

## A Reflection on March 16, 2013 *Circle of All Nations* event to honour Grandfather William Commanda's Legacy for Springing into the Next Cycle

### *Acknowledging the Vernal Equinox and the International Day for the Elimination of Racism*

Over many decades, the work of late Indigenous Elder William Commanda, *Grandfather* to many, the appellation signifying *relationship* and *respect* even to those who had never met him, has centred on two interlinked themes – a deep love for Mother Earth and outreach towards all peoples, irrespective of race, culture or heritage.



THE LEGACY OF ALGONQUIN ELDER  
L'HERITAGE DE L'AÎNÉ ALGONQUIN

Dr. William Commanda, OC

11.11.1913 - 03.08.2011

"We must come together  
with one heart, one mind, one love,  
and one determination to create  
A Circle of All Nations  
A Culture of Peace."

"Nous devons nous unir avec un seul  
cœur, une seule âme et une volonté  
pour créer un cercle de toutes les  
nations et une culture de paix."



A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS  
A CULTURE OF PEACE  
www.circleofallnations.ca www.asinabka.com

For more than a decade, this took the form of activities to honour the Spring Equinox and the United Nations Day for the Elimination of Racism – activities oftentimes organized in both the National Capital Region and at his Lodge in Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. In the late nineties, Grandfather himself would cook beaver and bring it down to feed people gathered at Victoria Island; sometimes the celebrations took the form of Pipe Ceremonies; at other times there were formal workshops and presentations to promote racial harmony and cross cultural understanding – for example at Darcy McGhee High School, at the Odawa Friendship Centre or on Victoria Island.

People from Ontario and Quebec, Massachusetts and South Africa might attend – one never knew who would turn up. One year Grandfather presented guests with *Circle of All Nations* tee shirts; old and young friends danced, drummed, sang and built relationships inspired by his energy of love.

Since his passing in August 2011, many continue to animate his teachings in their lives and work. This year the PSAC kindly allowed us to use their facilities, and we were able to organize a small event to honour Grandfather's work and legacy. We scarcely developed an invitation; then Leonardo William translated it into French and Spanish for us - from Montreal! A tireless translator at Circle of All Nations gatherings over the years, this time *Techno Moccasin Telegraph* was in operation!

We organized the event around the symbol of *Canoe* – to launch the journey into the new year in a way consistent with Grandfather's memory. A world renowned canoe builder, the canoe remains the iconic symbol of the heritage of Grandfather's ancestors, interwoven with respect for the resources and creativity inspired by nature, and symbolic of the larger journey of life.

We had some tense moments when technology challenged us – and were most grateful for the unending support of Tito and Sandra Medina – the *Circle of All Nation* work is animated as people choose to share their gifts in the common goal of the Grandfather mandate:

*We must come together with one heart and one mind, one love and one determination, to create a circle of all nations, culture of peace.* So they took it upon themselves to take care of the activity by bringing in speakers and facilitating the video and power point presentations; they are the ones who created Grandfather’s outside movie screen where many documentaries were launched - *Third World Canada, Canada the Movie, The Awakening*, to name a few.



We were pleased to present two videos this time – *The Portage of Wisdom*, by Patrick Gravel, and *Good Enough for Two*, by Valerie Pouyanne – both documentaries produced by young people deeply inspired by the Elder’s work and teachings – who also determined to share – to transcribe and transmit – the deep lessons about life that they had learned from him. Their great generosity and commitment to the work of the *Circle of All Nations* is what keeps Grandfather’s legacy vibrant.



Indeed his spirit was very much a part of the day, with breakfast at one of his favourite spots, *Rocking Johnny’s*, with Larry and Nancy McDermott, from Plenty Canada, partners in many *Circle of All Nations* events; and his grandson Chuck Commanda and his wife Janet, both actively following his creative footsteps in their work in canoe building and birch-basket making – Chuck’s grandmother, Mary, William Commanda’s wife, was well known for her prize-winning birch bark baskets – and Grandfather was happy to see Chuck’s talent maturing during his life-time.



