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TASTE OF

# Culture

by Tamara Aschenbrenner

ELDER-IN-RESIDENCE Q&A

PHOTOS: COURTESY EDMONTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

A member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Nôhkom Jo-Ann Saddleback holds many important roles within Treaty 6 Territory. She was the first woman executive for the Métis Nation of Alberta, served as Cultural Advisor when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in Edmonton, and in April 2021 began her role as Elder in Residence for the Edmonton Public Library. When the downtown Milner Library was undergoing its transformation, Nôhkom Jo-Ann was instrumental in the design of PĪYÊSĪW WÂSKÂHIKAN (Thunderbird House), a dedicated Indigenous gathering space within the library, by advising the architects, designers, and EPL administration. In her expanded role, she is continuing her commitment to the Indigenous arts scene.

**What have you noticed since you started as EIR?**

I was told not long ago that it [the Indigenous programming] was one of the most successful online sessions that the library has offered. Not one of—it is the most successful online session that EPL offers. And I kind of knew that it would be successful because, when people get a taste of culture, they want more. And for us, culture is not a product—it's the process. The library did right in using the cultural process to approach someone to be Elder in Residence.

**Can you tell us more about your role?**

I not only just open the doors, but I actively go out and use my knowledge of the Indigenous organizations in the city to bring partnerships here. We have partnerships with the Edmonton Two-Spirit Society, Dreamspeakers International Indigenous Film Festival, [and] specific groups that work a lot with Indigenous youth. I told them [EPL] that I come with an agenda. It is my purpose to acknowledge, support, and actively promote Indigenous artists, writers, [and] knowledge keepers.

**Before the pandemic, you owned & operated Căhcacêp Art and Tea House. What happened?**

It didn't survive, a lot because of COVID, when it was just starting out. But I loved it. It was so grand there, and it was the same thing, to acknowledge, promote, and support local Indigenous—and not just visual artists, but writers and filmmakers, to carry those obscure films and books. And to be able to have a platform for knowledge keepers to speak... and then I got COVID, and I have to say that that really pushed me years ahead in becoming an old woman, and I no longer had the energy.

**But the space was redeveloped recently, wasn't it?**

It needed younger people with more energy and just as much, or more, passion than me. So I spoke to a couple of really well-known artists, and I'm so happy to say that both are now running their own art houses. Lana Whiskeyjack with the Whiskeyjack Art House—her and her husband James, they own that. And then Dawn Marie Marchand now has Blue Horse Art Gallery in Smoky Lake.... My idea was, if there are art houses, Indigenous art houses, then it opens a door for artists. You don't have to be this businessperson, and you clearly have this support and these connections with other artists and with other patrons of art. So you really get the Indigenous art known and out there. And that's the good work, you know? It's hard work, but it's so worthwhile.

I don't think that the city can afford to see Whiskeyjack Art House go the way of Căhcacêp Art and Tea House. I think it's important—so important—that the city supports such a vibrant partner making a huge contribution to what's available and how lively and how deeply rich the city is.

**What are you most looking forward to this winter?**

I'm really excited because the pillars [in Thunderbird House] will be done. The artwork in here will be done. I'm really excited about the Indigenous community celebrating winter solstice, about us enjoying the holiday season. If the province opens up more and EPL opens up more, to have in-person meetings in here, to have ceremony in here, to finally be able to have that chance to bring artists in here and be able to do art in here—I'm really excited for that... Always about people gathering, about people sharing. 🍷



PĪYÊSĪW WÂSKÂHIKAN (pronounced PEE-YE-SOU WAASK-A-HIGAN), Stanley A. Milner Library | 7 Sir Winston Churchill Sq. [epl.ca/indigenous](http://epl.ca/indigenous)