has been strengthened. The trust enjoyed between the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation and The Exploration Place has grown over two decades of mutual effort. The history of Canada is being rewritten as we strive to correct past misconceptions and wrongs.

There are several new and exciting partnership projects in the works with the Lheidli T'enneh and we are enthused to be a part of them. We currently have two members of the Lheidli T'enneh that sit on our Board of Trustees. One is an elected representative, and the other saw the value in having their voice heard at the table. As one Elder told The Exploration Place Chief Executive Officer, Tracy Calogheros and I, now is the time for these sorts of projects and now is the time for meaningful engagement. The time is right; Nawhulna!

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This image features two Elders as they visit the *Cultural Expressions* Exhibit in 2013 during the BC Elders Gathering. Photo credit: Dave Milne

