

NDNs at UBC: The importance of remembering whakapapa at UBC

Written by Aquila Underwood

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NDNs at UBC is The Ubyssy's new column written entirely by Indigenous UBC students. *Kylla Castillo*

My mother always taught me that [whakapapa](#) (ancestry) is everything. If you have the whakapapa, it doesn't matter how much you know about your people, because you can be taught. She said that you belong to your people no matter what.

When I arrived in Canada, I was ready to own my whakapapa as a Māori-WSÁNEĆ woman. During the first week of university, I got emails from the Longhouse and the Indigenous student

about our other side.

For my first event I excitedly — or maybe nervously — went to learn how to bead in the Longhouse. I went, palms sweating and breaths shallow, and introduced myself to everyone. Every person I met was lovely, but my nerves stopped me from interacting like I wanted to. I couldn't help asking myself if I was allowed to be there, despite quite literally being a “status Indian.”

I felt isolated because I was scared that someone would tell me I wasn't Indigenous enough, or that they'd realize that I didn't know anything about my W̄SÁNEĆ side and tell me to leave, or that they'd ask why I didn't know my biological father or family even though they only lived on the Island.

At the end of the event, I got up, thanking the person who helped me to haphazardly string some beads along a string (which looked nothing like the earrings my sister makes for me), and left the Longhouse to head back to my room. I was so happy to have gone to the event. I called my family and showed them my beading, and told them about the cool people I met and how I was allowed to go to the Longhouse whenever I wanted. I could even use the kitchen! This was a pretty rare commodity for me as a first-year living on campus.

After a few days of thinking, my terror of the unknown came back and I did not end up returning to the Longhouse despite its tempting kitchen. I was scared of the fact that everyone I met seemed to understand their identities. I couldn't comprehend how they could do it. I have always grown up with one side of my family that I know (my mother's Māori side) and one that I don't (my biological father's W̄SÁNEĆ side).

I never see my biological father; he wasn't a great person and because of this I grew up with only my mother and her family in New Zealand. I feel confident in my Māori side because I have always had my mother's support, but because I have no W̄SÁNEĆ guardian to help me I have become too scared to get involved in the community as time has passed.

I was, and still am, scared of messing up. When you think about it, it's funny to think that you can mess up being your own ethnicity, but it's a feeling that I'm sure many people who grew up separated from their culture know well.

Googling whether non-Indigenous people are allowed to call Indigenous people Indians, because your new friend just did and you didn't *vibe* with it. Mentally, I have been stuck there for a while — outside the Cool Indigenous Kids' Club, Googling my own culture.

Swamped with work and midterms and calling family and keeping friends happy, I have ignored this imaginary club I'm currently waiting outside, hoping that maybe I'll magically teleport inside.

Realistically, I know this won't happen despite how much I hope it will. I know that instead of waiting for my friend to text me the password, I'll have to find it for myself. Maybe along the way I'll find a friend to join me in my hunt, or maybe someone will take pity on me and give me a hint.

No matter what happens, I will remember that I have the whakapapa to get into the club, even if I feel like I don't. Maybe after the search I won't need a password and instead I can tell the people at the door about my grandmother's time at residential school, and how the cultural genocide of my people almost worked and now there's almost no one who speaks our language anymore. At the end of the day, the fact that I have no connection to my culture has unfortunately become an aspect of my culture.

Aquila Underwood is a first-year student planning to major in political science and First Nations and Indigenous Studies. She was born in Canada but raised in New Zealand and is Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Āti Awa and W̪SÁNEĆ.

This is the inaugural article of NDNs at UBC, an open-form column written by Indigenous UBC students. If you're interested in getting involved, submit pitches or completed articles to opinion@ubyssey.ca!



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