Peter Stockdale was there to help with set up – and the anonymous public space was quickly filled with Grandfather’s presence in posters and photographs. Peter’s work with the National



Capital Peace Council reflects the connection with Grandfather's work in many initiatives in the capital city – Ambassador of Peace Award, green up/clean up of the Ottawa River, September peace festival activities, Martin Luther King DreamKeepers awards and so on. Ian Prattis recalled the presentation of the first Friends of Peace Award to Grandfather, many years ago, when children from Kitigan Zibi drummed a welcome in the rain, leading to his team's peace event last year, where a hundred and forty



children gathered to celebrate peace in City Hall. Rachelle Prudhomme talked of his connection with the University of Ottawa's Aboriginal Students' Medical Program, their *Dr. William Commanda scholarship* and the work to apprise the larger student body of indigenous priorities.



Joanna McMillan's presence reminded us about the longevity of Grandfather's *Circle* community, especially on Victoria Island, where she planted gardens that Grandfather always remembered to acknowledge. Two women, Martine Saura and Gisele La Brie drove five hours to be with us – one to strengthen links with Grandfather's energy and peace and



her home town, symbolically strengthened with a crystal gift she had presented him with one Gathering, and the other to develop connections for on-going environmental stewardship work. Roberta Della-Picca came to honour Grandfather's participation in a primary school event – which helped her young son come to terms with the systemic racism he was experiencing in school in Ottawa. It took me a little while to remember the occasion from almost a decade ago - to remember how we had gone to find tools for this new GWC project, teaching little kids: I still have the giant spider and ant we acquired to animate Grandfather's story telling. It was Ray Sunstrum, our partner with the *Wolf Project* who took him to this school presentation. (Grandfather was Special Advisor for this initiative, to honour people and groups who promote racial harmony – *The Wolf Project* is a co-animator with *Circle of All Nations* with our annual March events.) What a number of Grandfather memories embraced us all afternoon.



But even more special, perhaps, were the presence of new people drawn to Grandfather Commanda's legacy. Our earliest guests came from out of town, Maureen Berstock and Elizabeth Snyder - and they were impressed with his display material, making plans to showcase him in Perth - and drawn to tears with the spirit of Grandfather's

work. Dan

Duhaime was there, increasingly drawn into the world of Indigenous history and the gifts of the canoe legacy. Our official photographer was Julie Oliva, a student at one of the universities that had presented him with an honorary doctorate degree, l'université du Québec-Outaouais – she is actually from Spain, is new to Canada, quickly found the



*Source* and got roped into service! (Peter kept pretty busy with the camera too!) I remembered one of the early *Circle of All Nations* Gatherings – we had a few groups of people from Spain participating – one woman was in tears, and we tried to connect her with other people from her homeland – but no, that was not what she had wanted – she had come to shed her tears with the



Native Americans; Grandfather honoured that moment as a reconciliation with the distant past. He reiterated that in his words about the Residential School story – *they must find a way to forgive themselves; then they can ask our forgiveness – if this is done sincerely, then we all heal*. So it was also special to have a brand new family from Portugal join us – Isabelle Ferreira, Vasco Graos and Mario Graos, the father and son two days off the plane! It was indeed special to think of the animation of the spirit of welcome of Grandfather's

ancestors still resonating through his legacy yesterday.

In part, that legacy was reflected in the posters that Phil Weir helped create last fall – and he reminded us of the other Grandfather project that he had been passionately involved with – the vision for the *Indigenous Centre at Victoria Island*. A work in progress, Grandfather left us with his blueprint for the good life – to be animated in time at the ancient sacred site, as well as in all our other activities and events.



We were all so honoured to feel his presence with us so strongly to launch the canoe for the next phase of the journey! Certainly, Grandfather Commanda lighted the way once more, and his prayer, *Ginawaydaganuc, We Are All Connected*, guides us on. Now it is up to us, as Wayquay sang during his Millenium Peace Gathering, to *Navigate!! Megwetch!! Ginawayduganuc!*



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