

Nelson Martell
Saskatoon, SK
Waterhen First Nation
14 yrs.

Driver's Seat

“Dad can I have the keys to the car.” I ask my father constantly if I can drive and I always get the same response. “You’re not old enough yet.” Sometimes I wish I could just take the keys to the car and be independent for once. I am Nelson Martell, a 14 year old First Nation’s kid from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Although I grew up in the city I was always involved in my community of Waterhen Lake First Nation. When I was younger my father took me to round dances, pow wows and feasts. My First Nation is my link to my identity. I hunt, fish and learn the old ways from my mooshom. It makes me whole, complete and independent.

I see the keys to the car as a major step in my independence. I will be able to go anywhere I choose and I will be able to decide what I do. As soon as I step into the car and turn the ignition my parents will hand some control to over me. I am realizing that each person gains forms of independence in their life. I view these “independences” in the form of keys. Every key turns on and off different opportunities. These keys are cut with trust. I’ve also come to realize that when people aren’t valued, trusted and given responsibility, they are not able to fulfill their full potential.

My mooshom tells me about when he was young and he would go duck hunting to get food for his family. His dad trapped, hunted and fished. Both his parents knew a lot about nature and they lived off the land. When he first ventured out to hunt ducks he was gaining independence. This responsibility was a key in his life. His family was becoming dependent on him because he was bringing them back food to eat. Sadly, at a young age he lost some chances to gain his keys like typical kids would. Residential school stole his opportunities to earn those keys and gain his independence.

He never talks about residential school but I know it haunts him. He wishes it never would have happened and all his keys would have been cut. He could have used those keys to avoid alcohol and family problems. He has struggled to regain his independence and teach his grandchildren to recognize their opportunities. He may not realize that through his stories and teaching me how to be independent on the land that he is helping me to gain independence that he missed out on.

My father has also felt the effects of residential school. Although he never experienced it firsthand, he faced family troubles and a father who was recovering. He realises that his father has struggled. I believe that my father wants me to open as many doors as I can with my keys. He wants me to experience those moments where you are just mesmerized. He wants me to travel. He wants me to go to university. He wants me to be happy. I think this is what every parent wants for their children. It is especially important for people who have had opportunities taken away from them because others made decisions for them.

I learn what has contributed to my dad’s independence through his stories. Somewhere behind those stories are the life-changing occurrences that he has endured to develop his own

keys. I believe he acquired one of his major keys in life when he was cycling in Europe. He was always into cycling and midway through university he went to Europe with his friend. They brought their bikes and camping gear and then they went on a cycling adventure through eight countries. He was able to be doing one of his passions and have total freedom in Europe. He also learned about Europeans and that they have roots and history and are more than the cause of hurt to First Nations people. This really let him build up and develop his keys. He always has a good story to tell about his trip. Every key has to come from an experience when we are in control of shaping those experiences, they make us learn and grow.

Lately an American has been bringing a lot of attention to the ideas of freedom, happiness and the will to discover. Barack Obama is the 44th American president. He has been an inspiration to minority groups around the world. He has shown people that they can be whatever they dream of, they can achieve whatever they desire and that one's race should build them up rather than tear them down. He has certainly helped me to value my own identity and claim what is mine.

We as a new generation of youth we need to use our keys to our advantage. I am trying to pursue all the opportunities available to me through my passions; cross country mountain biking and nordic skiing. I am training in both sports to be at the top of my game. I want to be able to compete at an elite level. I would also like to be able to go to university and travel. Every day we are given multiple opportunities to venture out of our comfort zone and try new things. The problem is many adolescents don't feel comfortable trying new things. I want to learn from what our elders experienced and use it to be able to better my identify and take advantage of opportunities. I want to use my keys to undo the wrongs of the past.

Real change is achieved by using the past to create the future. We as First Nations people can come together and build a better future. I think our leaders must regroup and tackle one problem at a time. A focus on drug use is a good place to start. We need policies and opportunities that tackle youth drug use. As we deal with this problem we will start to see healthier communities. I feel like our leaders today, in all levels of government, are losing sight of our priorities. We still have lots of doors that need to be opened so we need the youth to keep gaining those keys. Our community leaders need to do like my mooshom and allow their experiences to help youth grow.

Things are not all negative. Community projects all across the country have helped create better lifestyles for our people. On the Samson Cree First Nation, the community has had enough of the gang violence and they are creating a task force to find solutions. These solutions will then create safer lives for the residents and better futures for the kids. We should use these examples and others to advocate to the government for funding, policy development and letting us reclaim our independence.

I believe that as long as I use my keys to the best of my ability others will follow and soon we will have a chain reaction that will sweep our nations. I must be grateful for the people who have taught me well, because I will pick up a pen instead of a knife, I will be in school instead of on the streets. I plan to pass on to my children a rich tradition and culture. I plan to claim my victories crossing the finish lines in life.

I had a dream that I was flying across a winter landscape and I was doing something good for my people. I was relieving mooshom's suffering and fulfilling dad's dream for me to be the best. My people were happy and successful. They were unified and organized. I was crossing the finish line. Just like my racing experience, I was exhausted but satisfied. I had done my best. I was fulfilling my own dreams and the dreams of my family.

It's as if the car that I am waiting to drive has been lovingly maintained and restored. When I get behind the wheel I know the value of the responsibility. I'm not going to be wreckless when my dad tosses me the keys. I am going with the strength of my mooshom and many others like him. Thanks dad, I'll be fine.