



MEDIA RELEASE

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The Gathering Tree Celebrates One Year, Its Message More Urgent Than Ever

Children's Book Encourages HIV/AIDS Awareness and Prevention

Vancouver, BC – Each day in Canada, one more Aboriginal person will find out that they have been infected with HIV. And when they do, many will be rejected by their families and friends. Identifying an educational resource to combat this startling statistic – and the stigma and discrimination that accompany it -- was the inspiration behind *The Gathering Tree*, a children's book created out of a need to raise awareness and understanding about HIV in youth. Produced by Chee Mamuk, the Aboriginal HIV education program of the BC Centre for Disease Control and written by award-winning First Nations author Larry Loyie and co-author Constance Brissenden, *The Gathering Tree* is now celebrating its first year in print.

As we mark Universal Children's Day today (November 20), as well as look ahead to World AIDS Day (December 1) and Aboriginal AIDS Awareness Week (December 1 – 5), *The Gathering Tree* represents the affirmation that Aboriginal people can positively impact their health and well-being.

"The reality is that HIV is rising in Aboriginal communities, and with this more and more children have family members living with the disease," says Melanie Rivers, Educator with Chee Mamuk for the BCCDC. "We wanted to encourage children to learn about HIV/AIDS in a culturally appropriate way and realized that a book was a great way to do just that."

Illustrated by award-winning artist Heather D. Holmlund, the 48-page book is a gentle, positive story of a family facing HIV, told in a rural First Nations setting. The story provides insights into ways of learning, the influence of elders in a community, the importance of cultural activities and aspects of physical, spiritual and emotional health.

"One of our goals is to make it easier for kids to feel comfortable about asking questions about HIV/AIDS," continues Rivers. "If we can do that, we can also help on the prevention front as well as establish compassionate care and better treatment programs for Aboriginal people living with HIV/AIDS."

Lucy Barney, Program Manager for Chee Mamuk, concurs. "The real by-products of educating our youth about HIV/AIDS are empowerment, understanding and acceptance of the disease in the Aboriginal community," Barney says. "Removing the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS will ultimately lead to better health outcomes, and with that, a healthier community."

Since it was first launched in 2005, *The Gathering Tree* has been distributed widely throughout BC and Canada to Aboriginal organizations and communities, schools and AIDS services organizations prompting discussion and raising awareness along the way. “The most intellectual conversation we can have is with the children. *The Gathering Tree* has done that,” says Leonard George of the Tseil-Waututh Nation.

The book was also featured at the most recent International AIDS Conference in Toronto (August 2006) as part of the Indigenous People’s Best Practice Panel. Copies of *The Gathering Tree* are now in schools, libraries and hospitals in countries and societies as diverse as Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Iran, Holland, South Africa, Ghana and Vietnam.

The Gathering Tree is recommended for children ages nine and up, and includes study material for teachers, parents, health educators and students. The book can be purchased through Theytus Books at: <http://www.theytusbooks.ca/> or at leading bookstores and retailers on-line.

Publisher: Theytus Books, Hardcover, 48 pages, 10 x 10. ISBN 1-894778-28-6.

Price: CDN \$19.95; US \$18.95.

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