



IN CONVERSATION WITH THE CIRCLE'S FALL STEWARD HEATHER O'WATCH

CREE, NAKOTA

Tell me about your role with the Circle, what does a typical day look like for you?

My role with The Circle is Research Coordinator. I've been with The Circle since the beginning of this year, my role is to listen, gather and share. *Listen* in the sense that I listen and observe a lot of conversations, things that I'm asked to look at and be a part of. I *gather* stories, experiences, and I also gather data. Then I *share* -- to see what story emerges related to the bigger picture and I share that back with the community.

What work do you have underway today and what do you find exciting about it?

I'm working on PiR, the Partners in Reciprocity and measuring the growth and learning through that program. The other thing that I do is look at harvests from previous Circle gatherings and present data and resources.

Currently, I'm organizing a new gathering called the Circle Feast. It'll be an opportunity to present and share back what we've learned, how we've grown, and bring that back to our community -- to our members. It is about knowledge mobilization.

What does research and knowledge mobilization mean to you?

As an Indigenous person, research means storytelling. Research means story sharing. Research means responsibility. Research means reciprocity. Research means identity.

Knowledge mobilization is keeping your word. When you're telling someone you're going to write something down, or you ask for their story, their words are sacred and as a researcher, you have a responsibility to share that back to them, whether it's through a resource tool, or a story or a documentary. When you're a storyteller, you have a responsibility to share that back to them.

For Indigenous researchers, knowledge mobilization means sitting down with community, sharing, and feasting. That's the essence of the Circle Feast: sharing, feasting, coming together. When an event happens in a community, you often bring food in, you bring kinship, culture, you bring ceremony, and protocol.

What is the connection between storytelling and research and why does it matter?

Storytelling and research are quite literally the same. They're two different words but they mean the same thing. When you look at a petroglyph, you might look at it scientifically. That's research, at that moment in time, someone wrote a story down for others to look at. You see that carry on and it's the same thing with oral history. When an Indigenous person shares a story, whether it's an ancient story or not, that story is data that's being shared. That's the same thing when it comes to research and storytelling.

When we think about storytellers, we think of someone sitting by a fire telling a story. Artists are storytellers. Elders are storytellers. A poet is a storyteller. So many aspects of our lives as humans are gathered around stories.

Research is moving, it's constantly fluid. There will always be different results at different times based on who you talk to, and who is telling the story.

What does it mean to steward the fall season?

To be the Fall Steward is a lot of responsibility and it's like being a good friend. There's a lot of past gifts of knowledge that I have to hold and be held accountable for in terms of making sure those stories are told. There's a lot of responsibility in the future and I mean for the voices of others. There's a lot of beauty in being that friend that tells people - *hey, this is how far you've come. This is what you've created, this is what you said, this is where you were a few years ago.*

How does working with the Circle align with your personal values?

My personal values come from my experiences as a young woman that grew up in southern Saskatchewan in a place that has been ancestral to me. I've never left and we've always been here. So to get to work with the Circle virtually has allowed me to keep my literal connection to land and that is special to me. I recognize that I am lucky to do so, and I have a lot of gratitude for this.

Grace, understanding and learning. Kinship, community, and wealth redistribution. The work that the Circle does in transforming philanthropy and in wealth distribution is incomprehensible and I don't mean that in a bad way. It's incomprehensible because I get to participate in something bigger than I ever imagined. It's been really fulfilling. I've learned to be more open-minded and be more self-loving. When you get to work with an organization like The Circle, you learn a lot about yourself and the power you have. The Circle does a really great job sharing tools for empowerment.

When you're not working with The Circle, what do you do?

When I'm not working with The Circle I'm at home with my dogs, my cat, and my partner. I am at home in my community with my relatives. I'm learning about myself and I'm healing.

What book, podcast or documentary would you recommend this season?

A great book I would recommend is One Bead at a Time by Beverly Little Thunder. It's a memoir of the two-spirited Lakota Elder. It's inspiring and I love reading biographies or memoirs of great leaders. You get a look inside of what has shaped them to be who they are.

A documentary that I recommend is a National Film Board (NFB) short documentary called To Wake Up The Nakota Language by Louise BigEagle. It's short but you can take so much out of it. Louise is a good friend of mine but more importantly she is doing the good work that is needed to inspire other Nakota Wiya's to continue to pick up our language.

