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**Indigenous Insights: An Evaluation Podcast  
Season 1 Episode 14: Vanessa Nevin**

<https://indigenousinsights.podbean.com/e/s1e14-indigenous-insights-vanessa-nevin/>

12 June, 2023

Gladys Rowe ([00:04](#)):

Tansi, greetings. Welcome to Indigenous Insights. I'm your host, Gladys Rowe, and I'm so grateful you are here. Each episode I sit in conversation with Indigenous evaluation practitioners, leaders, researchers, and scholars who are working in, thinking about, and supporting Indigenous evaluation, to share the learning they've experienced along the way. My hope is that these episodes allow you to reflect on how to design, implement, learn from, and support evaluation by with and for Indigenous families, communities, organizations, and nations. Join me and my guests as we open up our evaluation bundles to share what we've gathered in our journeys and bring them together into this space. I hope in these stories you will come to understand how we can collectively contribute to decolonial futures and strengthen Indigenous resurgence.

I'm so excited to be here today with Vanessa Nevin, who is the director of health at the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Secretariat and comes from Sipekne'katik First Nation within Mi'kma'ki. Vanessa has worked for APC for nearly 14 years on health, Indian residential schools, elections and social. She also brings extensive experience working with First Nation communities and organizations, including Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centers, North American Indigenous Games, and Victoria Native Friendship Center. Vanessa completed contracts with Aboriginal Healing Foundation to review and arbitrate proposals and University of Victoria Law School to research on First Nations alternative justice programs throughout the province of BC. Vanessa obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in history and minor in Greek and Roman studies from the University of Victoria and completed graduate courses for Royal Rhodes University's Master of Arts program for Conflict Analysis and Management. She has a Royal Rhodes University Certificate in Negotiations and an Aboriginal Trauma Certificate from the Justice Institute of BC. So much wealth that you bring into the circle and I'm so grateful that you agreed to be in conversation with me today. Thank you so much, Vanessa, for coming.

Vanessa Nevin ([02:18](#)):



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Thank you, Gladys, for having me. I'm really happy to be here today.

Gladys ([02:23](#)):

Wonderful. So before we jump into the conversation that we're about to have, I'm wondering if there's any other way that you'd like to introduce yourself into the circle.

Vanessa ([02:32](#)):

So I'm going to do the typical L'nu introduction to let you know who I am, because in Mi'kma'ki, we literally take all our relations to heart. It's like how are you connected within the nation and to our families, so I know how to place people when I meet them. I'm Vanessa Nevin. I was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia. I am a registered band member for Sipekne'katik. My parents are Wallace Nevin and Jeanette Paul. I was raised by my parents in conjunction with my grandparents because my father lived with his parents. So I had a wealth of knowledge from my grandparents and I really do treasure those conversations now. And I had the privilege of having a great grandmother that lived to be a hundred. Her name was Nancy Christoff. And I just think about everything that she's lived through and all her lessons to me in life. So I just wanted to share that little bit of information about who I am and who my family is as well as these credentials.

Gladys ([03:54](#)):

Absolutely. Thank you so much for bringing yourself in that whole way. I truly appreciate it. As we think about this podcast, I bring people in to have conversations around Indigenous evaluation, and Indigenous evaluation I think encompasses so many different experiences. And one of the things that I was reflecting on during your introduction is you have all of these different experiences in really important areas in Indigenous health and First Nations health and all of the intersecting areas. So when you think about Indigenous evaluation and how you've come into interacting with Indigenous evaluation, can you tell me a little bit about your journey with that and how you've come to think about this work today?

Vanessa ([04:43](#)):

Like I said, I had a wonderful relationship with my grandparents. I had two grandfathers that were Chiefs: Chief Simon Nevin and Chief Lawrence Paul. Chief Simon Nevin was from Sipekne'katik and Chief Lawrence Paul from Membertou. And they instilled upon me a lot of traditional teachings about leadership and what it means to be a leader and what it means to give back to the nation, what it means to advocate for our Mi'kmaq people. So when I look at that, I think, yes, there's advocacy, but how do we see if we're effecting change for our Mi'kmaq people and how are we measuring change? So the government may say they have X number of programs or X number of dollars that are put into programming, but I think about, what does success mean in community? What does success mean in the quality of the life of an individual and that community and that family? Because there's been layers upon layers of trauma, of disempowerment, of colonial violence, you name it. I think we need a dedicated, thoughtful, strategic approach to healing. And in order to see if you are progressing along that healing journey, you need to see where you came from and how far you've come. So when I think about



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Indigenous evaluation, I think about it in terms of the improvement of people's lives and the improvement for communities and how are we measuring success from our lens versus the government's lens.

