



Impact Story 1: Cory LeBlanc

Region 3
Disability Services

Indigenous people are 35% more likely to be unemployed than Non-Indigenous Canadians, and 30% of the Métis work with a wide range of disabilities in their everyday life. Employment challenges alone can be difficult for most, but for Métis with disabilities, this can be an intimidating and daunting task.

Rupertsland Institute's Disability Program Services is a vital bridge between employment services, external supports, and educational guidance for Métis people in Alberta. Disability Services works with Métis men and women who experience physical and mental disabilities to create personalized action plans for employment needs.

The Disability Program Services has funded approximately 19 clients with various supports such as professional assessments, equipment supports, and tutoring. An additional 40 clients have been provided with a consultation to assess their needs and have been provided with additional supports, including accommodations, mental health supports, and guidance entering the labour market with success. The Disability Program continues to grow each year and provide assistance for Métis men and women.

Cory LeBlanc from Calgary, Alberta is one of those people.



Cory LeBlanc was 19 when he first admitted that he had a drug problem to his mother.

His mother, who was also a user, set him up for his first treatment. Treatment that would continue on and off for the next 11 years.

“She loved me, and she wanted to do anything she could for me.” Cory recalled while shuffling uncomfortably on a bench in downtown Calgary. “She was just trying to be the best she could, which I understand.”

Cory, a 33-year-old Cree Métis man, is a well-spoken and gentle man. His shaved head is often covered with a baseball cap, with tattoos visible on both of his arms under a sweatshirt. On top of which, a handsewn leather medicine bundle hangs around his neck and rests openly on his chest. His casual, soft spoken, and approachable demeanor hides a story of years of struggles and adversity.



Through the 2010s, Cory became caught up in a destructive cycle. He lost his house not long after his first treatment, and fell into a life of drug addiction, homelessness, and mental health struggles.

Following a breakup Cory attempted suicide for the first time. “I went down into a depression. I tried to shoot up Fentanyl on purpose trying to overdose.”

He was in Vancouver at the time and was given a one-way bus ticket back to Calgary to go back into detox and treatment. For years, Cory would go between treatment, homelessness, and jail, spending winters at The Mustard Seed, The Drop in Centre, and the Alpha House in Calgary when he could, and resorting to petty crime to fund his drug addiction.

“The whole lifestyle added up”

“I

lost so many friends. I have lost so many friends.”

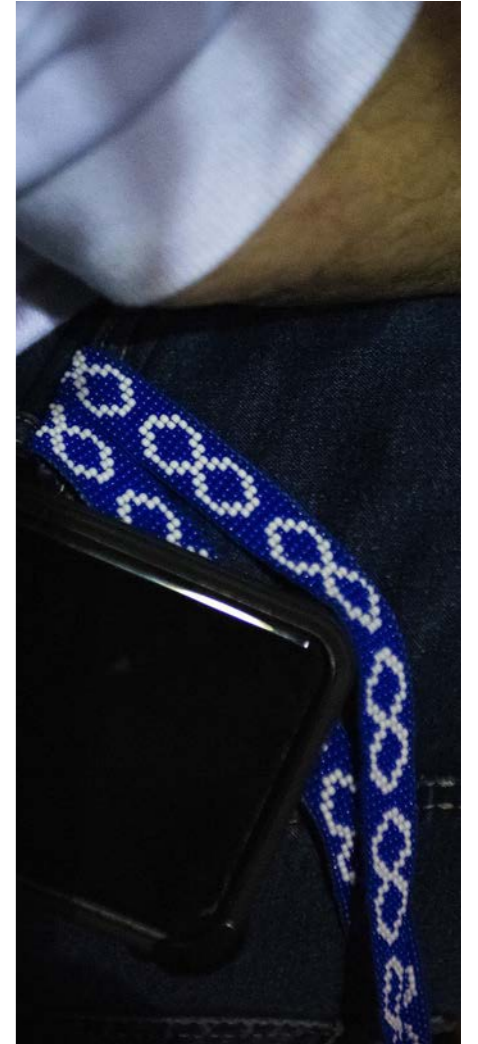
Cory paused, eyes slowly drifting downwards to a painful memory. His eyes shimmered and he took a pronounced breath.

“I was with him the day before, in my car.” Cory said of his best friend. “He was telling me ‘I want to die. I don’t want to live anymore’.” Another pause, this one longer, and his face visibly shouldered a deep sorrow.

“He OD’d the next day.”

With full eyes and a heavy heart, we sat in silence.

“I don’t want that anymore. I’m over that.”



During treatment Cory was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Of all that Cory was going through he described his mental health struggles as the hardest part.

“Trying to shake it off, it’s really hard. I’d be at work and the voices are trying to get at me, discourage me, saying that my boss doesn’t like me. I hear these words...”

Cory paused. “It’s probably one of the most difficult things.”



C

Cory's partner Nadine is a dark-haired Indigenous woman with a shy demeanor, standing on the balcony of Cory's apartment in downtown Calgary. Earlier in the week, the two rescued a baby pigeon that had fallen from its nest from above their suite. She hands Cory a new blanket to put in the box that the bird was in, as it still cannot fly. Cory says that the two plan on nurturing it until it can fly on its own, however long that will take.

"Being in her life, I've seen so much growth with her. She's on a spiritual path too. It's like we met for a reason." Cory says affectionately. The two met at a temp agency and, like Cory, Nadine is on a path of recovery as well, something that Cory sees as invaluable.

