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MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Edmonton, AB, April 14, 2025: A commitment to the arts, culture, community involvement, service to country and community, sports, trades and technology, and justice and human rights are just some of the themes being celebrated as 16 Indigenous women are honoured at the 29th annual Esquao Awards—including this year's Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award recipient Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse, MLA Edmonton-Rutherford, who will be welcomed in to the Circle of Honour.

The event to honour these change-makers doing extraordinary work in their communities will be held on Friday, June 13, 2025, from noon to 4:00 pm at River Cree Resort and Casino in Enoch, Alberta.

The Esquao Awards recognize the achievements and contributions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women from across Alberta and raise awareness about the challenges and obstacles they face. Since their inception in 1995, 542 women from close to 100 communities have been honoured in what has become the single largest recognition event for Indigenous women in Canada.

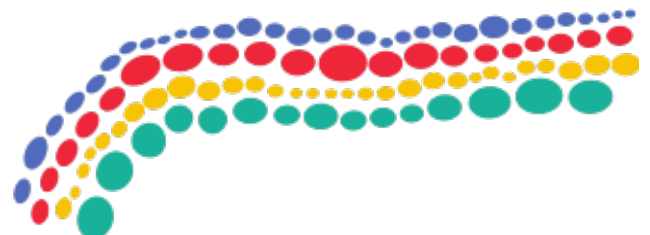
Each year, some 600 people from across the province and beyond attend the Esquao Awards. Guests include members from all levels of government, Indigenous organizations, Métis and First Nation leaders, businesses, friends, and supporters. Tickets for the Esquao Awards are \$110+GST or \$990+GST for a table of 10 and are available at eventbrite.ca.

Esquao, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW), is a non-profit organization that recognizes the role, value, and achievements of Indigenous women in society and raises awareness around the challenges facing them. Esquao offers culturally respectful programming in violence prevention, achieving justice, financial literacy, healthy relationships, housing capacity building, and leadership development for Indigenous women and girls. Founded in 1994 by Muriel Stanley Venne CM, AOE, BA (Hon), the organization strives to empower all Indigenous peoples in the reinforcement and rediscovery of their language, culture, and spiritual practices.

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For more information on Esquao or the 2025 Esquao Awards, please contact 780-264-2951 or 1-877-471-2171.

Esquao is the stylized version of the Cree word for woman.





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2025 Esquao Award Recipients

Amplifying the spirit, strength, and resiliency of Indigenous Women in Alberta

Co-founded by Marggo Pariseau and Muriel Stanley Venne, the Esquao Awards highlight the significant role Indigenous women hold in their home, in the healing and development of their communities, and in the building of Alberta. This year's honoured Esquao Award recipients include leaders in the arts, culture, community involvement, service to country and community, sports, trades and technology, and justice and human rights.

Rita V. Arcand, Morinville - Lifetime Achievement

A respected Elder, social worker, and student counsellor/advisor, Rita is an inspiration to all. In her work with the Family Reunification Project, she delivered culturally-appropriate healing workshops. Her relevant real-world examples related to her struggles as a residential/day school survivor, and her experiences in overcoming that trauma, have given her insight into how to reach out to others and offer them support and encouragement. Rita's gentle, non-judgemental and spiritual presence creates instant trust in those she meets and assists.

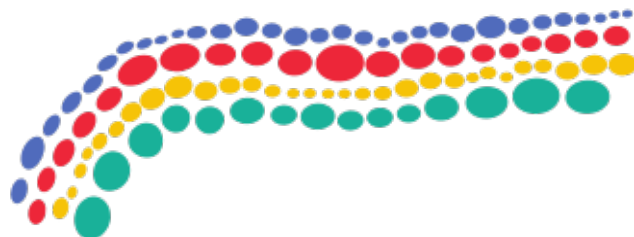
Dawn-Lyn Blake (Johnson), Calgary - Service to Country and Community

