

# Leading The Way

First Nation Leaders of B.C.'s Northwest Speak About HIV/AIDS



## ***Dedications***

To Aboriginal people living with HIV/AIDS  
and to those that have passed on.

To the individuals, families and communities who are leading the way  
to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and who are supporting people  
living with HIV in their communities.

Melanie Rivers

Chee Mamuk, Aboriginal Program,  
BC Centre for Disease Control



Emma Palmantier

Northern BC Aboriginal HIV/AIDS  
Taskforce

## *Introduction*

Every week, approximately one Aboriginal person in British Columbia (B.C.) is diagnosed with HIV. Behind this statistic is a person, their family and their community. This reality affects us all.

Leaders in First Nation communities can play a critical role in HIV awareness, prevention and support by not being afraid to speak about HIV in their own communities, by lobbying for adequate funding, by supporting HIV programming and by establishing policies that ensure people living with HIV are not discriminated against.

In February 2011, Chief and Council members from First Nations communities in the northwest of B.C. came together for a two-day HIV/AIDS forum. The forum was hosted by the Northern BC Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Taskforce and facilitated by Chee Mamuk, Aboriginal Program, from the BC Centre for Disease Control. The leaders shared their thoughts about the HIV epidemic in their own communities and made recommendations for action. This book is a compilation of those thoughts. The hosts of the forum commend these brave leaders for taking this action.

The purpose of “Leading the Way” is to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and to inspire others to step forward and speak about HIV. As we open up discussion in our communities, we help prevent the spread of HIV and create more supportive communities for those living with HIV.

We invite you to read the words of these leaders and share your thoughts with others in your own family and community.

*– Chee Mamuk, Aboriginal Program, BC Centre for Disease Control*

*– Northern BC Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Taskforce*



“ *To our youth: It’s important to get the message out to protect yourselves and, as you further your education and lives, be aware of what harm and dangers are out there.*

***People care about you and love you,  
and want to see you live good lives.***

These are serious concerns for myself because of how it can affect our people. As a leader for our people and our nation, I believe we need healthy people. We are always working towards protecting our people and concerned that they get the best, are taken care of and that they have a dream and hope for the future.

**Tony Morgan**      **Gitanyow**

“ *It’s vital that our people be healthy*

and practice healthy living. If we really work at healthy living, being healthy people, being educated people and having a healthy lifestyle, then all other areas of our life will be successful. ”

Alrita Leask Metlakatla







# “Caring and compassion

*are things we have to keep in our mind when we are trying to gain  
a better understanding of these illnesses that are affecting our people.*

We may have members that may be affected by these illnesses. If we have a better understanding of what we're dealing with, and can remove misunderstanding about how a person can pass on these illnesses, then we can provide better support to our community.

## Glenn Bennett Kitselas

TO OUR YOUTH: Don't be afraid to ask any questions. Don't be afraid to talk to your parents, talk to your health care providers, talk to your family. Try to gain a better understanding so you can make sure that you're healthy and that your family is healthy. You can share this knowledge with your family members; be it your brothers, your sisters, or your parents.



“ *My main goal is to  
create understanding* ”

Alice C. Morgan Gitwangak

and to eliminate the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. What would I say to a person with HIV/AIDS? That’s a tough question. What would I say to a loved one? They’re not alone. Families are unconditional – you love them no matter what.

”





