



Tahayghen students lead “profound” potlatch celebrating Haida culture

It wasn't a typical year at Tahayghen Elementary School (TES), and, for Grade 7 students, it wasn't a typical graduation either. In June 2021, TES students capped off their school year by – for the first time in recent memory – leading an exuberant outdoor potlatch celebrating Haida culture. Gwaii Trust Society funded this Masset-area project with a COVID-19 Grant of \$10,000. In 2021, this grant has focused on projects that support mental health and reduce social isolation among Haida Gwaii residents.

The pandemic has certainly led to feelings of isolation across Haida Gwaii, and it has taken an emotional toll on kids and their families. The K-7 student body is normally free to intermingle, but necessary health regulations have kept students apart. Extended families have had to stay physically distant. Some grieve the passing of relatives they never had a chance to memorialize with a funeral.

The lack of meaningful gatherings and an ongoing desire to share Haida culture with the next generation led Haida Language and Culture teacher Colleen Williams to suggest holding a potlatch. Her colleagues rallied around the idea.

“[The potlatch] was really meaningful,” Williams says. “It took a lot of time and energy from the teachers to do it.” Principal Verena Gibbs provided strong support, as did school staff, including a group of five who met weekly to plan the event: Williams, Reid (Grade 7 teacher), Jenny Kellar (Grades 5/6 teacher), Kieran Wake (Indigenous Resource Worker), and Midori Campos (Child & Youth Wellness Worker). “We worked on it all year,” says Williams, and all students were involved.

Williams prepared students for the potlatch by teaching them skills they would need to participate. “[From] kindergarten all the way to Grade 7, I taught them how to say an introduction speech in Haida.” Williams also started a drumming group for all the boys in Grades 4, 5, and 6 in the Haida Language class. She did this alongside Vernon Williams, who helped make the drums. “I believe in building leadership in people,” she says. “I want boys to be able to be strong leaders in the future.”

Many Elders, knowledge keepers, and artists were invited to give workshops. The 14 Grade 7 students each made their own drums with renowned Haida artist Reg Davidson, who taught them to paint using formline techniques. Other examples include John Brent Bennett, who taught printmaking, Meredith Adams, who brought her expertise in solar electricity to power the potlatch sound system, and Alison Keery, who led a water conservation project culminating in a choreographed dance.

Anyone who has been to a potlatch knows the feasts are incredible. To prepare, students went on field trips to gather a



A student creates a drum during the drum-making workshop

delicious feast from the land and sea. "Children are their best, most incredibly kind, generous, gregarious, vibrant selves out on the land," says Reid, noting the importance of land-based education that gets students out of the classroom and learning about their connection with the rest of nature.

Grade 7 students from Tahayghen Elementary School gather food on an outdoor field trip in preparation for the potlatch.

Students harvested chitons, butter clams, rock cod eggs, octopus, seaweed, nettles, spruce tips, and salmon berries. They also made jilts and crabapple jelly with Elders. Along the way, students were taught about food sovereignty, traditional harvesting practices, and the medicinal use of plants. Other food, including k'áaw herring eggs on kelp, halibut, and salmon, was provided as gifts from the Food to School program led by Shelly Crack, as well as from local fishermen and the Old Massett Village Council Adult Day Program.

At last, the big day arrived. On June 22, 2021, students, teachers, and a few guests celebrated the potlatch outside the school. Though families were not able to attend in person, the students sent honorary invitations. The potlatch was streamed on Facebook as well.

Food was eaten, songs were sung, and dances were danced. Each student gave their introduction speech in Xaad kil the Haida language (*Masset dialect*). The Grade 7 students also gave longer speeches that included reflections and eulogies for loved ones they lost during the pandemic. The students feasted and gave gifts. Their drums came to life in a special ceremony. One surprise (and thrilling) guest was Kiefer Collison of Big Brother Canada fame, who spoke to the students and signed autographs.

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Students gather butter clams

"The most memorable moment is the kids just being able to sing without my assistance, because they knew the songs, they knew how to sing them," says Williams. "For me, just teaching them how to sing was a major part of the potlatch."

"[The students] were impacted immensely in their well-being," says Reid, who noted transformation throughout the year. "They wanted to be here. And it was because of what they were building together."

"Colleen was incredible about running drumming circles all year long, so the confidence in our drummers [...] was unmatched. They were shining," says Reid, "There were many hands that took a role in helping bring culturally relevant experiences to the kids so that when they got to step into hosting a potlatch, they hosted a feast for matriarchs and chiefs."

This event has historical resonance and shines a light toward a just future.

"I think it was nothing less than profound, truly," says Reid. "[...] Part of it is that we speak to a colonial truth. So my students are very well aware that they're an act of resistance just being here, and that speaking their language, and learning their songs, and learning their traditional food gathering practices was not supposed to happen [in Canada]."

Colleen Williams expresses gratitude for her colleagues and the integration of Haida culture into the school in new ways. "I'd like to say háw'aa to all the teachers and the staff members who helped move things forward. [...] It was like a brand new year."

Erin Reid now teaches Grade 6/7 at Tahayghen Elementary School. Please contact her with any questions about the event at: ereid@sd50.bc.ca

Gwaii Trust Society funded the potlatch at Tahayghen Elementary School through the COVID-19 grant program. This program is still available to Haida Gwaii non-profit organizations and governments in 2021. Learn more about the grant program and find out how to apply at gwaitrust.com