"It's just inspiring seeing someone do [recovery] as well."

"I don't know what the future holds, but as long as I have somebody there that I'm close with, talk with, and recover with I



feel happy. It's like a team."

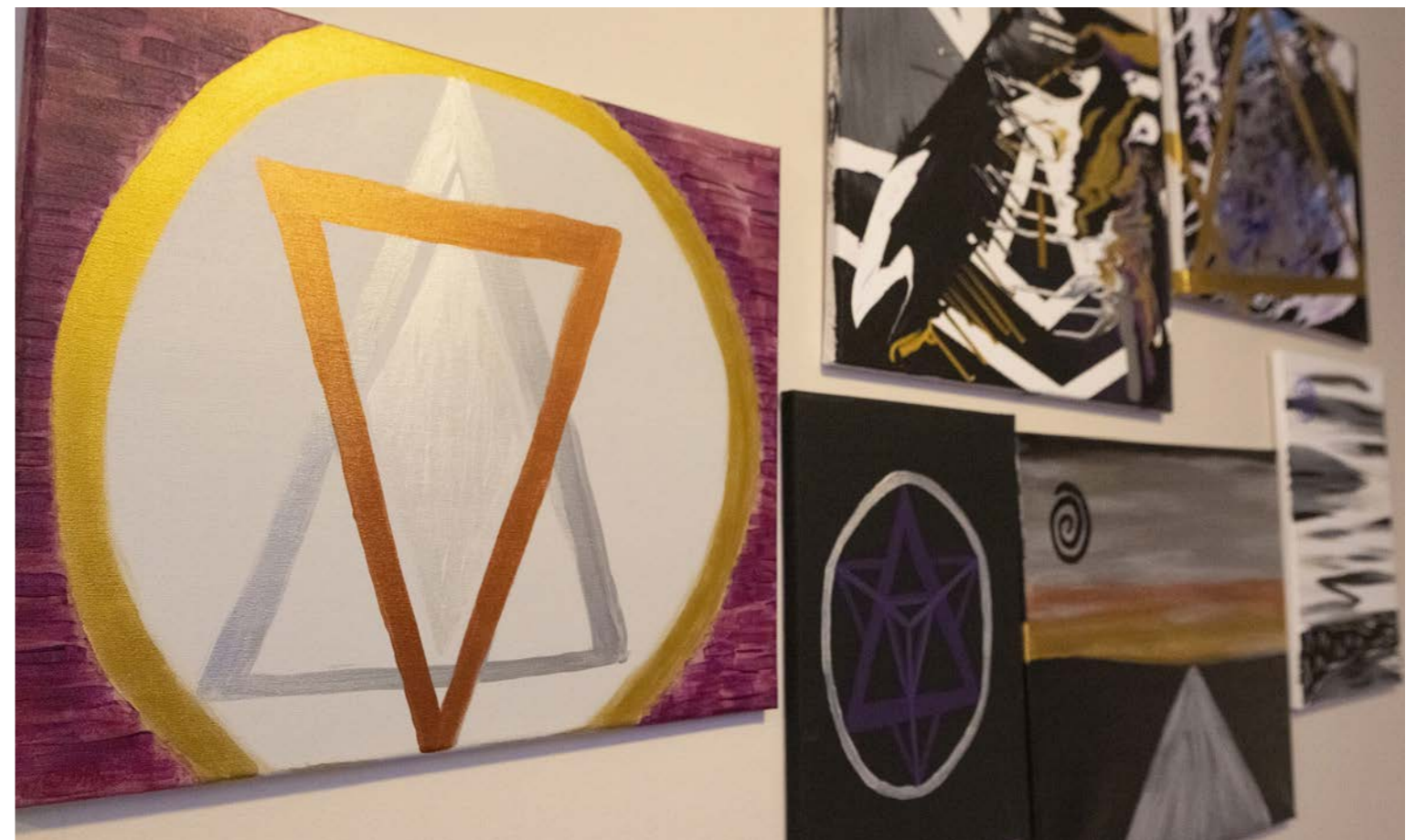
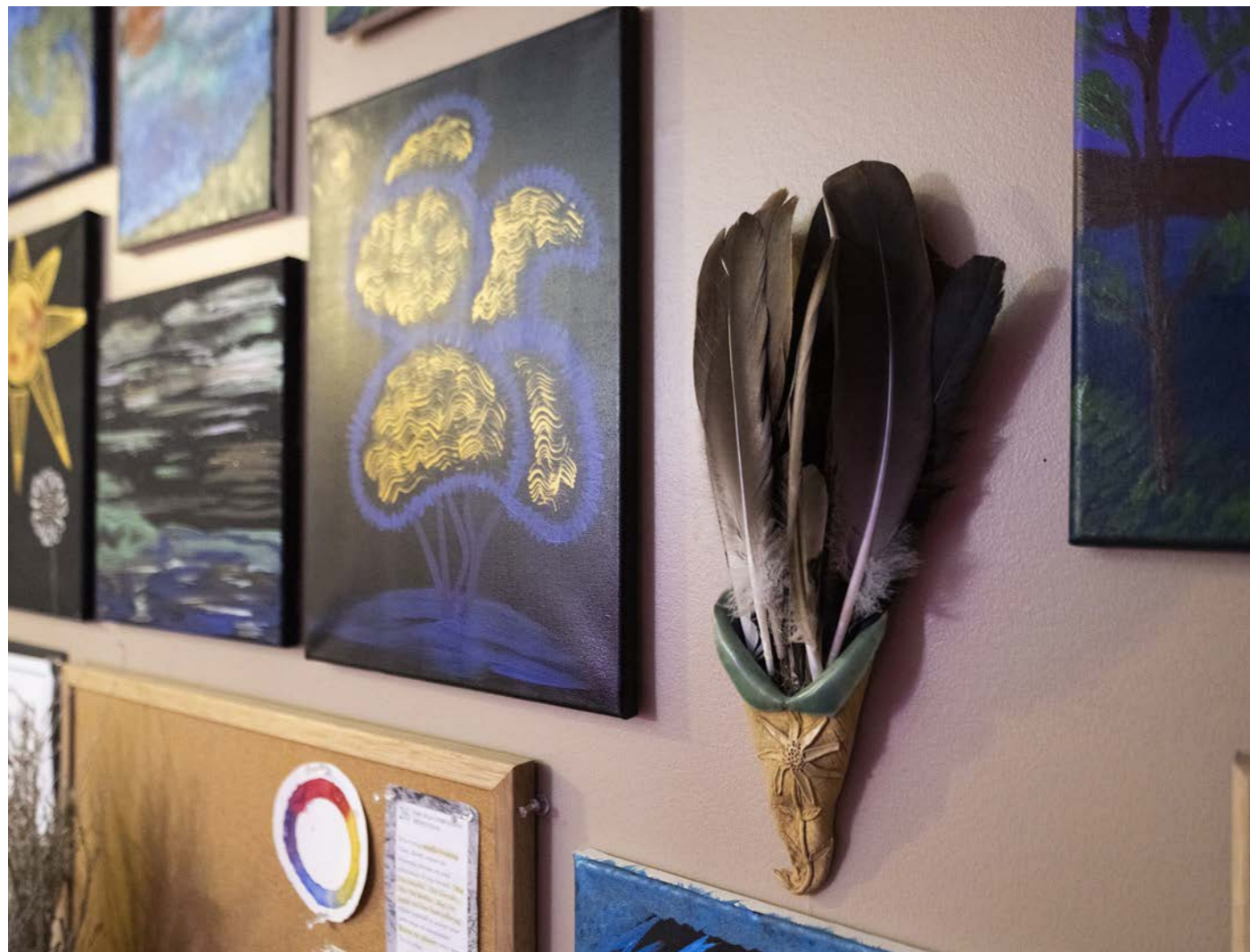
The two have just begun talks about moving in together for the first time.