“***Our children are our future.***

***We have to look after our future.***

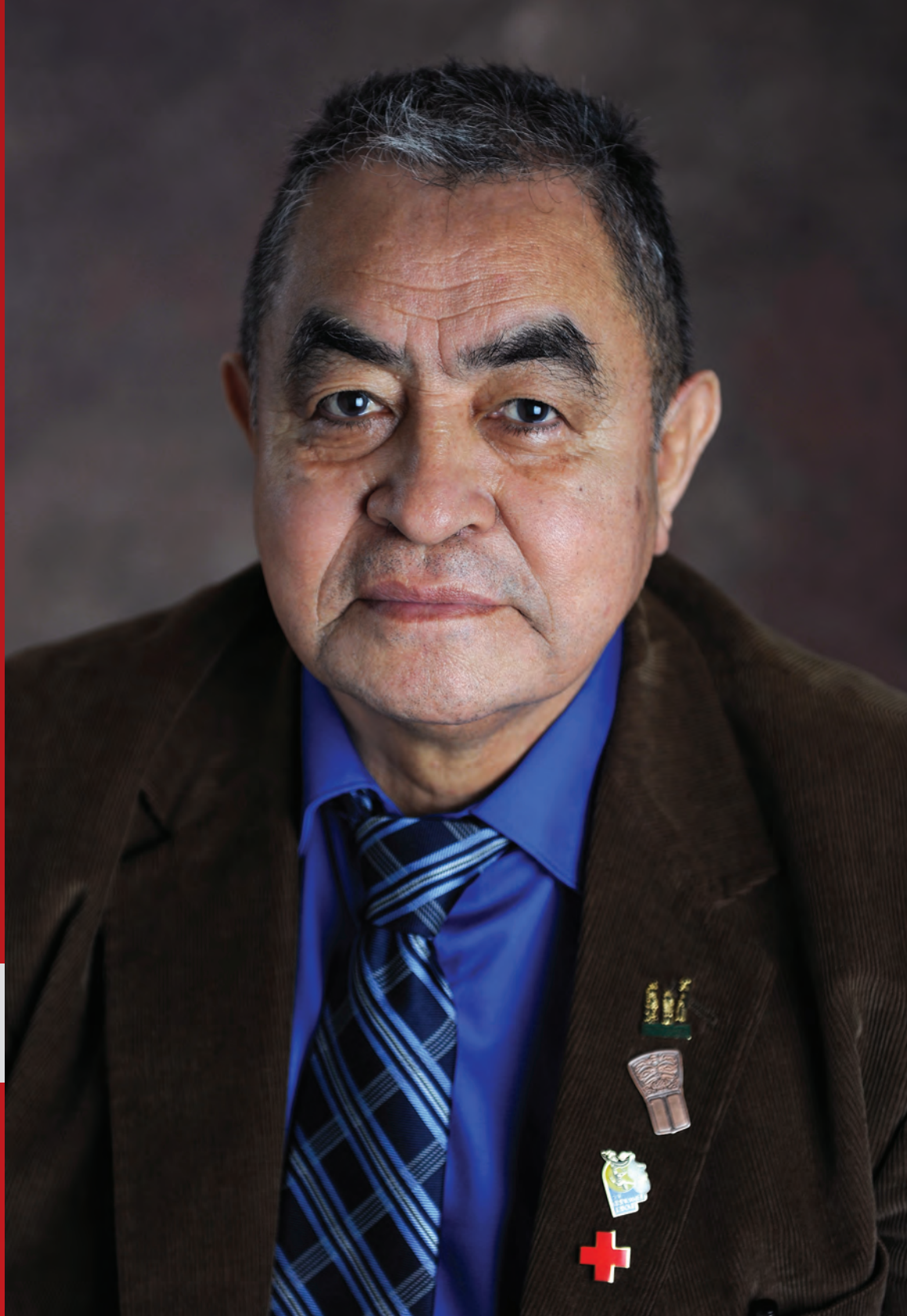
We don't want to isolate or ostracize anyone in this regard. We have to bring that message forward to our members, to focus on programming and education and awareness. It is of the utmost importance for our younger generations growing up now, as well as our elders who can play a lead role in informing us on what can be done.

