

# TEACHINGS DON'T ALWAYS COME FROM TEXTBOOKS



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**Teachings Don't Always Come From Textbooks.** Sometimes, they're passed between generations while sitting in the middle of the forest. In Indigenous cultures, teachings live in *stories* — and stories live on when they're spoken aloud, shared between aunties, uncles, cousins, kids, grandkids, and those who might not know they are listening to something sacred. Something passed down for generations. Something that might not be written in a textbook by the common white man, but that carries love, meaning, and care from the one sharing it.

This summer, I had the privilege of spending three days at “The Rock” Youth Camp in Neyaashiinigmiing, where I learned that medicine doesn't always come from a stethoscope. Alongside my classmate Allison, we helped run activities, guide a few mini-lessons, and most meaningfully, offer teachings of our own. Through hands-on lessons in casting, suturing, and injections, we shared pieces of our medical training with the youth, just as they and the land shared their knowledge with us.

From war stories hidden in forest ruins... to plant medicine sprouting along our route... to kindling bundles that taught us patience, and cedar that taught us respect — every day at camp was packed with knowledge passed hand-to-hand, just like it always has been. Just like it always will be.

And now, I'd like to pass some of those teachings on to you.

My name is Elijah Scott Aagiiosad Van Dinther. I'm an incoming 2nd year Indigenous medical student of mixed ancestry — Dutch settler descent and Anishinaabe descent from Kettle and Stony Point First Nation. I'm just wrapping up my first year at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry. I came to Rock Camp not just as a future doctor, but as someone eager to reconnect, to listen, and to learn. These days on the land taught me more than any lecture hall could. And, it is an honour to now share that experience with the community that welcomed me so warmly.

## DAY 1 – Wednesday, July 2nd, 2025

### *“Roots and Ruins”*

Our first morning began with introductions, handshakes, warm smiles, and the kind of energy that tells you something good is about to happen. We were welcomed by the team who made this week possible: Marleen Vogl, the Youth Mental Health Worker and camp coordinator; Halle and Taylor, two kind-hearted volunteers; Lesley Wade, the Community Health Representative; and Caley Doran, the Anishinaabe Interpretive Guide at Cape Croker Park, who would go on to share some of the most memorable teachings of the day.

We started camp the best way possible: with a walk through the land. Caley led us and the kids on a hike through Cape Croker to a place known locally as “the ruins” — the skeletal remains of a home dating back to World War I. We were told this house likely belonged to one of two brothers, Daniel and Joseph Elliott, who had enlisted in the 160th Battalion right here in Cape Croker. Daniel was awarded a Good Conduct Badge and a Victory Medal, the latter only returned to the community in 2018.

Caley shared with us that the house wasn’t simply abandoned — it was intentionally burned. But not out of malice. As we learned, the current belief is that it was the resident himself who set the fire, not to destroy, but to preserve. At the time, nails were incredibly difficult to come by and even harder to make by hand. By burning the house, the valuable iron nails could be harvested from the charred wood and reused. A powerful example of the kind of resourcefulness that has always existed in the community when it comes to building, surviving, and adapting.

Separately, I later came across a striking piece of community history: **between 92-100% of eligible participants from Cape Croker enlisted in World War I, some even lying about their age to serve earlier.** That kind of courage

doesn't come from duty alone — it comes from a deep love for your people and your land.

As we hiked, the stories kept coming — not just from the past, but from the forest itself. Caley read the land like a living book: bear tracks pressed into soft earth, grass torn up from heavy footsteps, branches moved aside by something big — and something recent. The kids were fascinated. So was I. This wasn't just a hike. It was a teaching on presence, observation, and respect for the land.

After the hike, we returned for a much-deserved lunch, catered by the incredible **Rhonda Pedoniquotte**. She made us fresh chicken Caesar salad wraps, potato wedges, fruit kabobs, and juice boxes that hit the spot on an especially hot day. Rhonda, as it turns out, is also mine and Allison's host — providing us with a warm home, fresh meals, and a soft place to land while we are here in Neyaashiinigmiing. The kind of hospitality that goes far beyond kindness. In truth, it is a form of medicine in itself.