As Cory walks around his house, showing his various paintings, art projects, and writings, a small calico cat rests in his bedroom. It hops up onto his bed as soon as it sees Cory and strains for affection.

"Her name is Princess. She's been there for me through some really dark time." Cory says as he lovingly strokes the three-year-old cat's head to purrs of approval.

"She saved my life."





A

Along with Nadine and Princess, Cory found comfort in art, something he recently began to explore as a way to relax and find tranquility in his mind.

"I do acrylic and watercolours," he says. Cory described his love of the night sky, his exploration of the colours of the night, and his love of the colour purple.

"I just love the night sky, it's so peaceful." He then talked about his love of space, stars, and the many thoughts he has about his place in the universe. His apartment is a gallery of his own making with dozens of frames over the past year each improving in quality and scope.

Even his trade would become an outlet. Metal workings, welded pieces of metal to resemble wood, and pipes and cables twisted to mimic trees hung on his walls and sat on shelves.

Even his body became a canvas for self-expression. Cory's left arm was adorned with a sleeve of tattoos of his own making. Symbols that represent him, his identity, struggles, and past. Completed over years, he was proud to show and explain what each stroke meant.

Art kept Cory grounded, presented an outlet for his thoughts, and opportunity for escape into a peaceful state of mind among the struggles and hardships he faced.

“I have an 8-year-old boy.”

He said in a matter-of-fact way but quickly his face saddened. “I don’t get to see him because of my behaviour. I do want to see him, and I do want to fight for him, so that was a hard one.” Cory lost custody of his son due to his drug use, something the mother of his child was able to shake, but he was not able to do. While he is not able to see him, he is kept up to date on how his boy is growing up.

For Cory, getting clean, finding a place to live, seeking therapy, steady employment, and long term ambitions were all part of a well thought out plan to see his kid again. His self-awareness of the consequences of his previous behaviour and the results of his current hard work and discipline was humbling. To be in his son’s life again was an aspiration that eclipsed all other goals.

“He’s, my fight.”

“He’s a dream client to work with.”

R

Rupertsland Institutes Provincial Disability Consultant Avery Enzenauer said of her interactions with Cory. “He’s open, transparent and honest.”

