



A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS
A CULTURE OF PEACE

A Circle of All Nations ~ A Culture of Peace

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2006 Mid Year Report on William Commanda's Work



Highlight of the Mid Year Report

June 21, 2006:

**National Aboriginal Day at Asinabka - Victoria Island:
A Sacred Ceremony, A Historic Moment,
A Glorious Celebration!**

**Mayor Bob Chiarelli presents
Elder William Commanda with the Key to the City**

Over five hundred people joined in this year's Summer Solstice activities at *Asinabka*: Victoria Island. It was a very special moment: Elder William Commanda's annual Gathering of Nations Pipe Ceremony was enhanced by a special luncheon reception hosted by His Worship, Bob Chiarelli, the Mayor of the Capital City, to present the ninety two year old Indigenous leader with the city's highest honour: the Key to the City. He is the first Aboriginal person to receive this unique award; in fact, only twelve have been presented since its inception in the mid thirties.

It was ten years since former Governor General Romeo LeBlanc had declared June 21 National Aboriginal Day officially; but, in fact, it was Willam's old friend Jules Sioui, the Indigenous rights activist, together with North American Indian Chiefs from across Turtle Island (Canada and the United States) who had declared this sacred day in Mother Earth's calendar *Indian Day* in 1945. Acknowledged in various ways over the decades, this year was the 10th year that Elder Commanda was celebrating the day with a Pipe Ceremony at the sacred site

"It was prophesied that the time would come when the voice of indigenous peoples would rise again after five hundred years of silence and oppression, to light a path to an eternal fire of peace, love, brotherhood and sisterhood amongst all nations."

We must come together
with one heart, one mind,
one love and one determination



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acknowledged as the spiritual meeting grounds of his ancestors since time immemorial. I remembered the years of ceremony on the gravel roadway under the watchful eye of the summer Sun, igniting the prayer for the place of gathering and strengthening of peoples, wondering how this old man could find the strength and stamina for this annual commitment, while the rest of us wilted in the heat, and wavered in our efforts to support the great vision for the Indigenous healing and peace-building centre.

But this year, as with the walnut that survives the harshest of winters, there was some deep quickening in the heartland of his ancestors, some sense of the sprouting of new life and hope. The presentation of the Key to the City to their son was finally a recognition and acknowledgment of their presence on the land. The Elder was right in commending the Mayor for his courage in presenting him with this high honour, symbolic of so much.

It was an eclectic group who joined in the celebrations, a microcosmic statement that William's Circle of All Nations is indeed viable because it was not just his close faithful friends and admirers who were there, but representatives from all types of communities and all walks of life: Algonquin First Nations Peoples (elders, leaders and youth) from the Ontario and Quebec sides of the Ottawa River, the Mighty *Kichissippi*, non-status and off-reserve Algonquin peoples, Aboriginal Peoples originating from different parts of country, and of Inuit and Metis ancestry, the Eagle Staff Carrier and Elders from the Assembly of First Nations, political leaders, Senators,

the diplomatic corps, environmentalists, peace activists, writers, musicians and artists, the Chief and Deputy Chief of Police from the City of Ottawa and representatives of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ontario Provincial Police and Surete du Quebec: ordinary folk and extraordinary folk.



The Vision for Asinabka / Victoria Island

Mother Nature blessed the day with glorious sunshine and cooling breezes, and we were all energized by her kiss. The sacred fire and the many pipes augmented her gift during the sacred Pipe Ceremony, and consecrated the Elder's prayer for *Asinabka*. The Chief of Police, Vince Bevan, presented Elder Commanda with a DVD on the service's history and with a police cap during the Pipe Ceremony, acknowledging the unique role he plays in contributing to the security of his homeland.

Then it was time for the Mayor's Reception, "mced" under the Big Top by the Elder's granddaughter Claudette Commanda Cote. The reception line was unending, and the Mayor was most gracious, standing beside the Elder as simply everybody

awaited their turn to be hugged by him. The organizing team had arranged a marvelous picnic feast on the river combining the four sacred colours and tablecloths with salmon and cedar tea, bannock and petits fours, and the feast was punctuated by sacred drumming and fiddle music, animated conversation and the key note speeches, first the Mayor's presentation speech, and then the Elder's informal and formal words.

We include their messages here:

Speaking Notes for Mayor Chiarelli Key to the City Presentation to Elder William Commanda

National Aboriginal Day
Victoria Island
Wednesday, June 21, 2006

Kwe kwe (hello in Algonquin),
Thank you. Ms. Commanda-Cote

I would like to extend a special welcome to the members of the Diplomatic Corps, members of the Senate, elected officials, First Nations Leaders.

