

The vision for the Sacred Chaudière Site as presented by Elder Dr. William Commanda, OC – by Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo, Coordinator, Circle of All Nations

The Sacred Chaudière Site has come into some unprecedented attention this past week – unprecedented over recent decades that is, because the country's greatest natural treasure, has been obscured from the reverence it used to be accustomed to receiving from time immemorial, and really, it never been seen or heard of by the vast majority of the people in the capital city. It was a meeting place of the Indigenous Peoples of North America for literally thousands of years, with evidence of human ancestors of the Paleolithic period marking their time here. Indigenous presence at the great circular rapids was noted by Samuel de Champlain on his first trip past the heart of the Medicine Wheel, where the Mighty Kichissippi (Ottawa) flows west to east and is joined by the Rideau and Gatineau. The Indigenous Peoples, rich in lives of symbol, knew this is where the wheel of life spins, and they honoured the place with prayer as they passed it on their canoes. How superstitious, pronounced Champlain, as he proceeded past the pounding rapids - that is till his canoe got caught on the rocks, he broke a leg and had to pray to his god for help; fortunately for him, nature was there, and a tree saved his life. But Queen Victoria too realized this was the power place, when she selected the *Asinabka, Place of Glare Rock*, for the capital city.

Immediately Philomen Wright arrived in this area in 1801, William Commanda's direct ancestors were alarmed – their sugar bushes were being cut down and they challenged this. Wright produced a paper, an agreement signed by their ancestors, he said. They were horrified by this *Loup Gareau, this monstrous thing*. After the devastating two centuries of European attack on their lands, waters, trees, beavers, language, spiritual practices, lives and relationships, they were a decimated peoples, now facing a new threat at the sacred heart of their territory. Wright's own daughter writes that the Algonquins responded with prayer, sacrifice and tobacco ceremony, to appease and transform the acquisitive and destructive energy they saw in the felling of the precious maple medicine trees.

Two centuries later, William Commanda offered prayer and ceremony again to show the path to reconciliation and healing of relationships, with nature and amongst people. A humble and inspirational man from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Quebec, beloved to people around the world as Grandfather and founder of the *Circle of All Nations*, he reclaimed the place of his people in the National Capital Region, and he presented a mighty, inclusive vision for the Chaudière Site. He saw it as public space, not private, and he ignited a fire and passion for this dream in many hearts and minds, not just Indigenous ones. William Commanda had many honours bestowed upon him during his long lifetime, none that he or his friends sought. He was a magnet and touchstone; he was presented with two honorary doctorate degrees from both sides of his ancestral river, appointment as Officer of the Order of Canada and the Aboriginal Achievement Lifetime award. But the most relevant to this story was the June 21 2006 Presentation of the *Key to the City of Ottawa* to him at Victoria Island. He shared his vision for the ancient sacred

site of his ancestors publicly. In 2010, the City of Ottawa endorsed this vision and affirmed support for the Asinabka Indigenous Centre.

William Commanda presented a four-fold vision for *public* space: freeing the Chaudière Falls to the extent possible; city park and nature sanctuary; educational historical interpretive centre; peace building meeting site and an Indigenous centre on the Chaudière Site Islands. It is a profound, inclusive vision for transforming the devastating history of colonization but it is not a vision for replacing it with neoliberalism. It is a vision where all can play a role, Indigenous, citizens, governments, developers, artists, architects – and where all should.

The sacred site offers much to present a win-win situation for all on its waters and shores, and William Commanda supporters continue to affirm strongly, but not with “boxing gloves”, his vision for the Sacred Chaudière Site. Those of us who are not Indigenous believe it is our opportunity and responsibility to *Correct Mistakes of the Past and Look Towards the Future*.

Grandfather Commanda presented the sacred blueprint and legacy for reconciliation and healing and for: *vision not a mere plan, the golden goose, and not gold; public and not privatized space*. Countless people are grateful for his tireless efforts to awaken us to the true blessings of his land.

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