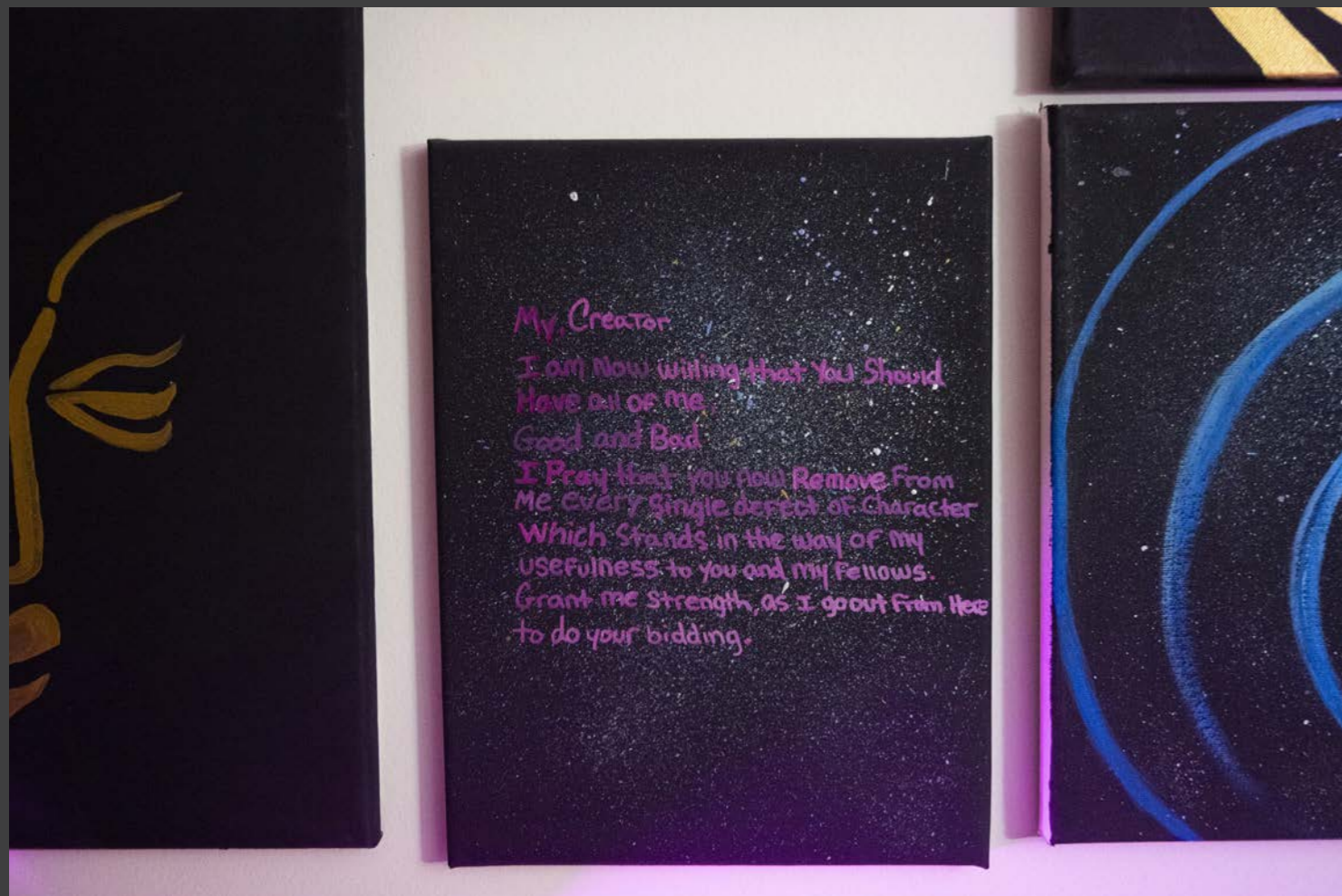
Cory first reached out to the Rupertsland Institute for employment assistance in March 2022 and was assigned a case manager to assist him with his career plans. With Cory’s struggles with mental health, Disability Services will step in to assist and help make employment easier and tackle those barriers together.

“33% of the population may need extra help to get to a similar level as everyone else and they might not know how to navigate all of the supports out there because it can be very overwhelming. We really adapt the program to meet the client needs and to help them address the challenges they experience” Enzenauer said.

Disability Services helped Cory by referring him to a psychologist whom they would work with

together to support his career journey. Together with the assessing psychologist and The Alex, a Calgary-based Community Health Centre, they got Cory on a path to employment, education, and self-sufficiency. With a team behind him, Cory chose to enter the trades and began the Trade Winds to Success program in May 2022.

Trade Winds to Success program is a Pre-Apprentice program that trains Métis people for jobs in the trades. Since the cost to participate for this program can become a barrier to many, Rupertsland Institute provided sponsorship funding to Cory while he was in the 15 weeklong program to ensure his cost of living would not be a barrier to his education, as without the funding it would have been near impossible to gain the skills, he needed for long term employment.





W

“Well, this isn’t what I want to do for the rest of my life at all!” Cory laughed as we stood in line for coffee. “But this is an important step to get to where I want to be.”

He had taken a short break from his work; demolitions for home renovations in a house in Calgary. Cory had been working as a labourer for the past few months with a small group of men.

Cory graduated the Tradewinds to Success program in August 2022 for Plumbing, one of only four successful candidates of an initial class of 16. An achievement that made Cory blush the first time it was brought up.

“Yeah, I’m really happy with that, I worked hard.”

With assistance from Rupertsland Institute, Cory’s success now provides him with a source of income and ambition for the future.

“I don’t think they know how much it meant to me. I have so much to thank them for.” Cory’s vehemently said he wouldn’t have a path forward if it wasn’t for the funding and direction given to him by Rupertsland Institute.

“They’ve been so good to me; they’ve helped me with so much. Without them I don’t know how far I would have got.” Cory said with a smile. He also plans on reaching out to Rupertsland



Institute in the near future for education assistance, a plan that might come sooner than expected.

