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# focus

on women magazine

**MOTHERS  
IN PRISON**  
breaking  
the cycle

Shirley Lang

THE BEAR MOTHER PROJECT  
KAREN TAYLOR — beyond hearing





## Shirley Lang: Healing the Spirit of the People.

Most aboriginal prisoners have experienced intensified poverty and powerlessness, and their fallout of neglect, abuse, and drug and alcohol use. Discrimination from within the criminal justice system means more, and longer, sentences; First Nations people are disproportionately represented in Canadian jails.

"It tears us apart, it keeps the dysfunction going, it keeps the pain going," says Shirley Lang, founder and program director of Spirit of the People, a Victoria non-profit society that helps First Nations people move beyond the criminal justice system. In her work with offenders and ex-offenders, Lang leads "Healing Circles" several times a week at the Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre ("Wilkie") in partnership with Victoria Native Friendship Centre, and started one at the Native Friendship Centre, now run by former offenders. "It is an opportunity where men can share everything and anything that is on their heart at that moment and it is also an opportunity for me to grow. When we get into a circle, we are all brothers and sisters."

As the owner of Dakota West Consulting, Lang is the only aboriginal person in the province writing the pre-sentencing reports based on the 1999 Supreme Court of Canada Decision *R. v. Gladue*—she calls them "cultural background impact reports"—that advise judges of jail alternatives for aboriginal defendants, as required by Section 718 of the Criminal Code. *R. v. Gladue* affirmed that to sentence an aboriginal defendant, a judge must be informed about her or his history.

Lang's reports are thorough. "I don't just talk about the individual, I talk about their family, I talk about their family's family, about the community as a whole where that person was raised. I talk about the economy of that community and all the other social issues," she says. "It's a whole community picture, not just a one-person picture."

Lang is now organizing Gladue: A Message for the Millennium, a symposium to be held in Saanich this September where British Columbia's judges will hear the Island's First Nations' perspectives on justice and justice practices. In her pre-sentencing reports, Lang encourages restorative justice, which involves "the person taking full accountability of their actions and being prepared to make amends. Restorative justice was part of our communities way back when. We just called it peacemaking." In a common restorative justice model, offender and victim meet, the offender apologizes, then does something to repair the harm; for example, if the offender stole from the victim, they may agree that she work in his store for a week.

Lang's definition of restorative justice goes further. She encourages and assists offenders to go to communities where they can find the resources they need. "[Reconciliation] is wonderful, but there has to be more healing done on behalf of the person who did the offence. If you heal yourself first then you are able to go out and make reparations with others. If you help heal that offender, you're going to have a lot less victims."

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Lang's compassion is extraordinary. The daughter of a Cree father, she grew up "off reservation" on a large, busy family farm in Alberta. Her grandfather, a violent pedophile, abused his children and grandchildren, leaving a legacy of alcoholism and pain. When she was 12, Lang's father committed suicide. His family sent Lang's mother, with her children, away from the farm.

At 15, Lang studied hairdressing in Edmonton and, defying all expectations, eventually owned three hair salons in Toronto and a talent agency. She was the entertainment industry's award-winning stylist, working for people in front of and behind the camera. "It was a great life, then I ended up getting married. It was a bad partner choice."

That marriage ended after less than three months, due to violence and abuse. She fled to Vancouver with her daughter, fearing for her life. "Everything an offender must feel when getting out of jail is what I felt—no community, no support, no money—although at least I had known community and support, and many offenders never have."

Lang eventually discovered that her ex-husband, someone whom she "really cared about, really loved," had fetal alcohol syndrome, and had been sexually abused as a child, resulting in a life of criminal activity and alcohol and drug abuse.

In Vancouver, open to a career change, Lang

became a bail and probation supervisor, and eventually was contracted to write a pre-sentencing report—for a pedophile. At first she couldn't do it. Then, she says, "I thought, 'This came to me because I haven't healed. I took it as a learning experience, for me to grow, not just to help this person. As I worked on it, I realized I was very judgmental. The experience helped me open to be compassionate and empathetic.'"

She adds, "If you look at situations, even the most negative, as a way to heal, you can."

Always aware of context, Lang is grateful for her working community. "I want to thank the Coast Salish Nation for allowing me the opportunity to live, grow, heal, share and work on their territory. I have received great support from many of the Elders and Chiefs and members of this community and for that I am grateful and honoured."

Lang also credits the commitment of the members of the board of Spirit of the People, who include a First Nations lawyer, a former prison warden, an aboriginal former offender, an aboriginal woman who works with aboriginal women survivors of abuse, a non-First Nations psychologist, and Cowichan Elder Harold Joe. Honourary members include Coast Salish Chief Mavis Henry, city councillor Helen Hughes, and Bob Crawford, founder of Spirit of the People in Toronto. **FW**