Greetings and thank you for having me here at Victoria Island, the sacred spiritual meeting grounds of Elder William Commanda's ancestors.

C'est avec beaucoup de respect pour ce site traditionnel que nous nous rassemblons ici aujourd'hui pour honorer un grand chef, un ami, un enseignant, un élève et un modèle.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of National Aboriginal Day Celebrations in Canada, but just before we begin if I could invite Elder William Commanda to come forward to the podium.

As the Mayor of Ottawa I am both pleased and privileged to grant the Key to the City today, because it demonstrates how strongly our city feels about honouring Aboriginal people of Ottawa and Canada.

Ottawa's Aboriginal heritage shapes the way in which our government conducts its business and how we work together to build and strengthen our city. The traditions, culture and language of Aboriginal peoples are an integral part of our unique identity as a city, including our very name.

Our commitment extends well beyond this award. The City is working hard to keep the spirit of National Aboriginal Day alive through our daily work with Aboriginal leaders, communities, governments and organizations.

Which brings us to why we are here today to present the "Key to the City" to Elder William Commanda who is also known by his Algonquin name - "Ojigkwanong" or "Morning Star". Or, for many of you he is known simply as "Grandfather".

This is an historic moment for our Nation's Capital, as Elder William Commanda will be the first Aboriginal leader to receive the Key to the City in this city's history.

Although this honour is long over due, I am sure Elder Commanda would prefer to have us look to the future and focus on how this honour can support his life's vision of bridging differences between the Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in the years to come.

As many of you know, central to all of Elder Commanda's teachings are the fundamental concepts of equality, harmony, as well as respect for Mother Earth, for all life forms she supports, and for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds.

Chief Commanda is convinced that the future of life on the planet depends on our learning to live in harmony with nature. Healing human relationships is the first step. Tolerance and forgiveness are essential. For these teachings and for his perseverance we are so grateful and open to receive his words.

For all of you who are fortunate enough to know Elder Commanda you may already know of his many talents and teachings. By presenting the Key to the City I am honoured to have an opportunity to spread his message to a wider audience. And so I would like to take a moment to introduce Elder Commanda's beliefs to people who may not be as familiar with his wisdom.

Elder William Commanda believes that it is of crucial importance that all of Mother Earth's children learn to come together with one heart, one mind, one love and one determination. Elder Commanda is the great, great grandson of Pakinawatik, the Algonquin Chief who, in the middle of the 1800's led his people to settle in the Ottawa River Valley.

His ancestors were the Mamiwinini, the nomads who were comprised of 84 Algonquin Nations across North America. The birch bark canoe is the symbol of their travels through the waters and the land.

Elder Commanda belongs to the Squirrel Clan, the clan of tireless seed planters. Squirrels are amongst the most gentle and friendly of the wild creatures, while at the same time never retreating and they inspire courage and perseverance.

Elder Commanda is the keeper of three sacred wampum shell belts of historic and spiritual importance that were

once held by Pakinawatik.

He was acclaimed Chief of the Kitigan Zibi Reserve for over nineteen years.

He is a world-renowned birch bark canoe maker and craftsman and his work is on display at the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough. He built his last canoe when he was 90 years old.

In 1987, he began public teachings on the messages of the wampum belts at the fourth First Nations Ministers Conference on Inherent Rights and Self Government for Aboriginal Peoples, chaired by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

He served as a spiritual guide to the 1995 Sunbow Five Walk, which was organized to carry the prayers of indigenous peoples across the North American continent, from First Encounter Beach on the Atlantic Coast to Santa Barbara on the Pacific Ocean.

In the 1960's he began hosting an annual gathering of the Circle of All Nations. The goal of these meetings was to eradicate racism and build community. The talking circle is a traditional means of communication and policy-making in most First Nations.

During an illness he had a vision of a 'Circle of All Nations' where all races could solve their problems by face-to-face communication in a talking circle. The work of reconciliation has now been expanded to many cultures and races. Today, the Circle of All Nations attracts over 3,500 participants who gather at his home in Maniwaki every August.

In addition, Elder Commanda has received many recognitions and awards, most valued amongst these are the Wolf Project and Harmony awards for his efforts to foster racial harmony.

The Wolf Project Award is presented to "those that demonstrate excellence working toward enhancing respect and understanding between cultures and races". Recipients of the award include, President Nelson Mandela.