Gladys ([06:49](#)):

Yeah, those are really important, fundamental ways of ensuring that the stories that are being told about us are actually informed by what's important to us. I wonder if you can talk a little bit more about what in your experiences success means for community and what success means when you think about quality of life? What are some of those elements that you've seen measured to understand that success when you're looking at evaluation from an Indigenous lens?

Vanessa ([07:28](#)):

So I have to say that here in the Atlantic we've been doing a lot of fundamental work on building up skills around essential evaluation and looking at does something meet the needs of First Nations communities? Does it not? Is it a program that seems to be busywork at the Atlantic level, but it doesn't really have meaning in community? So what I think is needed is that health directors, community-based workers, leadership in the community, they want to see their members thriving. And what does that look like? That looks like less people fighting addiction, more people receiving whatever healing tools they need, be it help with finding employment, be it help with talking to a clinician regarding a mental health problem, connecting to an elder to connect back into culture and identity and deal with some of the traumas that they've been facing through a traditional healing lens, connecting back to who they were meant to be before trauma affected them.

There was this quote that I've seen, that healing is a choice that we make; trauma is a choice that we didn't make that changed our life. Healing changes our lives. So I am all about how do we create positive change where it creates more healing within the community. Sometimes I don't use the term *evaluation* so much as *healing journey* because of the fact that we've been affected so much by colonial violence, that some of the situations that are affecting our communities and individuals are so complex, and it's going to take that concerted effort to deal with these situations. I know that healing can be a very personal journey, but it also is a journey for our community as well. And we have to look at the issues within our lives sometimes, not just from a personal perspective but a systematic perspective as well to get a greater understanding of where we fit within that.

So I look at it more through a healing lens and ask: how do we have collateral healing within communities, and how do we measure that, and how do we promote that in a way that works for communities? Because ultimately it's communities that are going to say, oh, this program worked for us, this was successful. It's almost like when you're cooking for somebody in community and they say, oh, yes, I like that. Maybe next time you use a little less salt, or be careful when you're frying it, your fried bread was a little too brown. So they're giving that feedback but they're showing up and we want that feedback to improve the quality of the things that we're trying to do, because ultimately my goal is how am I helpful to our communities? Is the thing that I'm advocating for going to help our community members or is it going to create more issues for our community members?



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Health and wellbeing is complex. When we look at the mental wellness continuum, there's so many different components to that. So how do we measure those changes and what about those changes will create positive change in a person or community's lives? That's individualistic as well because not everybody is the same, not all communities are the same. There is something that we're doing in community right now that we haven't evaluated, but we're getting a lot of positive feedback on: it's our health support program. They've purchased sewing machines, ribbons, and material, and they got the request to do ribbon skirts. What we're finding right now is we're getting a lot of requests from communities and for people to come in to do more ribbon skirts because they see the value of connecting back to culture. They see the value of learning the skill, they feel more pride.

You have people in the session that are talking about traditional ribbon skirts and how the Mi'kmaq had traditional ribbon skirts and where that all came from and the work that they did to have those ribbon skirts and the pride. What I would like to do is capture that in a way that demonstrates to the community and to government that this is a positive thing. This is creating meaningful change. I always think back to one of the statistics I heard about people who own drums. They were talking about the people who own drums and there was a direct correlation between the number of drum keepers and the number of sober individuals in a community. When I talk about sober individuals, I'm talking about the fact that they don't need to use substances to cope with their problems and they don't need to look to those ways that have hurt our community even further when they're trying to escape some of the problems. They're looking towards culture, they're looking towards positive elements within our cultural identity to build themselves up. And to me that really warms my heart, and I think that is a measure of success. So what I would like to do eventually is have communities talk about what success looks like for them in their community. Not necessarily at being tied to a certain pot of money or a certain program that's been prescribed, but it's based upon what meets the needs of community and their journey on healing.

Gladys ([14:15](#)):

That's amazing. And there's so many brilliant examples and stories you just shared in there about reframing the idea of Indigenous evaluation and centering healing and holistic care and connection to culture as a mechanism for change. I'm wondering if you can share – and some of these threads already came through but I'll ask the question – why is it important for Indigenous evaluation to be done?