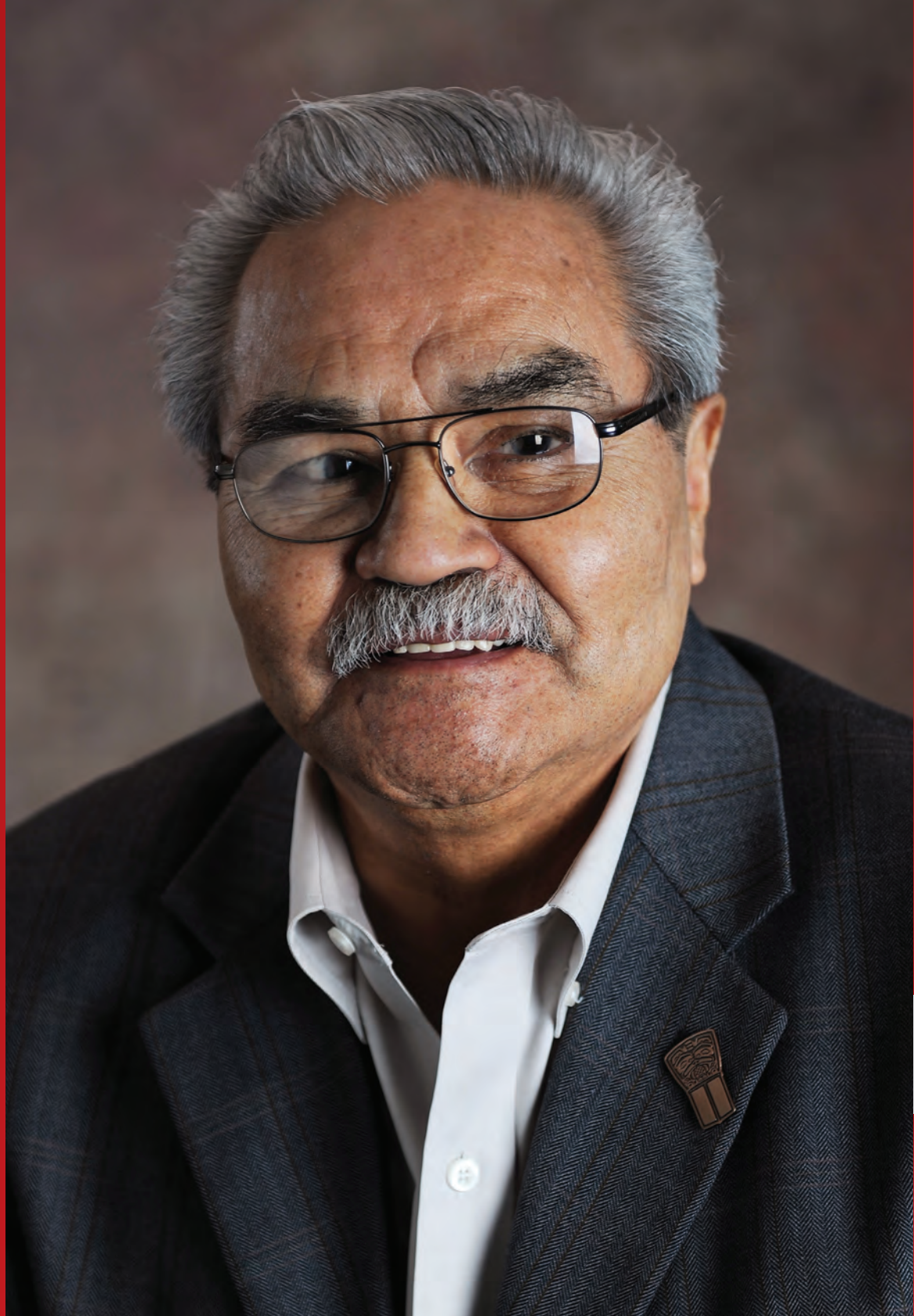
**Stan Dennis** **Lax Kw'alaams**

# “*We need more workshops*

in different communities so young people get the message that HIV is a deadly disease. Some of the young people don't realize they have it until they get home. Especially the young people who come from urban areas like Vancouver or Prince George. And I hope that the government will fund it a little more because it's needed in all the communities. Not only in the urban places, but in the villages.”

Nelson Clayton    **Gingolx**







**“The simple message is  
be aware and protect yourself.”**

*Health education and economic development are my priorities as the community leader, and I make use of every opportunity to respond to health needs in the community.*

Like any difficult issue in our communities, we have to own the problems that are related to the issue, and there are both positives and negatives to owning the problem. I'll go with the negatives first. I think what we see in First Nations right now is that delegated authority for governance from governments is very limited in capacity, both in knowledge made available and resources to respond to the needs.

The positives are much more encouraging. I think First Nations communities are able to address those issues because they have a lot to fall back on in their heritage, culture, traditions, language and spirituality. That can be put to good use to develop indigenous methodology that gives consideration to indigenous medicines as well.