“I always wanted to be a doctor.” Cory smiles, “but now my dream is to be an addictions counselor for Alberta Health Services. I want to help people who are going through what I went through.” Cory repeatedly talked about giving back as a career goal. Whether that’s to those who are struggling for addictions, those who helped him with his education.

“I’m hoping to go back to school to become the addictions counselor soon.”

When pried, Cory revealed giving a TedTalk is one of his life dreams. “It would be so great to talk to people about what I’ve been through, my mental health struggles, and maybe inspire some people.”

A wide smile formed on his face, and he looked up. You could almost see his imagination playing scenes of him on a stage with the bold red text behind him. He mused.

“One day...”

C

Cory's Métis heritage can be traced back to his great great grandfather who lived in Portage Le Prairie. For the better part of his life, his heritage and identity took a back seat to the struggles of addiction and mental health. Yet the question gnawed at him when he was at his lowest.

"I need to find my spirit. I lost my soul; I gave my soul away and I didn't know where to go." Cory would eventually begin to see his identity as Métis as the foundation of that journey.

"I went back into following my roots and wanted to connect with something higher than myself."

Cory first met Paul, a Stony Elder, while he was in treatment at the Sunrise Treatment Center in Calgary, Alberta. The Stony Elder took Cory under his wing and began to introduce him to not only Métis identity but to a spiritual calmness that was missing in his life. Through sweats and fasts, Cory's mental health improved, his drive to succeed intensified, and Cory's identity as a Métis man began to take shape.

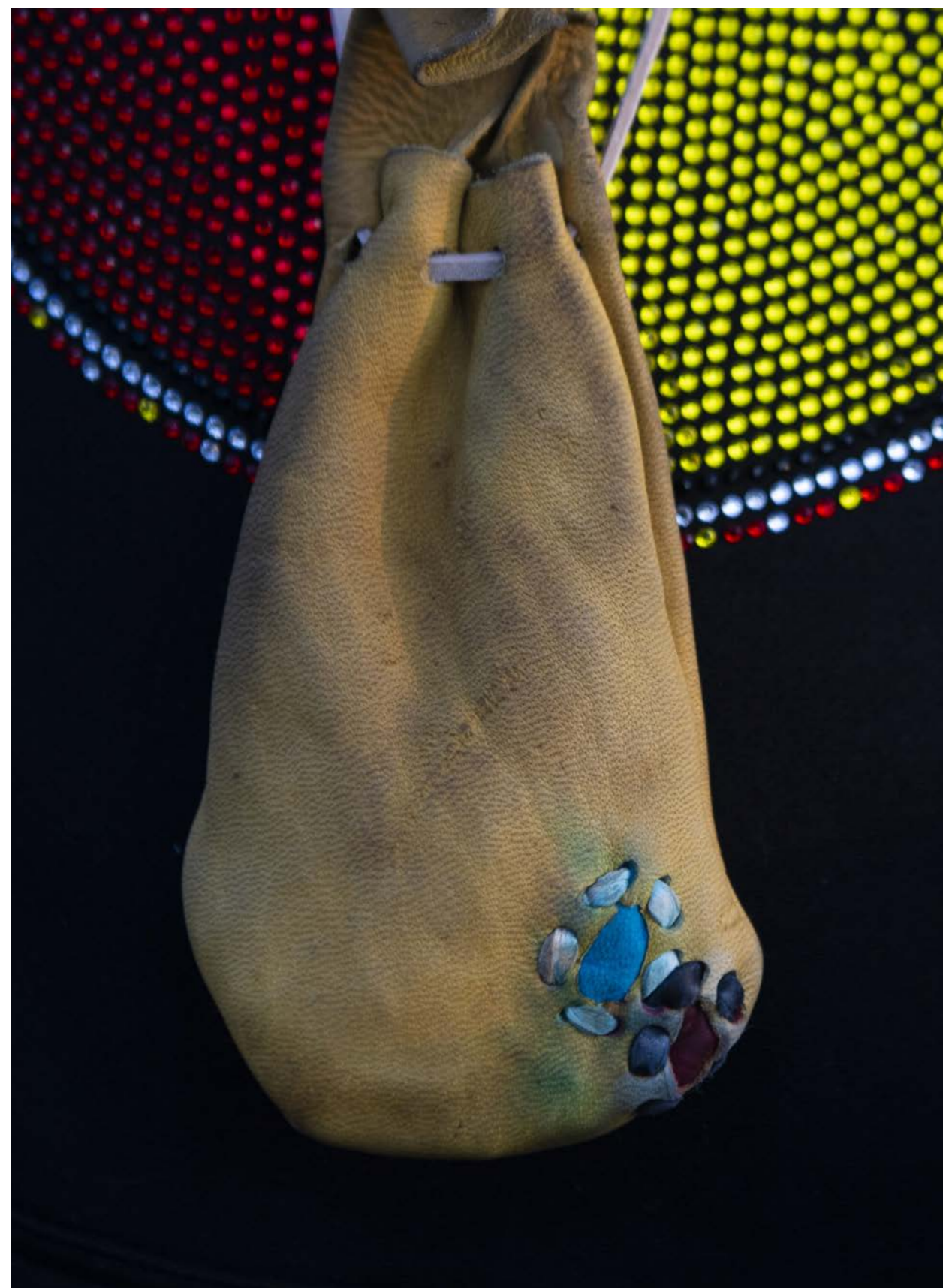
"To know that I am indigenous, it makes me proud. It's solidarity and suffering, it's mixed in my blood. We're still here and we're not going anywhere. I'm super proud."

