



Esquao

Institute for the Advancement
of Aboriginal Women

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MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Edmonton, AB, April 16, 2026: A commitment to children’s futures, community involvement, culture, education, health & medicine, justice & human rights, and sports are just some of the themes being celebrated as 17 Indigenous women are honoured at the 30th annual Esquao Awards—including this year’s Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award recipient Josie Nepinak, President, Native Women’s Association of Canada, 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 Thursday, May 7, 2026, 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, 556 women from close to 100 communities have been honoured in what has become the single largest recognition event for Indigenous women in Canada.

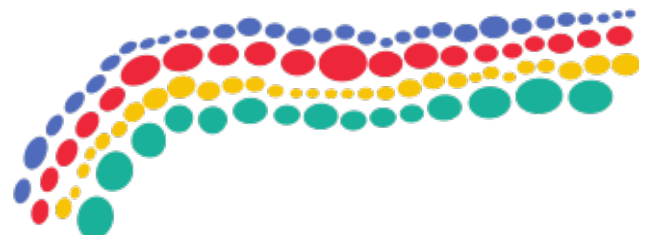
Each year, some 600 people from across the province and beyond attend the Esquao Awards. Guests include members from all levels of government, Indigenous organizations, Métis and First Nation leaders, businesses, friends, and supporters. Tickets are available at esquao_awards_2026.eventbrite.ca.

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 the 2026 Esquao Awards, please contact Sandra Huculak at 780-719-9162, or Esquao at 780-479-8195 or 1-877-471-2171.

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2026 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.

Rebecca Arcand, Alexander First Nation, Treaty 6, Morinville - Children's Future

Rebecca is a dedicated program manager for Awasísak Alexander Head Start Program. Recognizing a significant gap in the support systems available to children and families in her community, she started an early intervention support program for 40 children, which grew to 187 children in the first year. The program provides opportunities such as, access to financial assistance for food, experiencing cultural activities off Alexander First Nation, and family engagement activities they normally would not be able to access. A remarkable advocate for children and families, Rebecca used her exceptional relationship-building and strategic communication skills to add a preschool program, community outreach program, nutrition program, and cultural program to the original Head Start program.

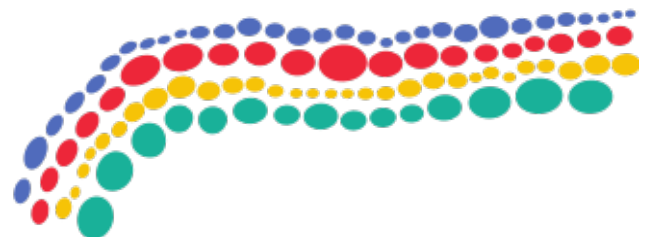
Kayli Avveduti, Alexander First Nation, Treaty 6, Edmonton - Justice & Human Rights

As CEO for the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, Kayli is a respected leader whose work supports First Nations communities and organizations across Alberta. She earned her Masters of Public Policy from McGill University in 2020, has been involved in various capacities as an advocate or analyst in public policy, and was recognized with a Top 40 under 40 Award as a young leader. Kayli's ability to work effectively across organizations and sectors, brings a practical and collaborative approach to the table. In her role as CEO of the Confederacy, she has demonstrated a strong commitment to economic reconciliation, sound governance, and the development of opportunities that bring practical benefits to First Nations.

Lauren Cardinal, Little Red River Cree Nation, Treaty 8, Edmonton - Sports

Lauren began her journey as a student-athlete at Red Deer College before transferring to University of Alberta-Augustana where she finished her BA in Kinesiology and Sport Studies and co-captained the Augustana Vikings women's basketball team. She was named Alberta Colleges Athletics Conference Second Team All-Star in 2021-22, and Canadian Colleges Athletics Association Tournament All-Star in 2023—the first Augustana women's basketball player to receive this award. One of the most decorated women's basketball players in school history, Lauren returned to the team as an assistant coach and later as head coach. She's helped coach elite U16 Indigenous athletes at a national level; worked with the Indigenous Sports Council of Alberta developing, coordinating and implementing sports programming; and is a certified Learning Facilitator accredited by the Coaching Association of Canada.