A strong and accomplished Cayuga woman from Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario-Haudenosaunee Confederacy-Iroquois, Dawn-Lyn carries her heritage with great pride. She began her law enforcement career with the RCMP, successfully serving for 12 years in Saskatchewan and Alberta. In 2010, she joined the Tsuut'ina Nation Police Service where she currently serves as the Inspector in charge of the Operations Section. Dawn-Lyn has played a pivotal role in creating impactful crime prevention strategies and youth-focused programs. In 2017 she received the distinguished "Officer of the Year Award" from the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association; followed by The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal in 2022; and being appointed to board of directors of the Alberta Law Foundation in 2023. Dawn-Lyn continues to advocate for Indigenous people by raising awareness and creating innovative opportunities by writing grants to supplement the financial inequities within First Nations policing.

Bebe Buckskin, Calgary (Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement) - Arts

Bebe Buckskin is a celebrated Indigenous artist making a significant impact in her communities through her music. She is known for her powerful voice, inventive guitar, and dynamic stage presence, as well as her dedication to promoting positive change through her art. Born and raised in Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement, she has the spirit of a lion and the heart of a healer, becoming a successful blues rock musician who honours and respects her Cree/Métis heritage.

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Mary Cardinal Collins, Riviere Qui Barre - Lifetime Achievement

Born in onihcikiskwapiwinihk Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Mary was brought up on the reserve in the 1940s. She attended Blue Quills Indian Residential School from the age of 7 to 17 and retained her nêhiyawêwin language. Mary began teaching in Slave Lake and spent 30 years in Indigenous language programming development. She has been a leader in curriculum development, translation, resource development, and language teaching, and an advocate for the preservation and teaching of Cree and other Indigenous languages within provincial and federal K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions. Mary's advocacy, guidance, and teachings in Indigenous education has had an everlasting impact within school communities across the province and will continue to have an everlasting impact on future generations.

Shannon Dunfield, Grande Prairie - Sports

A strong and inspiring Cree/Métis woman, mother, daughter, aunt, volunteer, and community leader from the Indigenous community of Kelly Lake, Shannon's passion and love for family, friends, and community is evident in everything she undertakes. She sits on the Otipemisiwak Métis Government Citizens' Council, on the board of the Indigenous Sport Council of Alberta, is past president of the North American Indigenous Games Council, and has served on the University of Alberta Senate. Hard work, determination and self-discipline has brought her to where she is today. Shannon has developed a unique and distinct appreciation of her Métis heritage and does not hesitate to lend a hand to help and volunteer.

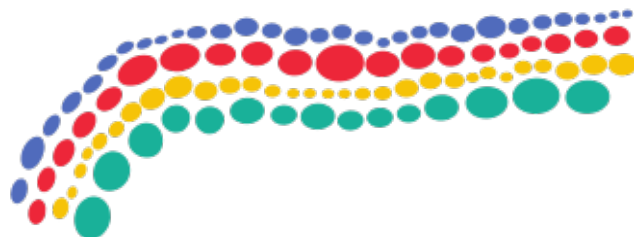
Diane Gardipy, BA, Red Deer - Community Involvement

Originally from Beardy's and Okemasis' Cree Nation, Diane's selflessness, compassion, and hard work are an inspiration to all. She is very active within her community through her employment with the school division; in her role as president of the Red Deer Indigenous Dance Troupe; and as a committee member for *Powwow Times Red Deer International Powwow*. Diane works to facilitate Indigenous learning in the schools and to create a community for staff and students. She lends her excellent organization and leadership skills, along with her time and energy, to various community activities and events— from creating food bags for Elders and families in need to participating in Indigenous-based advocacy for women, children and men. Diane's contributions have made a real difference in the lives of those in need and have helped to build a stronger, more connected community.