The Harmony Award encourages Canadians of all racial, cultural and religious origins to embrace and promote harmony, diversity, as well as equality. Elder Commanda was presented with the 2000 Harmony Award. Other recipients of the award include Dr. David Lam, Mr. Herbert Carnegie and Mr. Bromley Armstrong.

In addition to these esteemed awards, Elder Commanda also received the Bill Mason National River Conservation Award in 2004. The award is presented every three years to a Canadian citizen who has made an outstanding contribution to canoeing heritage and river conservation in Canada.

"And we respect the vision of Elder Commanda that this place will become a beacon for all those values that speak to protecting Mother Earth, and the philosophies and values of all our First Nations peoples."

Past Award Winners are Mr. Kirk Wipper, Founder of the Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association, and the Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau, former Prime Minister of Canada.

Elder Commanda received the Aboriginal Justice Award from the University of Ottawa's Aboriginal Legal Services Division in 2002.

And in 2005, Elder Commanda received an Honourary Doctorate from the University of Ottawa.

I am extremely pleased to have the privilege to present the City's highest honour here on Victoria Island. A place rich in First Nations and Algonquin history and heritage. A place where, before Parliament sat upon the hill close by, the river flowed freely and the air was clean and pure.

And we respect the vision of Elder Commanda that this place will become a beacon for all those values that speak to protecting Mother Earth, and the philosophies and values of all our First Nations peoples.

I invite you to join me in celebration and praise of Elder Commanda and his work. And, I am truly honoured to present Elder William Commanda with the "Key to the City" on behalf of City Council and the citizens of Ottawa in recognition of your outstanding leadership and devotion over four decades in fostering an understanding amongst aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples and in creating the Circle of All Nations.

In his informal response Elder Commanda talked about equality, respect, love, forgiveness and Mother Earth. The following is his formal response:

William Commanda's Remarks Upon Receipt of The Key to The City of Ottawa - June 21, 2006

I wish to thank His Worship, Mayor Bob Chiarelli for taking this courageous step of presenting me with the *Key* to the capital city of Canada. I am deeply moved to be honoured in this fashion on National Aboriginal Day. For me, this is as much an expression of understanding of my own individual efforts to work and serve my people, *all* the people who now reside on the land of my ancestors, as it is also an acknowledgement of the spirit of my ancestors and my Indigenous brothers and sisters. Thank you all for joining us today.

You may know that use of *symbol* is of great importance to Indigenous Peoples, guiding us to understandings of the bigger realities of life, and this gesture of the presentation of the *Key* to the heart of the country is of great symbolic significance to me.

For well over thirty years now, I have been the Keeper of Three Sacred Wampum Belts. These sacred relics of my ancestors hold messages of historic and spiritual importance for all peoples.



The youngest belt, the Jay Treaty Belt of 1793, the time before my country was divided, held the commitment for free movement across Turtle Island for my people. This Belt contains both genuine wampum and artificial Hudson Bay beads, foretelling the time when the borders would again dissolve.

In some respects, this message is ominous. But today, I see three levels of significance that makes me happy. The City of Ottawa is acknowledging someone from the City of Maniwaki; the Province of Ontario is reaching across to the Province of Quebec; and the National Capital Region, representing the entire country, is opening its heart to some one seen generally as

belonging within the confines of a reserve, the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. I see the spirit of borderlessness gaining strength. I see it as a symbol of hope.



I also carry the Three Figure Welcoming Belt, created in the 1700s, when my ancestors welcomed the newcomers, then the French and English, agreeing to share the grand natural resources of our land and our values with them in three equal parts. Mayor Chiarelli's letter to me states that I am being presented with the *Key to the City* in recognition of my immeasurable contribution to the community, my formidable accomplishments and my positive influence - I see implicit in these words a recognition of the wisdom of the Indigenous Peoples, such as my ancestors had hoped would be understood years ago, and I am grateful. The indigenous still stands in the centre between the original settlers and the newer people.

Today I wear with pride my Eagle Feather Headdress, a symbol of respect and wisdom amongst Indigenous Peoples, and this mantle, representative of my Honorary Doctorate Degree.

My people were also guided by the Seven Fires Prophecy, which had forewarned us of the difficulties we would pass through during seven epochs of time. We are now at the time of the final message of the prophecy; we all, and not just the Indigenous Peoples, are experiencing Mother Earth's pain and turmoil in our physical and spiritual health. Today, we are all also impacted by the pain and stain of war. I was born on the eve of the First World War, ninety three years ago; today the energy of hatred and racism divides us even more dramatically.