Cory, has now been sober for over a year. He, not only credits his connection to his Métis identity as a foundation to his substance recovery but has greatly helped his mental health. In addition to medication and therapy, his frequent visits to sweats and fasts on the Stony reserve just outside of Calgary have given a mental clarity that he hasn't felt in years.

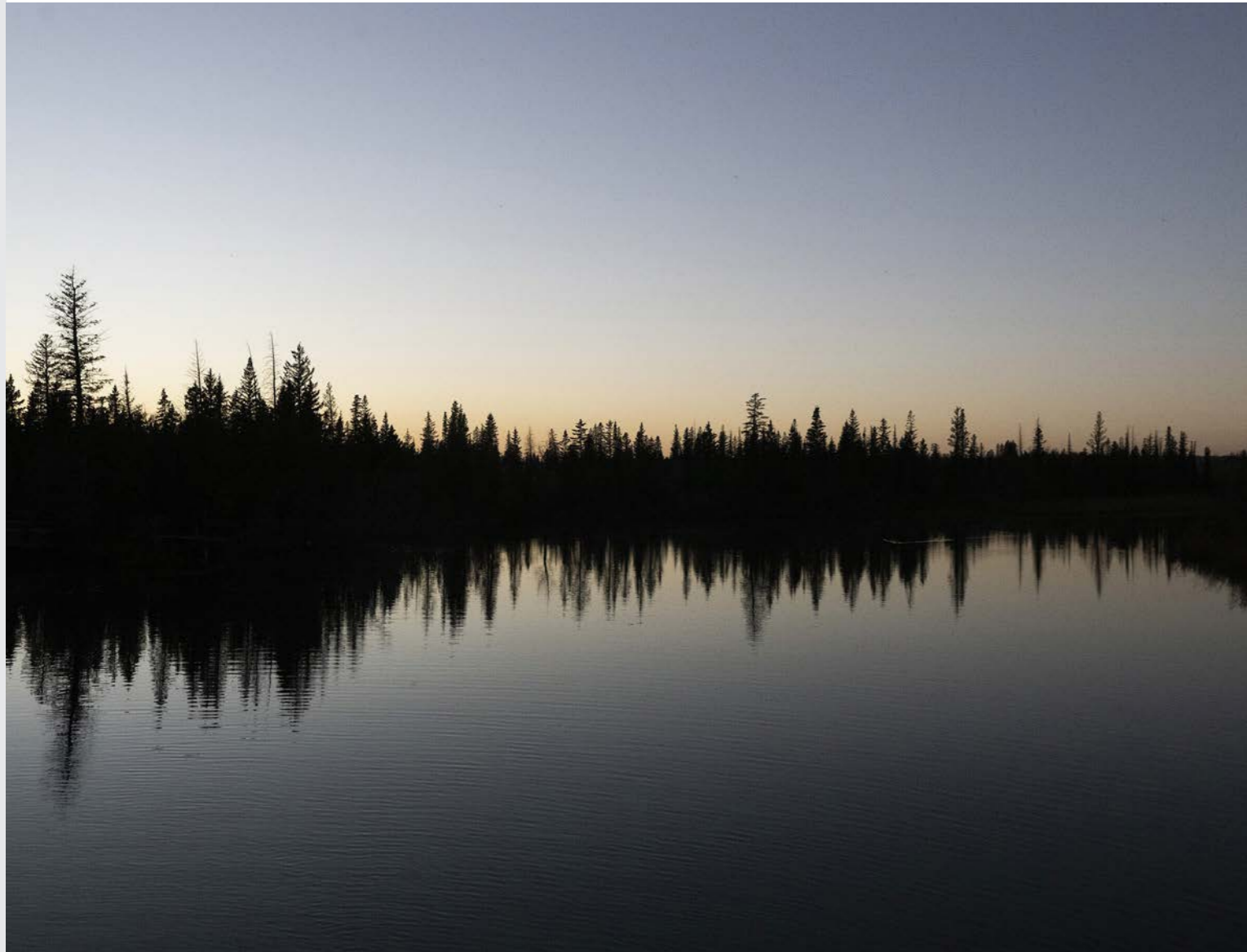
The first weekend of October, Cory described that he would be undertaking a three day long fast under the watch of Elder Paul. There was a sense of apprehension as Cory described that it would be likely the most intense fast he had participated so far.

It would involve a hike into the mountains near the border between Alberta and BC, before setting up camp and spending the weekend on a spiritual journey.

As he set off on Friday, while apprehensive there appeared to be an eagerness on what would come of the week, and a hopefulness that whatever would be found would continue to guide him.



"To know that I am Indigenous, it makes me proud."



“I got my pipe.”