**Willard Martin Laxgaltsap**



“ *I also believe the main cause of HIV/AIDS is poverty.* ”

## Kirsten Barker Gitxaala

I think it's the responsibility of the leadership in any community to address the social determinants of health – health itself, housing, education, employment. When you start to address those in a parallel fashion, you address the issues of HIV/AIDS and that's how we educate our people. And people start to be more responsible for their lives and for their families when you meet all of those needs.

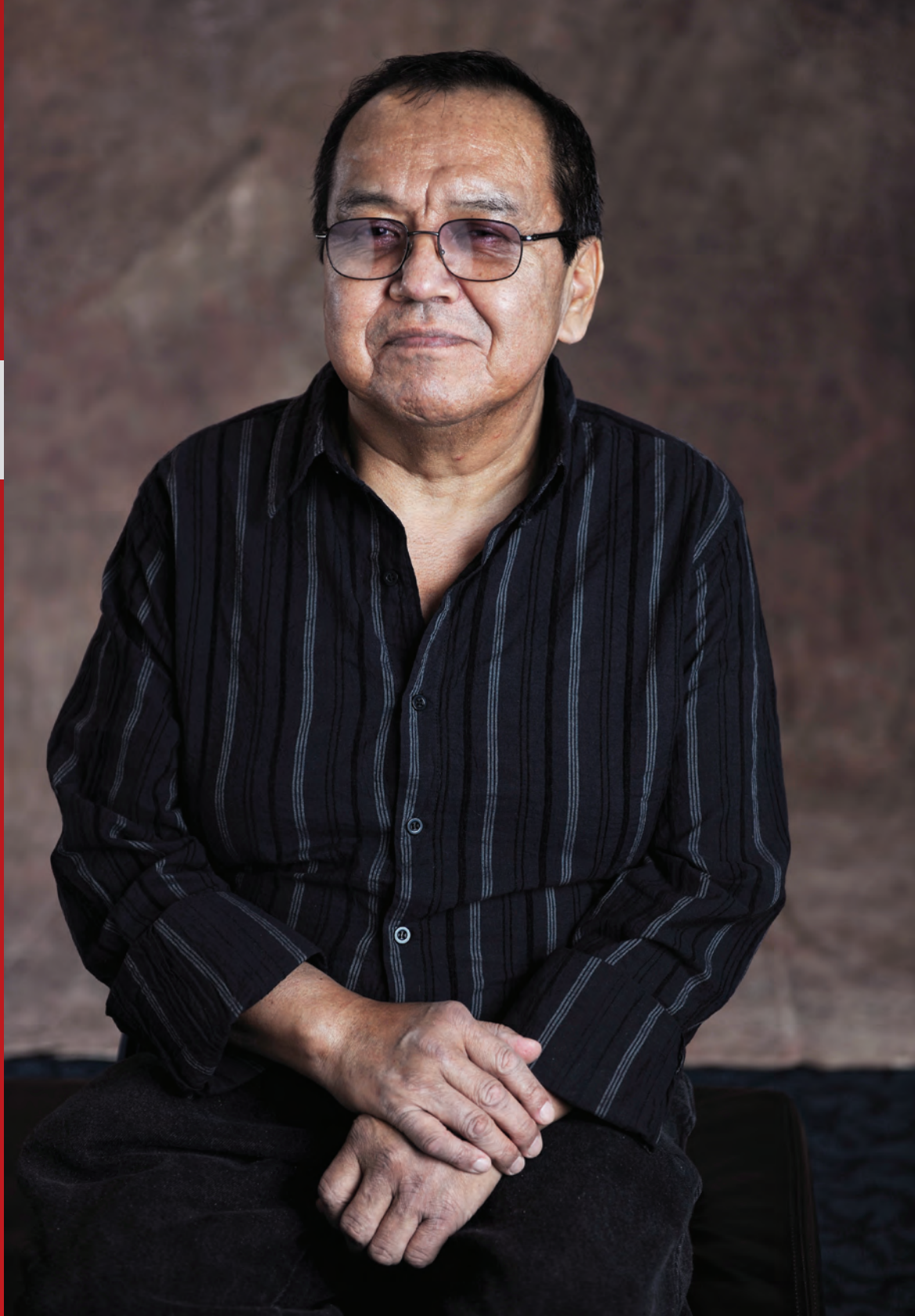
# Graham Brown Gitsegukla

“

Our young people need the information. Sometimes as a frontline leader, or band counselor, or health or school rep (I'm all three), when the young ones have nobody to ask, they'll come to me. It's very important. As a leader you need to stress:

Be very careful.

