

The BCBH 2019 Sisters in Healing Retreat was held over the weekend of Friday, September 27 to Sunday, September 29 at the Sts'ailes Lhawathet Lalem retreat centre in Agassiz, B.C. for Indigenous women who are family members to one of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.



17 First Nations women participants and nine support workers and facilitators joined together for one weekend of healing and strength building.

The weekend opened on Friday night with a traditional opening ceremony welcoming the women into the beautiful surroundings of the lodge and creating an instantaneous bond and sacred atmosphere. The women were blanketeted and walked upon a path of cedar boughs. Facilitated by Angela George from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation and Brenda Morrison the ceremony introduced the women into the sacred space. A local drumming group sang traditional songs as the women gathered for their blessing.

*“The opening ceremony was amazing.”*

*“Being hugged [helped with her healing]”*

*“Being in ceremony and realizing I’m not alone” [in response to question “what did you like best about this retreat?”]*

*“Traditional/cultural healing is important to incorporate into programs such as this. We tend to leave out ceremonies when dealing with grief/loss and think Christian prayer is the only way we ask for strength. Restoring our cultural and traditional ways are important to our First Nations way of life.”*

Saturday morning was spent in a Circle of Trust, in which all women shared who they were and some of their personal experiences dealing with the traumatic loss of their loved ones.



*“To be around other women who carry the same hurt/loss in their lives helps to feel ok with letting tears go.”*

*“It gave me strength listening to our women’s storeys [sic]”*

*“It’s so much easier to do healing work with women and to just BE.”*

Saturday afternoon the women had the opportunity to spend it in self-care with options for manicures, shiatsu massage, haircuts and/or a nature walk. Also available in the central cafeteria were arts and crafts. Women worked all afternoon and into the night on rattle making or painting wooden boxes to be revealed the next morning.



On Sunday morning, after breakfast, all the women gathered in the meeting room where a fire was burning. Anyone could write a letter to their loved one or gather an item they wanted to burn in ceremony later that day. After lunch, gathered in circle, our main facilitator Angela George led the women through a closing ceremony culminating in the burning of tears.

*"It was good to see that I was not alone. I felt safe. I felt myself still holding back and the head and hand massage, and the haircut helped me to release my sister. I wrote her a thank you letter and will burn my haircut for her."*

*"Tranquil environment which allowed for healing not only indoors but also outdoors. I am so grateful for the take home crafts."*

*"This workshop helps us to not feel alone on our journey."*

*"This should be on 4 times a year. Thank you for the time and space to be free and loved."*

*"It helped in grounding myself, letting some of the negative energy leave."*

*"I didn't feel isolated in my grief and loss of my youngest daughter who passed away...I felt more comfortable as the hours passed making connection with the other women helped me. Making rattle and box was fund doing art & craft..."*

*"[Other First Nations women] can relate to what I'm going through with respect to race – racism, etc."*



*"If it was more days...would be awesome."*

*"Longer time, perhaps a five day from Wednesday to Sunday"*