Roberta Giroux, Edmonton - Trades & Technology

As Indigenous Employment Coordinator for PME Inc., Roberta finds opportunities for First Nation, Métis and Inuit people in the construction industry. Her own journey to become an electrician began at age 28, overcoming cultural barriers of being both Indigenous and a woman. Following 15 years as a journeywoman electrician, she joined Trade Winds to Success Training Society and worked helping Indigenous men and women pursue careers in the skilled trades. Roberta is a proud member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and an inspiring mentor and motivator who uses her experiences and abilities to help other Indigenous people become successful.

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Pauline D. Gladue, Edmonton (Bigstone Cree Nation) - Lifetime Achievement

Pauline is a member of Bigstone Cree Nation, a registered social worker, mentor, residential and day school survivor, and a respected Elder who practices her Cree traditions and knowledge and uses Indigenous healing methods. After earning her Bachelor of Social Work degree from the University of Calgary, she worked in Wabasca at Bigstone Community Wellness for 17 years as a counsellor, manager and director. Pauline is a strong advocate for those dealing with mental health and addictions, and is known for her caring and her respectful and traditional ways of knowing.

Kiona Callihoo Ligtoet, Edmonton - Arts

Kiona is an artist practicing in amiskwaciwâskahikan, who grew up near Calahoo on a quarter section of land her moshom still cares for. Her family lines are Cree and Métis from Michel Band, as well as Dutch and mixed European. Her work draws from enfranchisement, but also from deep belly laughter and many visits home. Kiona has exhibited nationally, received the Lieutenant Governor Emerging Artist Award (2022), The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal (2023), and her debut graphic novel, *We Were Younger Once*, was nominated for the 2022 Doug Wright Award for emerging talent. Kiona is co-organizer of Making Space, a visual-arts focused BIPOC peer mentorship collective.

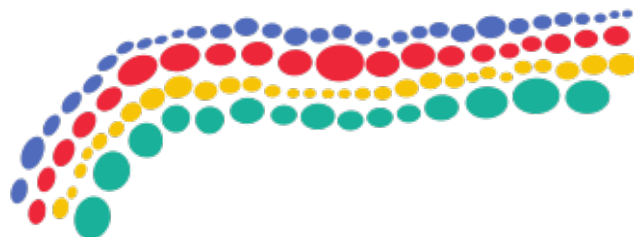
Allison Meltingtallow-Syniak, Sucker Creek First Nation - Service to Country and Community

Sergeant Meltingtallow-Syniak is a dedicated officer who cares about the people she serves, and is a strong female leader/mentor in First Nations policing in Alberta. She began her career in 1995, and since 2010 has been with the Lakeshore Regional Police Service—serving Sawridge, Swan River, Driftpile, Kapawe'no and Sucker Creek First Nations. A proud member of Sucker Creek First Nation, Allison routinely engages with Elders, youth and community members while mentoring and encouraging youth to pursue a career in policing.

Shirley Moocheweinies, Frog Lake - Lifetime Achievement

Born and raised in Frog Lake First Nations, Shirley is a respected Elder who has dedicated her life to helping her community. She's been a teacher, mentor, guidance counsellor, foster parent, community volunteer, support worker, and employment and training director. Shirley raised her six children and many grandchildren to be responsible, hardworking and compassionate citizens, and fostered over 50 children who she continues to be in their lives. She believes in the power of her culture to bring emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical healing to those suffering from intergenerational trauma, and utilizes her professional platform to integrate cultural teachings into the lives of her community members.

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Macyn Iistiniimaki Morning Bull, Calgary - Sports

Macyn is an extraordinary woman and gifted athlete from the Piikani First Nation. Overcoming dyslexia to excel in academics, Macyn went on to receive Calgary's Aboriginal Youth Achievement Award in 2018, Indigenous Role Model of Alberta in 2019, won the CCAA women's basketball championship with Olds College in 2019, and was named ACAC First Team Allstar and member of the CCAA All-Canadian Team in 2022. She was named to 2023 CANDO National Youth Panel, and is on the board of the 2027 North American Indigenous Games in Calgary. Her humility and strong connection to her culture grounds her. In 2015, she received the name Iistiniimaki, "to capture the enemy in a wooded area," which is also her great-great-great grandmother's name. Macyn, now a mother of two, works in Finance at ATCO and continues to play and coach basketball.

