

My name is Monique Manatch. I'm an Alquonuin from the Barriere Lake Algonuins. I am a student at Carleton University. I just finished a masters in Indigenous and Canadian Studies and now I am taking a doctorate program in anthropology.

Over the past several years I've participated in the blanket exercise with elders Barbara Dumont-Hill and her husband Larry Hill. We've facilitated the exercise with a number of different groups from students to government employees to actually a church group. There's been quite a number of different people from different walks of life who are participating.

People first come in, the blanket, there are several blankets that are put down on the floor and the participants are told that the blankets represent Turtle Island, it represents the land base of Turtle Island, the Indigenous territory. And then they, they sit in the circle and they talk about where they are from and what their perspective is and what they're hoping to see or experience during the exercise. And then they're ask to stand on the blankets and they're told that they will be participating as Indigenous peoples. So they, they walk around the blankets, they visit with each other, they get to know their neighbours, they're free to roam around and then generally it's Larry, Larry plays the European(s), and so there's a narrator and a European. And the narrator starts telling the story of what kind of happened, what has transpired on Turtle Island in North America when the European countries began passing laws that dealt with the ownership of North America. And it was never considered even necessary to talk to the people who were living in North America at that time. So they were passing laws. They actually bought land from the Hudson's Bay Company, which had been given to them by the government. So the government gives some land to the Hudson's Bay Company and then the Hudson's Company sells it off and some of that territory was used for reserve land for the Indigenous people.

So the whole history, starting right with contact and with people who passed away because of disease and who were relocated, the whole history is acted with the participants on the blankets. And while they are standing on their blankets, the European will come along and will start folding it up. So the the blankets get smaller and smaller and smaller, there is less room, there is less territory, there is less land for the people to stand on.

And then some of them are taken and relocated, like the Inuit were. They were put into an area that they weren't familiar with, where there was no food, many of them starved, and then they talk about residential schools. So some people are, they are given cards, so if they have a yellow card they represent the people who went to residential schools. And generally there is one or two of the yellow cards that have an X on it and that means that those people didn't return home. Some passed away, some never made it back to their communities.

So people are experiencing on a physical level the history of the government policies, the Indian Act which created, when communities split apart, when the provinces were formed, when the Métis tried to struggle to keep their land and what happened to them. People are designated as "This happened to you" and they are asked to sit down. And if they passed away, then they are asked to leave the circle, they are asked to leave the blanket.

So by the end of the exercise, there are very few people left standing on very, very small areas. There are few blankets that are left and afterwards, everyone sits in a circle again and they all talk about how they felt and what stood out for them with the blanket exercise.

It's surprising how emotional it becomes for people. Because for one thing they are not aware of the history, so it's all new. They didn't know this how the Indigenous people were treated, they didn't know about the pass system, where people weren't able to leave their communities unless they had a pass. They didn't know that apartheid was actually based on the Canadian pass system. They didn't know that thousands and thousands of people died. They didn't know about the seriousness of taking children from away from the culture and sending them off to residential school and how many of them actually died from that. They find it shocking to experience it, not firsthand but to be told, "You died because your community was starved out." Or "You died because of violent encounters with settlers." Or "You died because your community was moved and you have to go sit down over there." Or "You married someone who wasn't status Indian so now you can't live in your community so you have to move away."

You have to stand over here. It's a good thing they have to talk about it afterwards because it helps them digest the information a little better. And it helps them realize the relationship with Indigenous people is the way it is right now and it helps them to understand why Indigenous people have the type of social challenges that they face.

The first time I participated I was actually quite pleased with the depth of the history and it was so clearly laid out in such a way that people easily understood it. The second time I participated at the Kitchi Blanket Exercise they call it. The big blanket exercise up on Parliament Hill. And I had my son with me. And I actually was surprised at how protective I became whenever I saw a European coming, I started standing between the European and my son. I started moving my legs and placing my feet so that they couldn't roll up the blanket. I kept him behind me. And afterwards I was little surprised at my own reaction, how I responded, because it's an exercise and yet I felt very protective towards my child. So I can understand that when people who haven't been exposed to any of this history for the first time on such a visceral level that they would have that kind of emotional reaction to it.

I think it's a great of helping people to understand the relationship between Indigenous people and the Canadian government especially.

And it's open to everybody. I know the one in Parliament Hill is a yearly one, it's open to the public, anybody can come. And any organization can call up Kairos and request a blanket exercise. It's a wonderful tool, having them have that knowledge, that background before they go deal with the Indigenous communities. I think it's a great way of teaching them ahead of time instead of going in with pre-conceived notions of why these people are the way they are, they have an idea of the history.

Barbara says, "If you were taken from your mother's arms when you were three or four or five years old, you wouldn't be the same person you are today and neither would your mother."

It helps deconstruct stereotypes so that they're not seeing a stereotype anymore, they're seeing a human being because they can relate so what has happened to the person and what has happened to that family.