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Chantelle Desjarlais-Fiddler, Frog Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6, Cold Lake - Culture

Chantelle has always emphasized the importance of culture, language, traditions, and ceremonies in helping Frog Lake Cree Nation move forward together in a good way. As manager of the Frog Lake Library, the first First Nation library within the provincial system, she leads initiatives to preserve Cree language, culture, and traditions—especially in bringing cultural awareness to the Nation’s youth. Through the Cree Oral History Project, Chantelle collects, translates, and documents Elder testimonies—preserving the history and teachings for future generations, and ensuring Indigenous voices are never erased. She has transformed the library into a community hub, and is the critical go-between for the community, its youth, and Elders—and through programs and ceremonies, Chantelle has helped bring healing and forgiveness back into the community.

Jadyn Fischer-McNab, George Gordon First Nation, Treaty 7, Calgary - Education

Artist, educator, business owner... Jadyn studied at the University of Calgary, where she received bachelor’s degrees in kinesiology and education in 2015 and 2018 respectively. She is a full-time junior high teacher, and also owns and operates a small stationery business, @artbyJFM. Jadyn has made significant contributions through her involvement with the Werklund School of Education. She has played a key role in integrating Indigenous materials into school curriculums—helping students and staff develop knowledge, understanding and respect for the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences, and contemporary context of First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Jadyn is an intergenerational Residential School survivor, and is passionate about breaking barriers and educating others by incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and being into her art, her teaching, and her life.

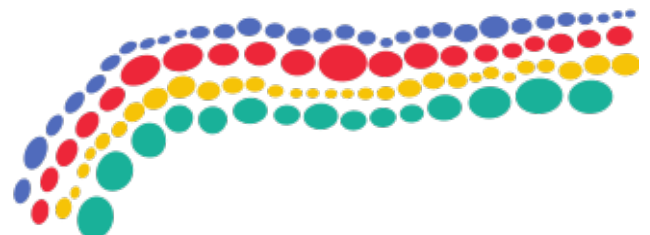
Gloria Fraser, Little Red River Cree Nation, Treaty 8, Edmonton - Health & Medicine

Gloria began as a Community Health Representative in Fort Smith, NWT, before becoming a Registered Nurse and a senior health administrator for First Nations and Indigenous communities in Alberta. As the Health Director at Bigstone Health Commission and Nune Health Board Society, she administers community and public health programs for members of Bigstone Cree Nation, plus primary care services for members of Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and Fort Chipewyan Métis Nation. Gloria’s knowledge of health has enabled Bigstone Health Commission to be a leading health provider in quality programs and services. She also serves on numerous boards and committees to advocate for improved health services.

Sasha Gladu, Alexander First Nation, Treaty 6, Edmonton - Community Involvement

Sasha has long been a noteworthy leader in the community. Whether it’s helping Edmonton’s most vulnerable secure housing and support services, advocating for MMIWG, serving on the YWCA Edmonton Board of Directors, or participating on YWCA’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Sasha takes every opportunity to explore her passion for helping Indigenous communities. She not only has lived experience, but has pursued education in the helping sector. In addition to her addictions counselling diploma and community addiction training, Sasha is currently pursuing a psychology degree. Friends and colleagues praise her for being a tireless worker, outstanding mentor, amazing mother and, most importantly, a strong independent Indigenous woman.

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Janet Gobert, Peepeekisis Cree Nation, Treaty 4, Bonnyville - Community Involvement

Bonnyville Friendship Centre CEO, Janet Gobert was recently appointed to the Government of Alberta's First Nations, Métis and Inuit Bursary Committee, supporting Indigenous learners as they pursue post-secondary education. This honour reflects her lifelong commitment to creating educational pathways, advancing equity, and building strong, respectful relationships with Indigenous families and communities. Through her work with Friendship Centre, Janet has been a driving force addressing some of the community's most pressing needs. Janet is a visionary leader whose powerful advocacy is deeply rooted in her lived experiences as an MMIWG2S+ survivor and an intergenerational residential school survivor. Her personal journey fuels her lifelong commitment to justice, safety, and healing for Indigenous families.