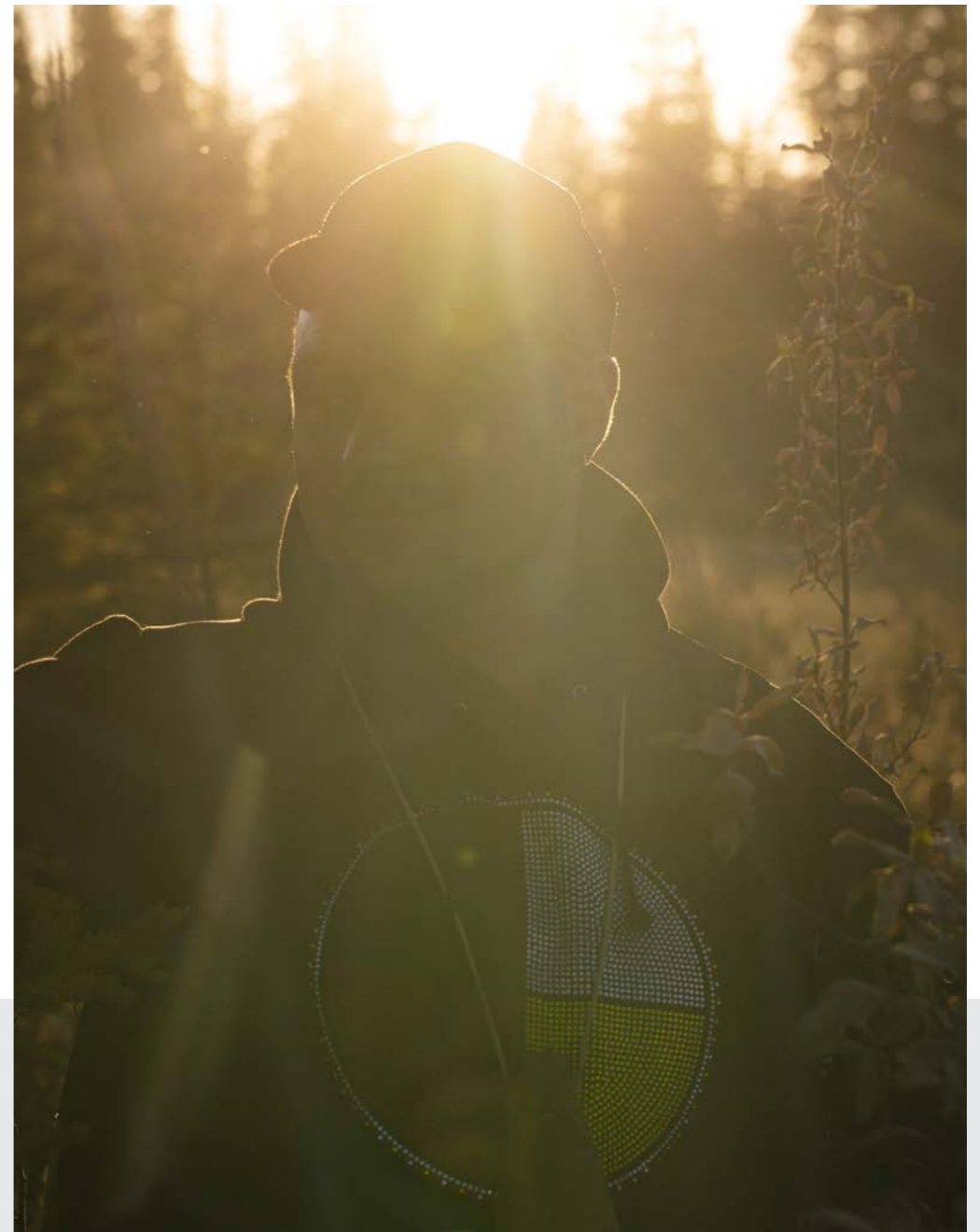
The text on Monday morning hardly conveyed the look of joy that was on his face that day. Cory was elated. A smile that had not revealed itself until now was now plastered on his face. Even without words, he was a changed man already.

The gift humbled him and his gifting to a pipe carrier and medicine bundle holder were titles that he held with such honour and pride. The weekend trip had been not just a success, but a moment of community, connection, and identity that he had not felt before.

Cory laughed loudly as he recalled falling asleep on duty, while watching the fire, and his blanket briefly catching fire.

“I tried so hard to stay awake” Cory chuckled as he recalled falling asleep after hours of tending the fire, and the playful ribbing that his companions gave him. He had not accomplished the fast alone, but with an accepting and kind community.