After lunch, it was our turn to step into the teaching circle. Allison and I led hands-on lessons with the kids, giving them a glimpse into the world of Western medicine.

Allison taught half the group how casts are made for broken bones — from soft wraps to hardened shells. Casts are essential in healing because they keep bones properly aligned and immobilized, allowing the body to do what it does best: repair itself. For many kids, it was their first time seeing how something that looks like a flimsy bandage can become a hardened tool for healing.

Meanwhile, I guided the other half through the basics of suturing — the art of stitching skin back together. Of course, no real skin was involved! Instead, we practiced on teddy bears, whose plushy bellies made for perfect, safe stitching. Sutures are more than just threads; they are bridges. They bring separated edges of the body back into connection, allowing wounds to heal cleanly and reducing

the risk of infection. The kids picked it up with excitement, their hands steady and curious.

We ended our teaching session with a fun (and safe) way to learn about injections using lemons. We taught them how to hold a syringe, how to approach the “skin,” and how to apply just the right pressure. Injections are a daily part of many healthcare roles — from nurses and doctors to pharmacists and paramedics — and learning them early builds confidence and demystifies fear. No pricked fingers, just lots of laughs and wide eyes.

We taught these skills not to turn campers into instant doctors, but to plant seeds. Because sometimes all it takes is one experience — one spark — to change a person’s path. That’s exactly what happened to me, years ago, during a youth camp back in Sarnia. That moment stuck with me, and now I carry it with pride into my medical journey.

As the day came to a close, we helped the kids back onto the bus, cleaned up our supplies, and took a quiet moment to reflect. Day one was already overflowing with stories, connections, and new memories. And somehow, it felt like we were just getting started.



## DAY 2 – Thursday, July 3rd, 2025

### *“Medicine at Our Feet”*

When we arrived on Day Two, we were joined by two new leaders: Chris Gilmour, an Anishinaabe educator in ecology, survival, and emergency preparedness, and Caleb Musgrave, a Mississauga Anishnaabe wilderness survival instructor and knowledge keeper. They would guide the camp for the next two days, blending teachings from the bush with deep care for culture and community.

We began the morning with a game. One camper was blindfolded and given a foam pool noodle, where the others tried to pin clothespins on them without being caught. The blindfolded camper had to rely on sound alone to figure out where their peers were. It was all laughter at first — but like many Indigenous teachings, the lesson lived just beneath the fun. Chris and Caleb used this as an opportunity to introduce the idea of **silent movement in the forest**. When tracking deer or other animals, moving quietly is essential. One snap of a twig, one clumsy step, and a hunt could turn dangerous, or be lost entirely. Even a startled buck could charge if surprised. Through a playful game, the kids were learning how to read the land with their ears — and how to move through it with intention.

Lunch was once again made with love by **Rhonda Pedoniquotte**, who never fails to make us feel at home. We had creamy mac and cheese, scon dogs, pigs in a blanket, and a camp classic for dessert: “worms in dirt,” made with chocolate pudding, crushed Oreos, and gummy worms.

After lunch, Chris and Caleb gathered us to begin our plant teachings. They explained that Mother Earth provides everything we need if we take the time to observe, ask, and listen. Caleb emphasized the importance of knowing a plant by more than its local nickname. Across Turtle Island and beyond, common names change, adapting to the land and language. But the scientific name remains

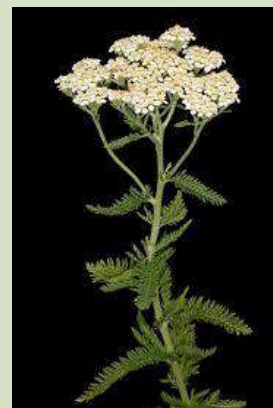


universal, and knowing it helps us communicate across cultures and borders. Alongside that, I've taken the time to include the Anishinaabemowin names for each plant, using resources like the Ojibwe People's Dictionary, to help us remember who first knew these medicines, and in what language they first spoke their names.