It is the time of the Eighth Fire, and we need to search for more profound solutions to our deep troubles, in order to leave a legacy of hope for all our children.

Two Core Messages

My ancestors left us with two core messages - messages that have guided my work, and messages that the world needs to awaken to in these times of unprecedented global crisis: one, *Respect for Mother Earth*, and two, realization that *We are All Related*.

The Vision for Asinabka/Victoria Island

I want to share with you my vision to guide us through these difficult times. It is a vision for the revitalization of this Sacred Site, *Asinabka*, at the circular Chaudière Rapids, *Akikpautik: The Pipe Bowl Falls*. In this vision, the falls are restored to their original state, in celebration of the spirit of water, and Chaudière Island is replanted with trees. Together, they constitute a wild space in the heart of the country, a sanctuary to be shared with all who live in and visit this great city, and they send a symbolic message of reconciliation with Mother Earth across the globe.

This Sacred Site was a very special and powerful meeting place for Indigenous peoples from time immemorial. It is time for us to light the council fires again. The vision for *Asinabka* calls for an Indigenous Centre to revitalize Indigenous culture and heritage, and a Peace Building Conference Centre for *All Our Relations*, on Victoria Island. It is here that we can come all come together as *A Circle of All Nations, A Culture of Peace*.

I thank Mayor Chiarelli for giving me this special opportunity to present you with this vision. Its realization is dependent on all of us. I am deeply honoured that you have all come to join me in lighting the Eighth Fire on this International Peace and Prayer Day.



Megwetch! Merci!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William Commanda".

Dr. William Commanda
Algonquin Elder
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Then it was time for more informal music and dancing organized by TitoMendinoMusic The Women's Hand Drummers, the Youth Drum from his home community of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Irish, Guatamalan, Inuit musicians and Mexican Dancers. People viewed the Birthday Posters from Grandfather's ninetieth celebration, together with the awards and photos celebrating special moments in his life and work, and his full colour book, *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*, by Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo, and his canoe dvd, *Good Enough for Two*, by Valerie Pouyane, were enthusiastically welcomed by those wanting to learn more about the work, philosophy and passions of this truly unique and tireless worker.

It was indeed a marvelous day celebrating the life of this land's most unique individual in the heart of his country.

Doctor Commanda, the Teacher: *Putting the University of Ottawa Honorary Doctorate Degree to Work*

Following the New Year's Eve Pipe Ceremony he generally hosts in his Lodge each year, the newly honoured Doctor prepared for the school year. He did two teaching sessions at Indigenous conferences at Trent University, the one university in Canada that offers a doctorate program in indigenous studies. Doctor Commanda's presentations on the Sacred Wampum Belts were very well received by students and staff and the public at large who participated in some of the sessions. In fact, one professor, well versed in the Three Fires Society and Midewewin Teachings, stated that his teachings enhanced her understanding of the historic, sacred and contemporary significance of the Wampum Belts considerably. He also did presentations on his work to create a Circle of All Nations, with practical suggestions to advance racial harmony and peace building. He then addressed the subject of indigenous justice; his knowledge in this area is not unsubstantial - his work with Aboriginal men in a federal prison is captured in the National Film Board Documentary by Lucie Ouhmet: *Ojigkwanong*; and in 2002, he was presented with the inaugural Justice Award by the Aboriginal Legal Services Unit of the University of Ottawa; this was presented by Aboriginal Lieutenant Governor James Bartleman. Further than this, of course, he is well versed in the broader justice issues impacting his peoples and others, pertaining to history, land issues, oppression, exploitation and racism; this grasp of history and world events, noted in his notes and annotations in his unique library of books, added a special depth and wisdom to the teachings he brought the students. And of course, no teaching session with William ever happens without mention of his greatest passion: Mother Earth and the three other elements, Air, Fire and Water, and his emphasis on Nature's Law. And, it was interesting to note that he was one of the few men who supported the Indigenous Women's Conference.

Might I add that he braved some of the bitterest days this winter to share his knowledge with his young friends. William, the eternal student, also has an avid interest in what other people have to share.

He attended a presentation by doctorate student Lynn Gehl, based in part on her research on his work and



Wampum Belt Teachings. Dr. Commanda also offers guidance and information to another doctorate student reclaiming Algonquin history, Paula Sherman.

He also did two more Wampum Belt teachings, one at St. Paul's University, for First Nations Leadership Development Program, and the other for community elders at his own Lodge in Maniwaki.

We think the University of Ottawa would be proud of their graduate!