Vanessa ([14:47](#)):

It's so important for us to define what success means to us, because government defines success sometimes by quantitative numbers, like number of clients seen, number of contribution agreements distributed to communities. And yes, that is important, but what also is important is how is this contribution effecting change within that individual's life? How is this money being used to improve the quality of life for all of these communities? What is more important: that we saw 20 people, or that you were able to work intensively with a few people and you made a lot of positive changes? So there's a difference between handing out brochures and effecting change and what does success mean to people. Is it successful that all treatment centers are full? Yes,



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that shows occupancy rates and that the service is being used, but it doesn't show a reduction of drug use within community. So how are we measuring the health and wellbeing of communities?

Gladys ([16:08](#)):

Yeah, it makes me think of what you shared previously around the importance of community defining success for themselves and defining it in a way that isn't necessarily linked to a particular small piece of funding or particular project – one project here, one project there – but for the community as a whole to be able to point to and say this is what's important to us as a community and this is how we know we're able to thrive and be successful and to have that kind of collective vision that they're working towards as a community.

Vanessa ([16:46](#)):

Definitely. I couldn't agree more.

Gladys ([16:50](#)):

<laugh>. I feel like we're on the same page for that, for sure. So there's individual change, there's community level change, and then you're involved in a lot of Atlantic regional level efforts as well in your role. And I know that you're connected with the Atlantic Indigenous Evaluation Stewardship Circle, and I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about that work.

Vanessa ([17:14](#)):

I just want to get back to the regional aspect of it as well. I am the Director of Health for the Atlantic Chiefs. So that means that I've worked with all of the Directors of Health and all of the communities here in the Atlantic and some in Quebec. We have Chiefs' priorities and they are mental wellness and chronic disease. We've also embedded them through services for individuals for all stages of life, and how do we measure change there? So with that, we've developed these strategic action plans, that's wonderful. But what we are trying to move towards now is how are we defining the work we're doing under the strategic action plan? How is it successful for communities? So that's where I got involved with the Stewardship Circle, because I wanted to see the connection between evaluation and seeing that First Nations had a real say about how they were defining what success meant for them and their communities.

The Atlantic Indigenous Evaluation Stewardship Circle is a loose connection of professionals throughout the Atlantic. We put out a call to people in government, people in community, to say, hey, do you want to learn more about Indigenous evaluation and how can we support evaluators who are evaluating in community and how can we support emerging evaluators that have that Indigenous lens and, more importantly, Indigenous people with that Indigenous lens? We have linkages to the Nova Scotia Chapter of Evaluators and the Canadian Evaluator Society where we've been able to get that knowledge sharing happening. We've been able to take some online courses around essential evaluation and provide some feedback for those courses as well to say, this is how you can make this course more culturally appropriate for First Nations people. So it's give and take there. We've also done some work with Nikki Bowman and Larry from Indigenous Evaluations and got some training on what exactly does it mean to have Indigenous evaluation within your communities.



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So we've been bringing that information to the Stewardship Circle, to the Health Directors, to create that awareness that this is not just community-based evaluation – it goes a little bit beyond that – and to get that buy-in to say, hey, this is something we should be looking at and this may meet the needs of your community. We are looking at it from a regional perspective so that we are able to better meet the needs of communities: what do you think? So we've been asking those questions and meeting to do that. Right now we are also supporting evaluators going to the national conference in Quebec. We're supporting emerging evaluators going to that conference and people who are really interested in learning more about evaluation and in particular Indigenous evaluation to develop those resources within communities to build that capacity.

Gladys ([21:05](#)):

It sounds like there's so many different ways that you're supporting work at that regional level within that group to build awareness, to build capacity and to make those connections to resources and opportunities, which I think is so important as we think about ensuring that communities have what they need in order to move towards their vision of success and the priorities that they're working towards. So important!

You really bring that regional view to Indigenous evaluation, and you've talked about the individual and community level priorities and how that really needs to inform how we learn about change and how we learn about transformation. In your career so far, have you had any other aha moments around Indigenous evaluation or do you have any stories that identify some challenges that we're dealing with right now? If we think about Indigenous evaluation, where do we need to grow? Any insights or reflections that you've had in your time in this work.

Vanessa ([22:11](#)):

With communities, I know that they don't want to take on work that they don't think the government will value. So they're so busy within community, they want to make those changes, but they don't want to undertake something that's going to cause a lot more work for them, especially if government is not on board with it. Or if they do an internal Indigenous evaluation, they keep that to themselves. They don't share that, and that's up to them. With this, what we're trying to do is create that awareness: what is Indigenous evaluation? Why is it important, why should it be respected? How do we create that capacity amongst our Indigenous people to have Indigenous evaluators out there to do this work? Cause we may have jobs that come up that require this skillset and we want to be able to have our people take those jobs to be able to offer that lens to carry this work even farther.