***Find ways and means  
of prevention.***”





# “ *Have a proactive approach against HIV.* ”

I think knowledge of the virus would be the first step. Knowing about the virus and through education might be the first step for the whole community. Rather than just sweeping it under the table.

As leaders of the community we have a key role in implementing procedures that may be beneficial for people with HIV and AIDS, to welcome them back in the community rather than ostracize them. If we have something in place for the people that are infected with the virus, we can have more of a sense of relief for them to be with their family rather than be in an urban setting.

Keith Morgan    Gitsegukla

# Mamie Wesley    Glen Vowell

“

TO THE YOUTH: Do positive things with your lives, like sports.  
Be active in sports and don't go down under peer pressure.

***Always be active in any community events.***

And this is what we're trying to do right now in our little community: really talk to our young people about that. Get a good education to set a goal for whatever they want to do with their lives professionally. I think that's so important.

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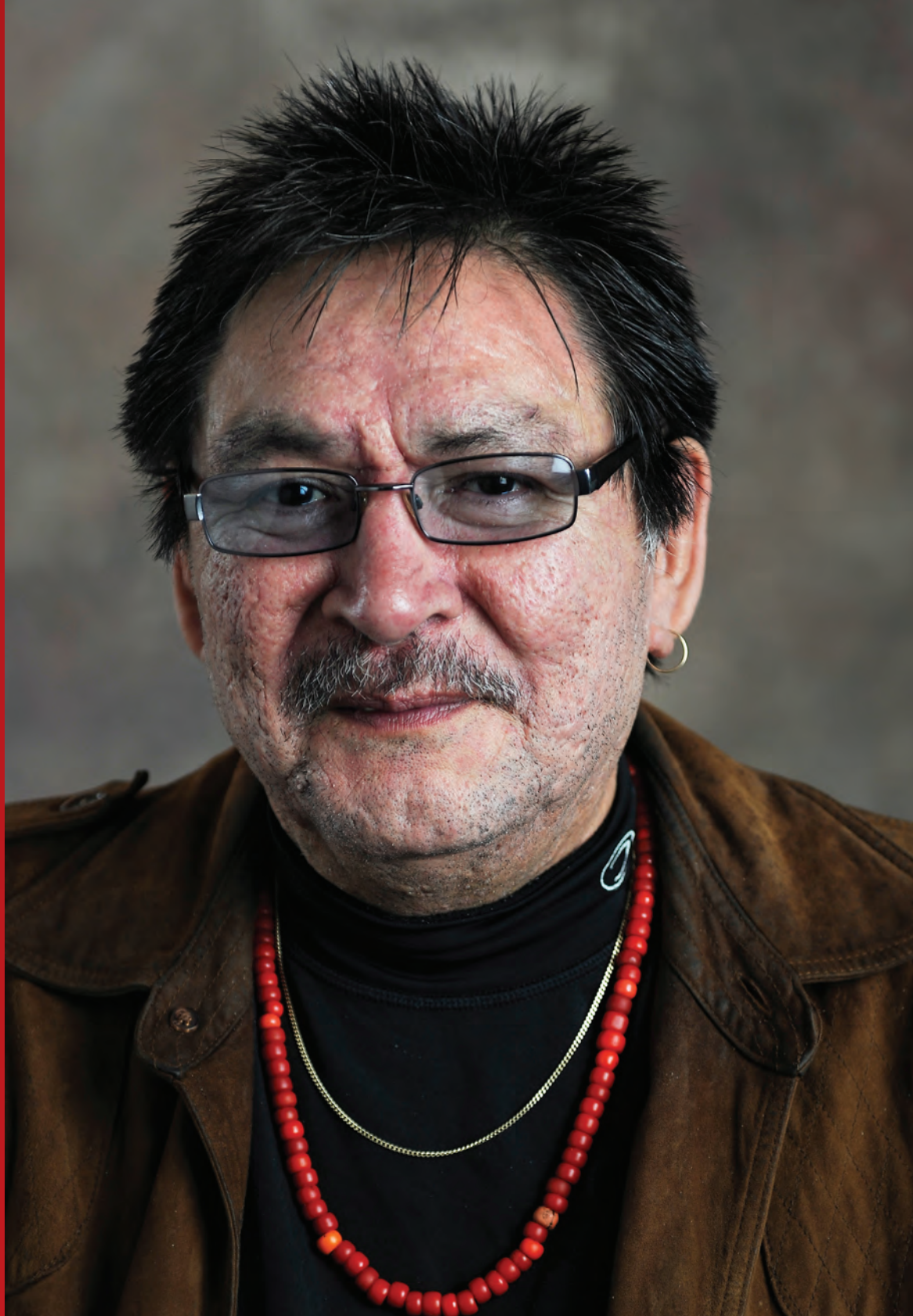




