



## The Learning Circles Project: *The Circles*



Enaahchtig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre

by Janice Brant

Enaahchtig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre is located north of the city of Barrie, Ontario near Victoria Harbour. At first glance you are entering a private farmstead, as a scenic snow covered lane leads you to the lodge. A stable and horses greet you at the first bend in the road. Surrounded by quiet rolling hills and beautiful maple trees you feel the intimate association between natural places and the healing of people.

“Enaahchtig” is the Ojibwe word for maple tree. It was chosen as the name of the lodge because of the gift of healing that this “tree of life” provides to the people. The lodge staff, along with the help of Elders and volunteers continues to celebrate the arrival of spring and the gift of the maple tree by collecting and boiling the sap to make Maple syrup.

Enaahchtig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre have been established to provide opportunities for holistic healing and learning based on the principles of Aboriginal culture. Traditional Aboriginal values and beliefs are promoted so as to encourage and foster healing, rebuilding, and strengthening of Aboriginal communities. Their holistic approach promotes the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being of Aboriginal people individually and collectively. They provide opportunities for individuals and families to reconnect with the natural world through land based cultural activities such as seasonal ceremonies, medicine walks, horseback riding, cultural workshops, gardening, and men’s and women’s sweat lodges.

Enaahchtig programs and services are traditionally focused, holistic, and guided by Aboriginal psychology. The scheduling of programs is based on the four seasons which coincide with the natural rhythm of their surroundings. Each season offers residential programs for families and individuals to participate in focused, intensive healing work. Non-residential programs and services are also offered and include outreach programs in various communities. Enaahchtig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre strive to address the many healing needs of Aboriginal people of all ages and walks of life.

[www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm](http://www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm)

Central to all programs and services offered by Enaahutig is traditional healing methods integrated with contemporary practices. Enaahutig is a place of healing and counsel, as well as a place of learning the teachings gifted to Aboriginal people by the Creator. It is a place of the sweat lodge, of fasting, and of ceremonies for healing and celebration. It is a place of rediscovery, reclaiming, and of learning new ways to live in a good way.

Families participating in the residential program are offered a variety of workshop sessions that may include life skills, positive parenting, healthy relationships, grief and grieving, proper nutrition for a healthy balance, along with other workshops as indicated by the needs and expectations of participants. These workshops are highly participatory and promote a balanced mind, body, spirit, and emotions central to Aboriginal philosophy. Participants are not required to read print material and writing is minimal to accommodate families that vary in age and skill level.

The family residential program cycle, like all Enaahutig programs and services, is based on the cyclical nature of the universe and life, therefore participant families attend throughout the span of a year arranged to coincide with the four seasons. Enaahutig recognizes that personal healing is an individual process and each individual progresses at their own pace, therefore participants are welcome to return even after the completion of the cycle.

Community outreach is an important part of Enaahutig programs and services and offers a variety of learning circles to engage Aboriginal people and their families. These circles are facilitated by Enaahutig staff with the support, knowledge, and expertise of Elders from various communities locally. They are open to people of all Nations, although they are primarily intended for individuals and families of Aboriginal descent.

Enaahutig hosts monthly Full Moon Ceremonies for Aboriginal women to come together and share. Six to eight women attend on a regular basis to celebrate their womanhood, share their stories, and learn from one another. Teachings and sharing is oral and confidential, and serves to strengthen the community of Aboriginal women.

The Sewing Circle is a good example of a learning circle. It offers an opportunity for Aboriginal people to explore their talents and gifts with the design and creation of traditional clothing, as well as acquire and develop new skills. Participants can learn to work with patterns, experiment with various natural and synthetic fabrics, operate a sewing machine, and explore various tools and techniques. It provides an opportunity for participants to develop new friendships and enjoy the company and support of other Aboriginal people. Denise Toner, Enaahdig's Social Counsellor, describes it as a sharing circle for women who care, share, and nurture one another.

