

“Healthy Land, Healthy People”

Alice Olsen Williams’ Quilt



Photo: Fred Cattroll, Courtesy Assembly of First Nations

“Healthy Land, Healthy People” (14 feet wide x 5.66 feet high) was made as a way to include The People’s voice at the November 24-25, 2005 First Ministers’ Meeting (FMM) at Kelowna, BC, Canada. This was the first time the FMM focused on Aboriginal issues, the four main issues being (at least to governing organizations) housing, health, education and relationships, such as jurisdictional issues. This meeting was attended by the Prime Minister, the Premiers and the Leaders of the five national Aboriginal organizations: Assembly of First Nations, representing First Nations; Native Women’s Association of Canada; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Canada’s National Inuit Organization; the Métis National Council; and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, who speak for off-reserve, non-status, and non-treaty, urban Indians.

This quilt project provided a unifying and creative approach for Indigenous people to contribute to the FMM as well as a unique and highly symbolic means to communicate our Indigenous worldview, unity, and vision for a better future. With the help of the Women’s Council at the Assembly of First Nations, I put out a call for quilt blocks that was circulated throughout Canada and asked that each contributor provide her name and a small story explaining what her quilt square was about. As a result, the quilt is accompanied by individual stories that have been compiled in binders for ease of access and include a numbered chart/map of the quilt and names of the individual quilters. Forty quilt blocks were received. The blocks speak about how we, as the Indigenous Peoples of this great and sacred Turtle Island, have a special relationship to and connection with the Land and all of Creation. We know that we should care for, look after, and nurture the Land and all of Creation. We are terribly concerned about the total destruction, disregard, and pollution of the Life-Givers, The Great Mother, and all the Beings of Creation.

I sewed the blocks together and made a quilted wall-hanging. At the corner of each block there is a star. These were designed to acknowledge the always present Spirits of our Ancestors and our Relations. Different fabrics with sky designs are used for the border of the quilt at the top and top-sides. Further down the sides, the fabrics which depict water are used. Further down still, and across the bottom, fabrics that show animals, birds, foods, leaves, and trees are used. I chose these fabrics for the borders to signify that we are all embraced, looked after, cared for, and nurtured by The Great Mother Earth.

Still too often, only people who are saturated in malestream culture are welcome to sit around the table at important decision-making meetings and that, therefore, only their worldviews, their voices, are heard, recorded, and disseminated. Where are our ideas, our voices, our worldviews? We, as women, as Indigenous Peoples, see the world, governing, Life, Land, and resources very differently. The little ways that are available to us pale in comparison to the avenues that are available to those who share the same values and beliefs of a capitalist, patriarchal, colonialist mind set. As I thought what I could do to get the voices of Indigenous women heard at the FMM, I kept thinking about my quilt-making. Eventually, it came to me that I could get as many Indigenous people as possible to make quilt-blocks, and I would stitch them together as statements about what is important to us. I wanted the quilt to hang at the FMM so that it would be seen, and the messages read, talked about, heard, and taken into account at the decision-making tables.

I would like to share the words of Amelia Williams, who was ten years old when she contributed her quilt block: *“I thought it would be important to make her [new sister] a quilt where pieces were sewed together because, like the fabric, our family was being brought together tightly. The pieces in her quilt are like our roots and who we are. As proud Anishinaabe people we are all brought together by something, whether it be by stories, families, or our connection to this Land, Turtle Island. I think it is important that we recognize that we are all pieced together to become one. Just like quilting, we are all strands of something different, but when we are all brought together, we become one beautiful being.”*

The quilt has been showcased in different forums across Canada and the United States in efforts to continue its unifying and healing messages.

—Alice Olsen Williams