“*Just have concern.*”

One thing I want to do now is send out staff for training to get rid of the myths. Like how it's contracted between individuals. For myself, this is a big learning experience. But I have a lot of friends that do have HIV. I've been very close with them, giving them lots of support.

Arnold Clifton Hartley Bay



**“ Knowledge is empowerment  
and the sooner we can educate our members about  
the devastation of this disease, the better our communities  
will be able to work together and deal with it.**

Most of our First Nations communities are so isolated –  
we need resources to continue to bring the message to the  
members so we can provide the best possible services to  
our people that are living with HIV/AIDS.

**Lorgan Bob Tahltan**

“ *If you see anyone that needs help, don't walk away.*

*Help them. Support them.*

*No matter what it is. Especially HIV.*

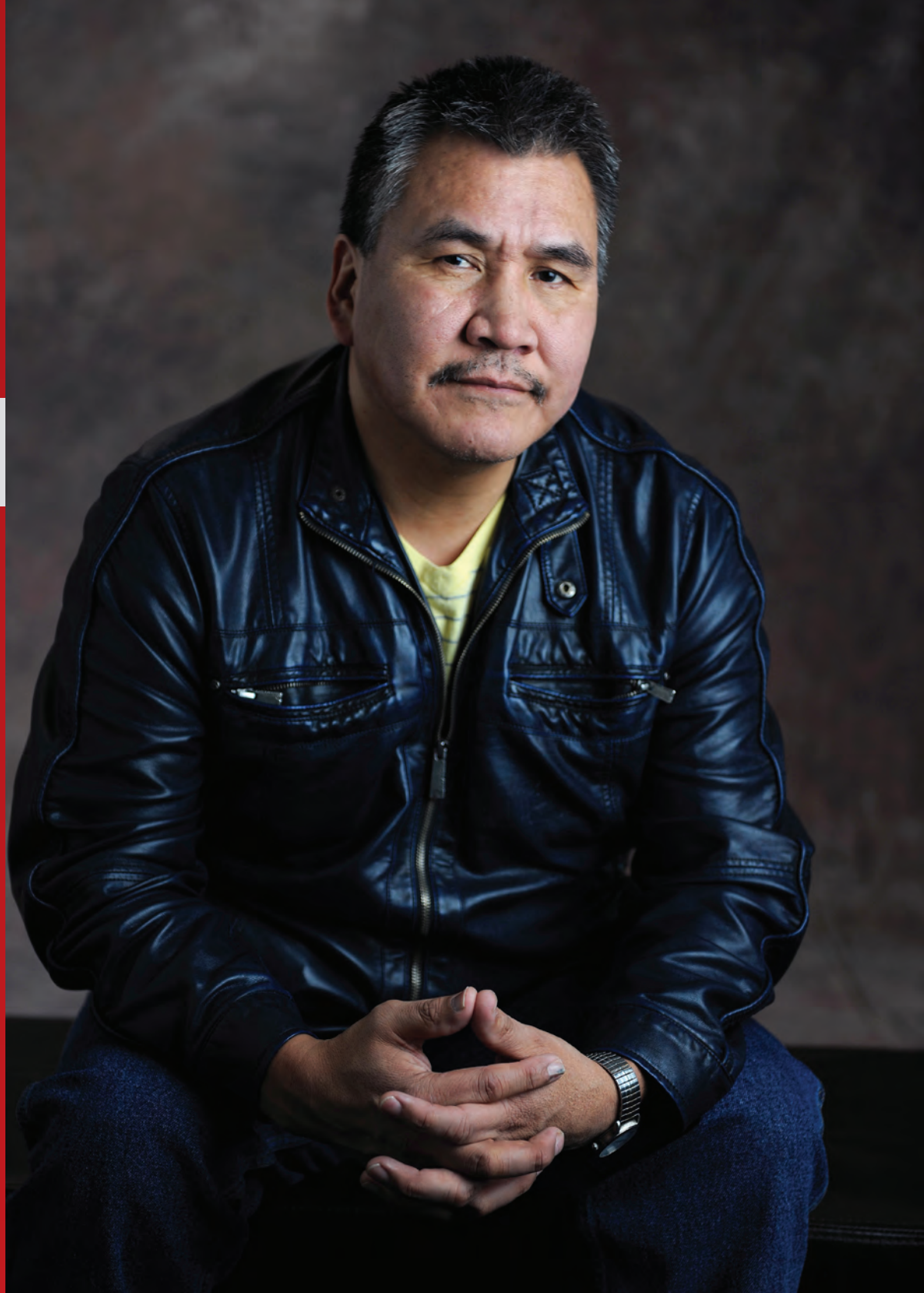
## Morris Williams Gitsegukla

I care for the health of our community from young to old. And I hope to bring the HIV awareness back to Gitsegukla to see where I can assist in making a difference.

I feel that every person is important. We all have responsibilities. We have a unique system in our nation. Everyone is important right from birth, to elders. Everyone plays a role. If anyone along that system is jeopardized, it really weakens our system. That's why I feel the health part is really, really important. It's based on some of my experiences. I've had trying times in my life and I'd like to pass it on to my children and for the next generations to come: our health is of the utmost importance.

Honour your health. That's the most valuable thing you can obtain, to keep. Don't do anything to jeopardize it. Honour yourself and respect yourself in a way that could break the cycle. Keep the community together. Everything else just falls into place.

”







“ ***Value yourself and value others.***

***It's a cultural teaching that is there.***

I really believe that communities, especially the younger generation and older generation, need to have a better understanding and be able to talk about HIV/AIDS and be educated on it. It makes a difference for how we feel about it.

