

# What the Big Smoke brought

WORDS BY SPIRIT RIVER STRIPED WOLF

Spirit River Striped Wolf (Iyimakoyiomahka), outgoing president of the Students' Association of Mount Royal University, provides his thoughts on a year with dr. linda manyguns, phd, leading MRU's office of indigenization and decolonization and progress made at the University towards truth and reconciliation. Of Blackfoot descent (Piikani), Striped Wolf will graduate with a Bachelor of Arts — Policy Studies later this year.

On Jan. 28, I was honoured to participate in a Blackfoot tradition on the Mount Royal campus called a Big Smoke Ceremony. I was asked to be the one who "sits holy" by dr. linda manyguns, phd, MRU's associate vice-president of indigenization and decolonization.

During the ceremony, which takes place all night through to the early morning, I sat in prayer and meditation while being blessed by ceremonialists and traditional knowledge-holders. There was the smoking of sacred pipes, prayer, singing of sacred songs and the telling of sacred stories.

I asked dr. manyguns, who has chosen to use lower case in rejection of hierarchical symbols, for guidance for my role. Born on the Tsuut'ina Nation and registered at Siksika, manyguns suggested requesting prayers for the students, faculty and employees of Mount Royal to experience good health, success and happiness.

The Big Smoke Ceremony is very intense, participants are often exhausted, but nevertheless it continues. As dr. manyguns took me home at around 5 a.m., she explained that the endurance required to participate has always fascinated her.

Some might find it odd to hear about an Indigenous ceremony taking place in an academic setting and wonder if it is appropriate to have it sponsored by the University. Personally, I believe this is a great way for Mount Royal to engage meaningfully in truth and reconciliation. One of the principles in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) final report comes to mind: "Supporting Indigenous Peoples' cultural revitalization, and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, laws, protocols and connections to the land into the reconciliation process, are essential."

Enduring the ceremony is one thing, but organizing something of this importance and significance is another large challenge. Having worked with dr. manyguns to prepare, I know that the ceremony's intention was indicative of who our associate vice-president is. Although still quite new to the MRU community, she has a strong sense of duty to this campus and towards all of our success.

## A CULTURAL SHIFT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

dr. manyguns has a vision for her office that will be enduring. She told me that she believes MRU is committed to making change and ensuring that Indigenous people will be welcomed. Being a student leader of Indigenous descent has shown me that MRU does, in fact, have faculty, employees and students who are committed to indigenization and decolonization. dr. manyguns said that her facilitation is vital for a cultural shift.

"Indigenous ways of knowing must be taught and understood," manyguns says.

The office of indigenization and decolonization is instrumental in that process. When I asked dr. manyguns about whether she's dipped her fingers in advising the University on changes to its policies, she says that she has first been focusing on such initiatives as to how to engage the campus community on what indigenization and decolonization actually is.

For several months, dr. manyguns has been leading a highly successful poster campaign, since adopted by school boards around Alberta and even into B.C. She has created the [mru.ca/decolonize](http://mru.ca/decolonize) page, a repository of information about indigenization and the history and culture of Indigenous Peoples. The Journey to Indigenization, a two-week long observance including feasts, connection circles and faculty presentations, ensured that important dates like Orange Shirt Day, the anniversary of the signing of Treaty 7, Sisters in Spirit Day and the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation were recognized.

dr. manyguns says that any change in policies to reflect indigenization and decolonization really depends on the answer to a single question: "How Indigenous does MRU want to be?" As she puts it, the reason why the indigenization of policies needs to be sought out in this manner is "because the colonizer still has a right to their colonized education. The Indigenous people aren't going to take control over all education, although they want to take control of theirs."



Spirit River Striped Wolf



linda manyguns, phd

Acknowledging that MRU has the right motivations, manyguns asks, "Do we completely shift everything to an Indigenous format or do we find a middle road?" She goes on to explain that the creation of her role is a starting step in determining the right response by creating opportunities allowing foundational structures within the university to figure it out in a way that moves us forward.

**PRIORITIZING LEARNERS**

As a student leader, I'm thrilled to have recurring meetings with dr. manyguns. In one of our conversations, she highlighted that the outcome of her work is ultimately for students, especially Indigenous students, and many of the initiatives she has in the works involve their participation.

dr. manyguns also highlighted the valued relationship she's built with the MRU landscaping and grounds staff (as the land itself has an integral part to play in the indigenization process), as well as Indigenous employees across the institution and the employee community as a whole.

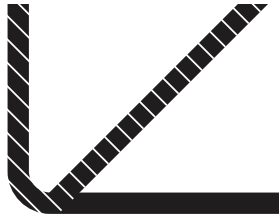
"The support that I've gotten from various areas has been outstanding," she says, "and deeply appreciated."

Besides getting to know her new campus community, dr. manyguns has been hard at work establishing relationships across the country with other post-secondary institutions and their Indigenous leadership. Along with other leaders, dr. manyguns will work with former senator Murray Sinclair, who was chief commissioner of the TRC and helped deliver its final report. She and her colleagues want to tackle the question of Indigenous identity within academia.

dr. manyguns is also working on developing the Traditional Thinkers Circle, which will involve elders, traditional thinkers and community experts and is meant to bring more Indigenous ways of knowing into the campus community.

As dr. manyguns succeeds in introducing more traditional thinkers, culture, relationships and ceremony to the campus community and to academics, more learning and decolonizing initiatives will arise, such as engaging with the community gardens and campus grounds for land-based teachings.

Since I first started at MRU, I have seen a marked increase in elements of indigenization and decolonization in the everyday. To have dr. manyguns as a resource, I believe, is instrumental for bringing co-ordination and order to a community that is very much engaged in doing their part in making the campus equitable, diverse, inclusive and *indigenized*. 🐾



# Blackfeet Nation Bannock

This beginner's bannock recipe was provided by Spirit River Striped Wolf as part of a collaborative project developing K-12 lesson plans for Alberta educators.

Bannock is a simple bread recipe that was introduced to Indigenous Peoples in Canada by Scottish settlers. Indigenous communities adapted the initial recipe, which has been incorporated as a staple food in their cultures. Bannock is a versatile bread used in many contemporary Indigenous dishes, and is traditionally served with roasted meats or wildberry jams.

**Ingredients:**

- 6 cups white flour
- 3 tbsps baking powder
- 1 1/2 tps salt
- 2 1/2 cups water

**Instructions:**

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees
2. Mix together flour, baking powder and salt in a large bowl
3. Gradually stir in water until a thick dough begins to form
4. Turn dough onto a lightly floured board and knead until the dough is not sticky (it does not need to be perfectly smooth)
5. Grease a 9-inch by 13-inch baking pan
6. Use a rolling pin to flatten dough until it is roughly the size of the pan
7. Place dough in pan and adjust to fit
8. Bake for 35 minutes or until golden brown

Turn out bannock onto a cutting board or cooling rack (can be cut while still warm).

**Chief Earl Old Person, 1992**