Indigenous evaluators: there's only a few that I know of. I would love to see a team of Indigenous evaluators in each community. I would love those evaluations to be respected internally by the community because it meets their needs and to be respected by the funder to say, hey, you know what's best for your community. You know what works. You know what's successful. We see you've done some work here. Is it possible for you to share that information with us so we can tell those good stories about how your community is able to define success and build that success within their communities to help their community members? So with anything I do, I ask, is this work helpful for my Mi'kmaq nation? Is it helpful for our Indigenous people across the board? Is it something that's valuable? Is it something that is going to support and help



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people? That's the mindset that I come from with this, and I would love to see more Indigenous evaluations. I know that we have some real promising practices right now with Tammy Mudge and the Friendship Center, and with Nikki Bowman and Larry with Indigenous Evaluation because of the fact that we need to build this capacity within our own communities so that we're able to have those definitions of what success looks like and we're able to have our people do that work.

Gladys ([25:16](#)):

So there's lots of points there, but the two that I wanted to draw forward is, first, in First Nation communities in Canada, one of the most significant funders is the federal government. And so I've heard this before and I've seen this: the reality is that if the funder doesn't value Indigenous evaluation, then there is a risk. There's a risk that if community organizations, programs want to evaluate in a way that is more congruent with their ways of knowing, being and doing, they take a risk in pushing back against the federal government who is one of the primary funders. And that is a really big gap. I think that needs to be addressed in terms of what is evidence, what is valued, and how might the advocacy happen to shift those understandings within governmental structures that largely fund First Nation health and social service programming.

The second piece there is that there are so few Indigenous evaluators and the dream of seeing a team of evaluators in community so that there's more than one option. That there's people who are working together as a collective: that is a beautiful dream and speaking that into existence. So those two things say to me a little bit about where the ecosystem of Indigenous evaluation or the infrastructure of Indigenous evaluation is at right now. I'm wondering if there are other pieces that come to mind for you that are needing of support or shifting or transformation in order for Indigenous evaluation to really thrive?

Vanessa ([26:55](#)):

I think that you have spoken the two main ones: one was that acceptance – let me say respect instead – by the federal government, the provincial government, that Indigenous governments know how to measure what is successful for them. We don't have foreign states like Australia coming to Canada and saying, you are not measuring this properly for our liking. Or going to Manitoba and saying, hey Manitoba, you're not measuring this to our liking, to our understanding, you need to change this. Manitoba would say, what are you talking about? We know our people, we know what we need to do here. Obviously the province of Manitoba has its issues, but what we're saying is that there needs to be those fundamental levels of respect for Indigenous governance. That we are governments, we do have nations, we do know our people, we do know how to measure success. We do understand what happened from the colonial structure, and we have gone through so much collateral damage. Now is the time for collateral healing and what does collateral healing look like? It looks like how do we envision success? How do we define success? How do we define healing? How do we envision healing? How do we work towards that for the betterment of our communities? Because I think anybody in Indigenous leadership, if you ask them why they're there, it's because they're doing it to serve their community.



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Gladys ([28:53](#)):

Absolutely. And so what would you say to funders or organizations who are actually wanting to support this kind of evaluation, this kind of Indigenous, grounded, led, determined evaluation. What would you share with funders or organizations wanting to support this work?

Vanessa ([29:12](#)):

I would share that it's really important to look at the work that's already been done, respect that work, look for opportunities within your sphere of influence. Start implementing some of that work in ways that work for Indigenous people in that area. There are things that happen on the west coast of British Columbia that are very different from the east coast. It's not to say either one is better or worse; it's just different. So you can't just take this one-size-fits-all approach, either what works for the Inuit may not work for the Mi'kmaq, may not work for the Nuu-chah-nulth. So you have to look at the differences within the nations to work with them to define what that nation defines as success and build from there.

Gladys ([30:14](#)):

So important, and I think that's such a good reminder. When you think about what you might share with emerging Indigenous evaluators, what do you want to share with them?

Vanessa ([30:29](#)):

I say dream big, because if we don't dream and we don't vision a future, how can we work towards that? We have to have that vision there. We have to say, yes, this may take some time and it may be a stepped approach where it takes this generation or even the next generation, because when we look at what happened to us, that took generations. So we have to think about what way can I work in my community that will make meaningful change today, for my children and my grandchildren, and what are the things that I can envision? If you don't have that vision and you think, no, you can't do that, or no, the government won't accept that, no. Then you've already defeated yourself before you even started. So I would encourage anybody to have that vision and think about ways to implement that vision.