In an environment such as this conference, you'll start to know the feeling that comes along with it; that you're starting to accept this and know how to address it and not be so scared of it. You're helping yourself, your family and the people in need that are there with HIV/AIDS. ”

**Toby Howard** **Gitsegukla**

“

When we first heard about HIV back home, it was mostly a lot of misconceptions about it and fear that it's going to spread fast. I think just to educate our people; it will take a while to change anybody's view on this. It'll take a long time.

***It's a journey we're going to have to make.***

The information we receive we can share with our community and the surrounding areas. We can network with our other villages.

***Message to the youth: Walk with confidence.*** ”

Jack Wright Kispiox





# Carol Quock Iskut First Nation

**“It’s easier to build strong, healthy children than to repair broken spirits.”**

I think leadership can do a lot. We’re at a place where community and Nation social development can happen much more progressively. We must prioritize dollars to do community planning within our Nations, so we can offer the best that we can possibly offer to our people.

I think we need to plan on collaborative services and preventive methods to look at building healthier communities. We need to focus on the Early Years and make certain we have support programs in place. Programs that are going to support parents, who are the caregivers, to do their utmost when creating and developing the “little people” in order to make certain we form strong foundations so that we have healthy individuals making healthy choices. If we put more money into the early years, it’s less likely we’ll be faced with the challenging situations that we are faced with today. We must ensure we have quality, culturally enriched early childhood programs within each community to build healthy, empowered First Nations people.



## ***Thank You from Chee Mamuk***

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