

SEPTEMBER 2021 SPEAKER
PATTI PETTIGREW
THUNDER WOMAN HEALING LODGE

A perfectly-timed UWCNY talk!! Perfect because guest speaker Patti Pettigrew, founder and executive director of Thunder Woman Healing Lodge, the first female Indigenous one in Ontario and only one of three in Canada, spoke to us within days of the ground-breaking ceremony for the lodge. It will open next fall at 2217 Kingston Road, Scarborough, and is for all categories of Indigenous women – First Nation, Métis, and Inuit. The talk's date also was perfectly-timed because Patti spoke to us the same week as Canada's first ever National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, September 30, for which we all wore orange in respect. And perfect because Patti was the kick-off speaker for UWCNY's 70th year, an important club milestone.

Patti is a member of the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation near Ottawa.

Healing lodges differ from standard halfway homes in that they incorporate Indigenous customs and beliefs as part of the adjustment process from prison to the outside world. They were recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the suggestion of Indigenous leaders concerned about what they regarded as over-representation by Indigenous people in prisons. They also thought that mainstream transition programs weren't applicable. Patti attributed the large number of incarcerated Indigenous people to "unresolved and intergenerational trauma caused by the Indigenous people being regarded as disposable – little children in residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, the many First Nation communities without drinkable water."

Patti's Algonquin name means "Blue Thunder Woman." She is a human dynamo. She started organizing Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society twelve years ago. As of now it is operating in what was a small store on Dundas Street. The lodge will have twenty beds, providing housing plus counselling in an Indigenous atmosphere. "It will heal and redeem, provide wholeness and balance, show the way forward." The ground breaking was done with an Indigenous-beaded shovel. There will be a sweet grass ceremony to declare the site sacred. "Zero carbon footprint as Indigenous people see themselves as custodians of the land." She said the minimum expected stay is four months.

"It says a lot that there we're only the third woman's Indigenous healing lodge in Canada," Patti observed. "Indigenous women are the fastest growing incarcerated group. They account for sixty-three percent but are only four percent of the population. They are more likely to be prosecuted than men. Between 2009 and 2019 there was a sixty percent growth in sentencing. In my opinion their crimes – theft, addiction, drug trafficking – are a reasonable response to their condition. Walk in their shoes. Indigenous women are the backbone of Indigenous society. They haven't been treated with the respect they deserve."

The Bank of Montreal provided interim financing to purchase the property and the City of Toronto forwent payments for permits. Patti acquired a van to pick up inmates released from the Vanier Centre for Women, a medium and maximum-security prison in Milton west of Toronto, discharged late at night during Covid, and distributed one thousand backpacks with personal hygiene and PPE items plus food gift certificates.

In her thank you, the club's Barbara McNutt said, "We often hear more about problems than solutions. This building will be an inspiration."

Susan Goldenberg