Gladys ([31:36](#)):

Beautiful. That dreaming process is so important. Thank you for that reminder and invitation.

It was a while ago that we initially started this conversation about this episode and sharing some of your experiences, and I'm wondering from that time to now, if there's been something that you've been carrying that you were just really excited about sharing. What is exciting you right now about Indigenous evaluation?

Vanessa ([32:05](#)):

What's exciting me right now is that we're starting to take that theory and starting to implement it. We're starting to look at our strategic action plans and we're looking at having Indigenous evaluations. One of the challenges, though, is having those Indigenous people to carry out those Indigenous evaluations. So we don't want to just build up the capacity for non-Indigenous





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individuals. We may have to in the beginning because those are the only people that are applying to our request for proposals, but I have a vision that eventually we will be getting responses to our RFPs by Indigenous evaluators. The idea that we're even looking at this from an Indigenous evaluation framework as we move through this regional strategic process is something that's pretty exciting for me anyways. Maybe I'm a little bit of a nerd <laugh>, I don't know, but it does make me quite excited and it warms my heart that we're actually starting to see some tangible steps being taken.

Gladys ([33:25](#)):

That definitely excites me too; in thinking about the progression from 15 years ago to where we are today and asserting the need for and the importance of being heard at the same time around Indigenous evaluation and what it can offer our communities, I think is exciting.

And I think there's a point there – and you shared it a couple of times now – that there just aren't enough Indigenous evaluators doing this work. And you talked about community, it would be beautiful to have several people in a community who are supporting one another. What else might it take? Tell me, do you have the solution for this lack of Indigenous evaluators out there? <laugh>?

Vanessa ([34:07](#)):

I'm not sure Indigenous people realize that there is this market for Indigenous evaluators, that this is something that's worth learning about and this is something that they could make money from, and this is something that they can do to help their community. I think that there are some Indigenous evaluators, but maybe not enough. Maybe the word evaluation has them scared. Maybe they think they have to have a certain degree in evaluation to do this work, or maybe they think that evaluation is like how it was 20 years ago. So maybe those shifts need to happen. So I think it's that educational awareness that this is emerging, this is something that is valuable, this is something that could be a great market for somebody to get involved in. I would love to see our youth starting to take this on and demanding this. When they have programs demanding this, when they want to evaluate what works in communities, knowing that they can do this evaluation, knowing that the funder will accept this, and just having that confidence to do it. I think that there's a lot here and it can create a lot of change, and I want to support that change, that positive change.

Gladys ([35:43](#)):

Amazing. Yeah, so many things that you just said there – I thought, maybe it's not really this career that a lot of people know a lot about, or there's this perception with the history of research and evaluation – rightly so – that it's not something that anyone wants to be involved in, and people may be not hearing the story of the transformation of what it means to do Indigenous evaluation. So yeah, thank you for taking that big question and kind of pondering with me what it may take to expand this work.

I think as we come to the close of our time together, I just wanted to see is there anything else that you wanted to make sure to share that you're thinking about or that you're hoping for as we close off our time together?



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Vanessa ([36:32](#)):

I hope that people take the time to learn about Indigenous evaluation and why it's so important for our community and think about ways that they can start to integrate it into their own community program and their own communities to measure their own success and start saying, hey, yes, we can measure what is successful to us. We can say what is successful to us, and yes, that will be supported and respected. And you know what? We can encourage our young people to learn about this and other people in our community to learn about this so that we can find a way that systematically supports our vision of healing and success and thriving.

Gladys ([37:23](#)):

I hope that too. Ekosani for sharing this space with me today. Vanessa, I'm so grateful to have learned more about your work and what is making you excited in this work, and I want to thank you for being here.

Vanessa ([37:38](#)):

Wela'lin, Gladys, for having me.

Gladys ([37:42](#)):

I'm so glad you spent time with us today.

I have a few notes to wrap up this episode. If you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on your favorite streaming service, including Pod Beans, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts so that you don't miss an episode. Also, this podcast is self-supported and I'm hoping to make the work more sustainable. So if you're finding the content interesting and valuable, please consider supporting Indigenous insights through Buy Me a Coffee. You can find the link in the show notes. Finally, I would like to extend an invitation. If you are someone who has an interest in Indigenous evaluation and would like to have a conversation on this podcast, I would love to hear from you. Please send me a note and we can connect about your work, what you're learning, and the questions you're thinking about. That's it for this week. I look forward to sharing the space with you again soon. Ekosani.