Floranda Kootenay, Stoney Nakoda Nations, Treaty 7, Calgary - Community Involvement

In her 30 years of working in the community, Floranda has been a social worker, helper, mentor, teacher, advocate, and respected Elder. She has helped countless women and children break the cycle of violence, empowering them to seek a healthy environment and home for their families. Her wisdom, stories and cultural teachings when working with at-risk youth brings calmness in their time of crisis. Floranda is a Morley Day School survivor that fought to retain the Stoney Nakoda language and cultural practices. She was the first in her family to graduate from a post-secondary, all while raising her four sons. A fierce "Warrior Woman", Floranda is a champion for social change and is at the front lines of many events for MMIWG2S+.

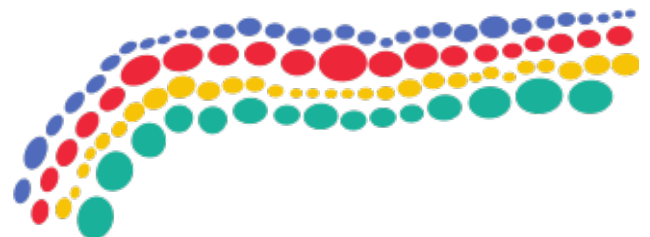
Chantel Large, Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6, Calgary - Education

Chantel is honoured for her courageous spirit, resilience, and unwavering commitment to education, professional excellence and community service. She well-grounded in her cultural heritage as a Cree woman. In her family, the three generations before her attended residential school; and she also overcame intergenerational trauma. After earning her Masters degree in Social Work, Chantel stepped into the role of sessional instructor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary—generously sharing her wealth of Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and practice with her students. Her career has included roles as a child and youth worker at Métis Calgary Family Services, mental health therapist for Alberta Health Services, and her current position as Cultural Services Manager at Miskanawah, an Indigenous-led charitable organization grounded in cultural traditions and teachings.

Marrisa Mitsuing, Saulteaux First Nation, Treaty 6, Sylvan Lake - Culture

For Marrisa, culture is a way of life. You can witness it through her clothing, food harvesting and preparation, through her learning and using Cree in her household, and from the kindest and grace in which she interacts with everyone. Marrisa is a daughter of residential school survivors, and like many grew up with a loss of traditions. As she got older began to reclaim her culture and fully embrace who she is and where she came from. Marrisa has made a significant impact by curating the award-winning museum exhibit "Ochiwin". She brought her community together by creating and organizing the Red Deer International Powwow, and has reached millions of people with her content on social media, sharing her passion for culture.

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Etienna Moostoos-Lafferty, Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 8, Edmonton - Education

Etienna walks the talk with integrity as an Indigenous educator who models how to integrate the love, humility, values, knowledge, practices, relationships, and beingness of miyo pimâtisôwin (good life living). She has experience in both First Nations community schools and in provincial schools. Etienna has worked provincially as an Indigenous Education consultant, coach, and independent contractor; and in her current role of assistant professor in the Department of Human Services and Early Learning at MacEwan University leads the Indigenous Research Group. Completing her Master in Education at the University of Alberta with a 4.0 GPA, her thesis topic was "Pihtikwe: Exploring Witness in Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development". Etienna is now pursuing her PhD in Education, and continues to inspire educators who want to be better in their work with students and in their peer relationships.

Gladys Okemow, Peerless Trout First Nation, Treaty 8 - Children's Future

Gladys embodies the principles of relational accountability, kinship, and balance in her role as the Onikanew for the First Nations of Peerless Trout, Lubicon Lake, and Loon River. Following her tenure as Peerless Trout First Nation's first elected female chief, she was the first Onikanew to be appointed under Awašak Wiyasiwêwin (Children's Law). Leading through quiet resolve, careful listening, and the ability to bring people together in times of conflict or uncertainty, Gladys models humility and strength in equal measure. She demonstrates that true authority flows from service rather than command, and her guidance reflects a deep understanding of natural law, community obligations, and the sacred responsibilities carried by women in Cree ways.