The Sewing Circle evolved out of Enaahdig's need for gifts that are distributed at certain ceremonies and the need for women to get together. The circle has eight regular members who meet once every second week from 5:30 to 8:00 o'clock in the evening. Denise Toner, Enaahdig's Social Counsellor and circle member, says: "The sewing circle has been ongoing for approximately three years." Many of the women are mothers, aunties, and grandmothers. The Sewing circle began with a donation of 700 dollars. The money was used to purchase materials and the various women began to meet. Over time their membership grew to form the Sewing Circle.

Enaahdig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre support the Sewing Circle by providing them with a place to meet, access to sewing machines, and nutritious snacks at their meetings. Enaahdig has also helped to support the circle by providing honorariums for guests and helpers to teach the members how to make jingle dresses and moccasins. In return, the Sewing Circle makes gifts for the giveaways and does some fund raising for Enaahdig. On one occasion the Sewing Circle made a quilt and raffled it off. The money was then donated to support the annual Horse Ceremony held at Enaahdig.

The Sewing Circle projects are directed by the women. They have learned to make ribbon shirts, moccasins, aprons, gift bags, quilrows (blankets that folds into a pillows), and jingle dresses. One member had an idea to make sewing kits for women and tool kits for men to

be given as gifts. At other times the members bring their own projects and materials to work on.

The Sewing Circle has occasionally attracted young women in high school that were interested in learning to make traditional clothing. Denise explained that everyone got along well and the older members enjoyed the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills.

The teaching, learning and sharing that happens in the Sewing Circle is primarily oral and almost no print material is used in their activities. The literacy skills in the group vary and several of the women have difficulty reading and using patterns, and therefore they rely on their creativity. One member is working on getting her General Education Degree (GED) with a local program while another woman is a teacher that works with children with learning disabilities. Often the women create their own patterns and learn from trial and error.

One of the major challenges facing the Sewing Circle is transportation. The circle participants travel from a broad rural area around Victoria Harbour to attend the Sewing Circle. The participants work collaboratively to ensure that everyone can get to the meeting and home safely after.

The Community Kitchen is another group hosted by Enaahutig. The Community Kitchen group was founded with the aim to support low income Aboriginal families by sharing food, ingredients, recipes and culinary skills. The group meets monthly and includes individuals who like to cook, as well as those who wish to learn. Participants share their favourite recipes and learn new ones. They explore nutrition and healthy eating, as well as techniques for cooking, meal planning, and canning. Participants in the Community Kitchen are not required to be able to read or write, although some reading and numeracy skills are an asset for reading recipes and following instruction.

The Community Kitchen has eight regular participants that have been meeting for approximately five years. Enaahdig's Children's Program Worker, Val Wood helps to facilitate group and comments, "the Community Kitchen is very social, there is lots of sharing, laughter, and learning."

Sweats are offered on an on-going basis for both men and women. The sweats attract regular participants and is an opportunity for men and women to come together to learn and share in a good way. Sweats are very spiritual and are used for teaching, healing, cleansing, learning, and reconnecting with Mother Earth. Sweats are followed by a feast to which all participants have made a contribution and serve as a time fellowship for the group. The teaching and learning that is a result of the sweat lodge is oral and requires no print materials. Participants learn in the sweat lodge by doing, seeing, and listening to the wisdom that is shared by the Elders, conductor, and other participants.

The learning circles supported by Enaahdig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre are based on traditional teaching and learning methods. They are predominately oral and reciprocal in nature, where everyone is a teacher and a learner. The practice of teaching by modeling is used almost exclusively at Enaahdig and one is shown rather than told. The facilitators are not seen as knowing more than his or her participants and through actions convey useful skills or practical information that the participant can adopt or reject.

Building relationships and strengthening the Aboriginal community are key components of the learning circles. The inclusion of Elders and the sharing of traditional cultural knowledge, beliefs, values, practices, and philosophies serve to strengthen the identity and self-awareness of Aboriginal participants as a "whole" being (spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical). The learning circles foster the development of healthy relationships, a positive self-concept, and knowledge of who you are and where you come from, along with an understanding that learning is a lifelong process by which each individual comes to know his or her purpose.