

## Transcript for Jelanna

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My name is Jelanna Bighorn and I am a secondary teacher here in Vancouver. I started the Junior Youth group and children's class through a student of mine who was interested in helping start a spiritual and moral education class for the kids in her neighborhood. So, originally, my husband and I lived in a different area of the city that was quite far from the school and we made the decision to move to the neighborhood to be closer to the children. Most of the children that we work with are First Nations, First Nations background. They live in East Vancouver which is an area that doesn't have a lot of opportunities.

We hold the children's class in our home which is about 4 blocks from where the children live and it just so happened that one afternoon I was coming with 15 of the children by myself and luckily I had two of the junior youth there to assist me. As we came to the door of my building the manager was there waiting and he saw this group of 15 children and I don't think he looked at us with a very friendly face. He saw 15 aboriginal children in a neighbourhood where they are not looked upon very kindly and I assumed that he was worried that his building would be in some way damaged or that they would be disrespectful in that way.

So he said "What are you doing here?"

And I explained, "Well, I offer this spiritual and moral education class in my home and these children come every Friday."

He said, "No, you can't do that. You can't have all these children in your home" and I was very upset because this is my home and this is what I've been offering and I was very adamant: "This is my home these children are here to pray, they're here to grow spiritually."

And so very reluctantly he let us into the building and afterwards the children, they were upset and we talked about it very openly and I said "we're going to show this manager, this man that you are the best behaved children in the neighbourhood and show him you're potential, what you can become" and it was wonderful to see, or to *hear*, the next day my manager left a message on my phone and apologized for having assumed that the children would be unruly when in fact they were, you know, perfect, actually.

With the junior youth program it's geared towards a group of students, a group of kids sorry, who are ages 12 to 15 and it's an important time in their lives when a lot of choices have to be made and choices that could lead to trouble later on if they're not carefully looked after. So the program revolves around certain books that they do, a curriculum, and it really revolves around service. How to tap into the capacity, the potential, that junior youth have to make an impact on their community.

They have so many ideas. They have so much enthusiasm. And for example in the group that I work with we looked around their building and saw a lot of garbage and I put the idea forth, "What could we do? What could we do to change your environment? What could we do to make it beautiful?" And they were so excited; they came up with millions of ideas.

“We could plant, you know, seeds and all of the kids could have their own pots that they could grow their seeds in.”

“We could put garbage cans out so people would recycle and put their garbage away.”

It's really exciting to see a group of young people who otherwise would be ignored really taking initiative in their own community.

One of the very exciting developments with the junior youth program is watching them teach the children's classes and we made it very clear in the beginning that part of the junior youth program besides developing yourself - developing your own spiritual qualities - it's important to have an outward looking orientation. How can you be of service to the community around you?

To see the older siblings take their younger siblings in hand and pull them over to them and read the prayers for the younger ones that couldn't read. It was just... sometimes it would make me cry and I would have to hide my tears because the kids would wonder why? Are you sad? What's wrong? It was just so beautiful to see these young plants be nurtured and to grow and over the year that we've been working with them it's, every time it amazes me, every time they surpass what I think they're capable of. The kindness and the patience and they're ability now to recognize beauty around them and to want to recreate that. It's really... it's something that motivates me.

And of course all the younger children want to be part of the junior youth group and they're very excited, they're waiting for the day when they turn twelve when they can participate in this next level of service.

And it's a process that will continue on and on and it's a process that we're starting, my husband and I are starting, but it will go on without us. And so we're training the next, the next generation of human resources, these young preteens, these young girls who are 12 years old who are going to take responsibility for their community, take responsibility of the children and their spiritual development and to see their neighborhood transform and from the very beginning that vision was shared with them that we want this community to change, we want this neighbourhood to change and they're very excited about being a part of that.