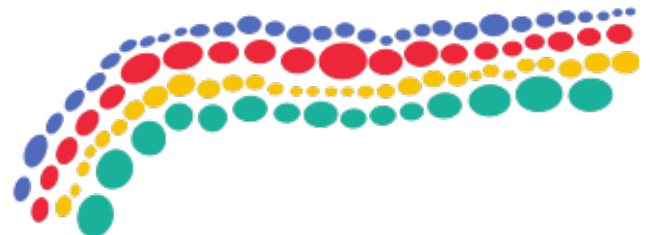
Linda Potts, Frog Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6, Maskwacis - Culture

Linda is a strong Cree Elder who lives and treats everyone she meets with respect, dignity, equality, and shares her Cree culture openly. She is a keeper of the Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) language and cultural traditions, and serves as an advocate for families. Together with her late husband, Chief Melvin Potts of the Montana First Nation, she owned and operated a group home for children in foster care. Always willing to pitch in for the good of the community, Linda believes spiritual and cultural connection strengthens the sense of belonging, and she works to guide, prepare, and offer traditional knowledge. Her legacy of dedication of love and service will inspire generations of Indigenous people to come.

Rebecca Reid, Kahkewistahaw First Nation, Treaty 4, Edmonton - Community Involvement

Rebecca founded the non-profit Water Warriors YEG in 2020 to fill the gap for Edmonton's unhoused community's access to water. Several times a week, a team of volunteers hit the streets with water, snacks, sandwiches, supplies, and necessities for people living rough on the streets. The team makes connections, listens, and helps as they are able, advocating and offering supports as needed. One bottle of water may not change the world, but it may make all the difference to that one person's day. Having lost her niece to a drug poisoning, Rebecca is passionate about harm reduction and teaches Naloxone Administration in her spare time. Rebecca is trained in Studio III Low Arousal Non-Violent Crisis Intervention, a certificated approach that is Human-Rights based, as well as Trauma-Informed Care.

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Dr. Gabrielle Weasel Head, Kainai Blood Tribe, Treaty 7, Calgary - Culture

Dr. Gabrielle Weasel Head, a proud member of Kainai Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, carries her leadership in the way of Indigenous women since time immemorial—grounded in relationship, guided by responsibility, and accountable to community, Elders, and future generations. As Board President of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, she has provided governance leadership rooted not only in policy, but in Blackfoot ways of knowing—where decisions are made with consideration for balance, respect, and collective impact. Her role has been protective and visionary, ensuring the organization grows in a good way, with cultural integrity and community voice guiding every step.

**Josie Nepinak, President, Native Women’s Association of Canada
Minegoziibe Anishinabe, Treaty 4, Calgary**

Circle of Honour Inductee, Muriel Stanley Venne Leadership Award

Josie Nepinak is a proud Anishinaabe woman from Treaty 4 territory, with roots in Minegoziibe Anishinabe. She believes in a balanced approach to teaching Indigenous wisdom and healing along with modern Western methods. This promotes the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, families, and communities.

Her broad background includes over 30 years in executive leadership, immersed in complex social issues, working with Indigenous organizations, and advocating for Indigenous women and families affected by family violence. Josie has a bachelor’s degree in women’s studies, along with ongoing career development in management. She chaired the Calgary Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Committee and served as the President of Esquao’s Board of Directors. She is also involved with several national and provincial boards and councils.

In her current role as President of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), one of her primary and integral objectives is to ensure the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQAI+ people (MMIWG2S+) are enacted by decision-makers at all levels.

She strongly holds with reconciliation beginning with equitable inclusion in policy decisions that will and are impacting Indigenous women and gender-diverse people. This goal includes environmental policy planning and national priorities related to climate change.

Josie’s mandate includes continuing the fight for equality in training opportunities, education, health care, mental-health awareness, and housing for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people. Personally, and as an organization, NWAC cannot emphasize enough the importance of a healing model for intergenerational trauma.

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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