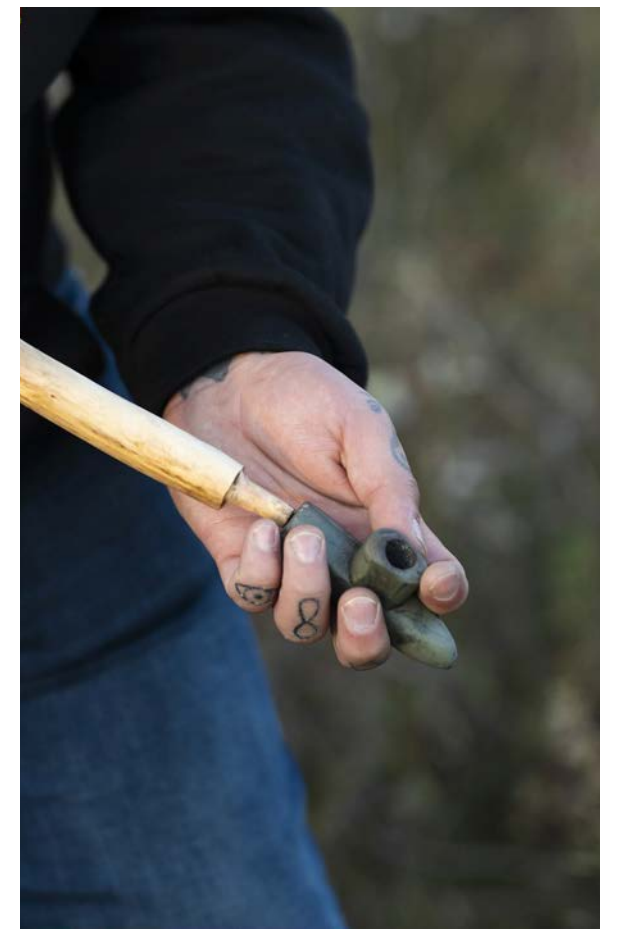
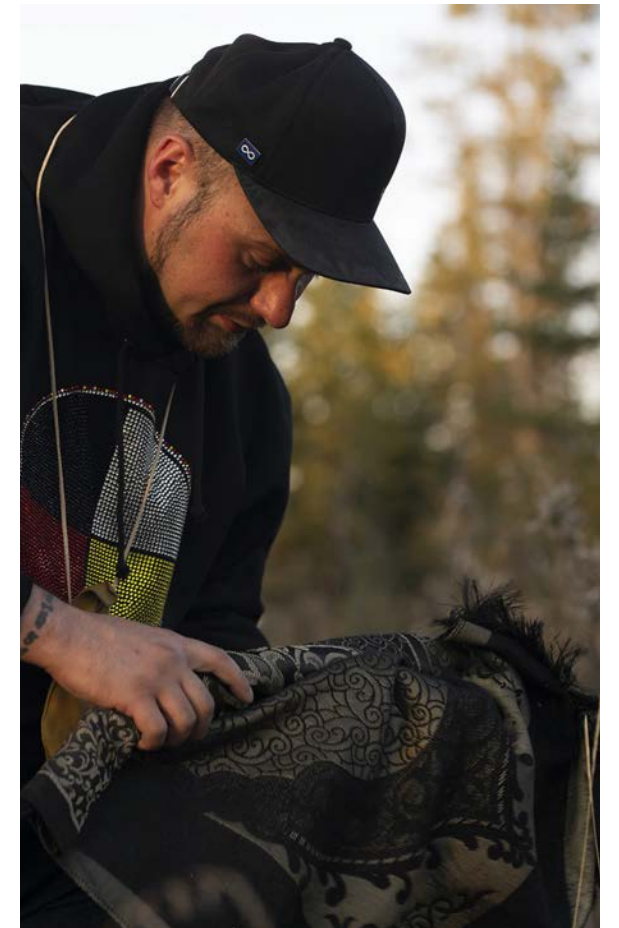
The weekend was full of moments of reflection, appreciation, and discovery for Cory, and he talked for hours. He would carry a smile full of pride for the rest of the afternoon as he walked along the banks of the Elbow River.





The first time Cory pulled out his first pipe, he cradled it like a newborn. As he gingerly unwrapped the pipe from its blanket, he explained with reverence how it was gifted to him by Elder Paul and that he had plans to carve and decorate the handle and pipe with designs of his own creation.

He laid the arms length wooden pipe handle to his elbow as he gently screwed on the hand carved stone pipe fixture to the end of it. He proudly displayed the pipe along with a rattle he was gifted as well, signs of acceptance into an Indigenous community he had only recently found and welcomed with open arms.



L

Later that evening while making way urback to the car, Cory crossed a small bridge over a creek in the river valley. A pair of beavers made their way through the river to their home, while a smiling Cory watched, phone recording in hand. Cory had never been through that part of Calgary, despite living in the city for years now and it being a short trip away from his home.

“I’m going to bring Nadine here.” Cory said while watching the beaver glide through the water. He said loved being outdoors and the peaceful tranquility it provided. Cory had pointed out several plants that he recognized from his time with his elder and speculated on what plants he might find nearby, in his own backyard.

Far from the chaos of downtown Calgary, Cory began to reflect on his journey that was finally seeing the rewards of his toils and tribulations. In quiet contemplation, overlooking the Elbow River and a sprawling forest, Cory watched the sun set behind a forest of autumn-coloured trees with a sense of calm and purpose. It was there he summarized and achievement that had eluded him for years.





“I finally know who I am.”



C

Cory's apartment was a small one-bedroom suite in the heart of downtown Calgary. The walls were adorned with his art, poems, and certificates of achievement. On a coffee table in front of the TV, there were dozens of acrylic paints, a work in progress, and a smudge kit. A shelving unit in the corner of the living room held small articles clearly important to him, A Buddha statue, a medicine pouch, a small drum, a photo of him and his son.

He prepared a smudge to end the day on a spiritually cleansing note as he did every day. Smells of cedar, sage, and sweetgrass began to fill his apartment as he gently pulls the small pillar of fragrant smoke over his head.

Cory LeBlanc talks of his journey from addiction, homelessness, unemployment, mental health, and loss with an uncommon honesty. His courage to see his struggles as lessons to learn from and motivations to keep pushing when things appeared bleak was inspiring.

Despite now being sober, homed, educated, employed, recovering, and happy it is evident that he won't be content with just that. His ambitions went beyond bettering himself but those around him through a desire to give back to the community, inspire those who would listen and driven by an unshakable aspiration to better understand his Métis identity and be a better man.