Sandra Potts, Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation - Justice & Human Rights

Sandra is a grandmother, friend, relative, and proud member of the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation. She has worked to alleviate the detrimental over-representation of Indigenous people in the judicial system, and has helped bring in Indigenous practices and ways of knowing into the justice system. In her roles as a probation officer, FASD mentor, and court worker, Sandra's commitment to connecting Indigenous justice system participants with supports and services helps ensure positive outcomes for them and the community.

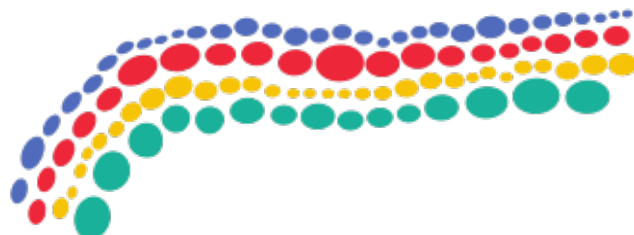
Kayden Reves, Edmonton - Service to Country and Community

Although still young, Kayden is a poised, confident woman who demonstrates leadership, embraces her Indigenous culture, and provides cultural information sessions to her Cadet group. She is determined to join the Canadian Forces and became a Cadet at 12. Always keen to learn about and share her culture, Kayden is a proud member of the Métis Nation of Alberta who loves the outdoors, hunting, fishing, and harvesting berries and medicines. She is a responsible young woman who's been instrumental in helping her single dad with her younger brother, and is a proud teen mother at 19 to her son Finnley.

Lisa Dawn Richards, St. Albert - Culture

Lisa is strong nehiyaw iskew known for her advocacy, caring, and commitment to nêhiyawêwin (Cree) reclamation. She holds a Masters Degree from University nuhelot'îne thaiyots'î nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills and teaches her language and culture through St. Albert & District Further Education Association. Her passion for traditional teachings speak to her authenticity, competency and expertise. Lisa is particularly supportive of those who did not grow up with their culture, and is an inspiring and caring mentor, wife, mother, nohkom, and avid seamstress.

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**Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse, MLA, Edmonton - Circle of Honour Inductee,
Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award**

Elected to the Legislative Assembly of Alberta representing Edmonton-Rutherford, Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse understands the importance of advocating for the needs of all Albertans. Born and raised in Edmonton, Jodi is a proud Cree-Mohawk woman from Michel First Nation, and has been recognized internationally for her anti-racism work with the Edmonton Shift Lab.

Prior to becoming an MLA, Jodi served as Executive Director for the Yellowhead Indigenous Education Foundation—working to support corrections, child and family services, health departments, and creating an emergency response system to support families during the pandemic. She also founded Miyo-Pimatisiwin Productions and was a producer and broadcaster of *Acimowin*, an award-winning Indigenous radio program. Jodi served two terms as a member of the council for Michel First Nation; was a collective member for Walking with Our Sisters; and sat on the Edmonton Police Commission.

Jodi worked with former Commissioner from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Chief Wilton Littlechild, to bring the second World Indigenous Nations Games to Edmonton, going on to serve as Executive Director for the Games. She worked with the University of Alberta in faculty development and community relations for the Faculty of Law, and was the community engagement and reconciliation adviser in the Office of the Provost.

Jodi holds an undergraduate degree in Native Studies and is completing her MSc with the Faculty of Resource Economics and Environmental Sociology at the University of Alberta. She lives in Edmonton with her children and their rescue dog.

Each year, Esquao's board selects an Indigenous woman in a leadership position to honour with the Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award. This award celebrates the accomplishments of a truly deserving recipient, as well as recognizes Muriel's legacy and her contribution in making the organization the success it is today.

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