Here are some of the teachings we received.

Yarrow – *Achillea millefolium* – **Ajidamoowaanowag**

Crushed yarrow leaves can be used to stop bleeding, especially nosebleeds. Caleb shared a personal story about using this plant with his own son, tucking it into his nose to stop the bleeding, and watching it work within five minutes. It was a beautiful moment of listening about how traditional medicine happens in real-time care.



Cattail – *Typha latifolia* – **Apakweshkway**

Before the cattail flowers, the inner stalk can be pulled out and eaten, raw or cooked. Cattails also provide structure: they've been used traditionally to build shelter, line boats, and even serve as tinder for fire-starting (a hint to what we'd learn on Day 3). They're a survivalist's dream, and a gift from the water's edge.

### Burdock – *Arctium* – Wiisagibagoon

Burdock is a **biennial** plant, meaning it lives for two years before completing its life cycle. In the first year, it grows low to the ground with large, heart-shaped leaves. In the second year, it sends up tall flowering stalks topped with purple blooms and sticky burrs that cling to anything they touch.



The root is rich in calories and can be harvested and eaten like any earthy root vegetable. The large leaves are used to wrap food during cooking or even to fashion temporary rain shelter — or to make a fancy umbrella. It is a plant of both nourishment and shelter, teaching us how one root can serve many roles over time.

### Greater Plantain – *Plantago major* – Pakwan

This plant is known for soothing insect bites, poison ivy rashes, and minor sores. Its antimicrobial and antihistamine properties make it a natural remedy for itchy, irritated skin. Crushed into a poultice, it becomes a cooling balm passed down through generations.





## Jewelweed – *Impatiens capensis* – Ozaawashkojiibik

Best known as the antidote to poison ivy, jewelweed can also help treat athlete's foot. It often grows in the same moist areas where poison ivy thrives. Nature putting the cure right next to the cause.



## Basswood – *Tilia americana* – Wiigobimizh

The inner bark, or bast, can be stripped from the outer bark and braided into a strong rope. Traditionally, it was used to make nets, baskets, mats, and more. At camp, we used it to make bracelets, one strand of bast at a time, reminding us that patience and repetition are tools of creation.

The plant teachings that day were more than just knowledge. They were a reconnection to the land, to history, and to the old ways of knowing. As Chris reminded us, learning how to live with the land, not just on it, is a skill worth carrying.



## DAY 3 – Friday, July 4th, 2025

*“Sensing the Darkness, Kindling the Light”*

Our final morning began with Chris and Caleb returning to lead us through more sensory-based games, blended play with teachings that reached far beyond sight.

First up: campers paired off. One partner was blindfolded, spun around, and led to a tree. They were given time to get acquainted — through touch alone. The feel of the bark. The shape of the trunk. Then, they were spun again and challenged to find the same tree using only memory and their hands.

Innocent fun? Absolutely. But beneath the laughter lay a powerful lesson: in the wilderness, especially in the dark, your vision can’t always help you. Being able to recognize surroundings by texture, sound, or spatial awareness becomes essential. This game planted the seeds of that awareness.

Next, a challenge of sound. All campers were blindfolded. Somewhere off the distance, Caleb began to quietly drum. Their task was to find him — safely — using sound and instinct alone. These weren’t just games, they were teachings in how to move intentionally, to listen deeply, and to trust your body. When the night falls, no flashlight, no fire, just the forest — it’s skills like these that can get you home. That can get you safe.

Chris, ever the storyteller, shared a true story that brought it all to life. A friend of his had gone hiking to watch the sunset and fell asleep. She woke to total darkness, alone in the woods. But because she’d trained with games like these — only more difficult ones, blindfolded in the forest at night with a drum two kilometers away — she knew what to do. She took off her shoes and used her toes to feel the ground, sensing when the trail curved, when it rose, when it dipped. Step by step, breath by breath, she found her way to safety. A lesson in intuition, preparedness, and connection to the land.

By noon, we gathered once more for lunch from Rhonda Pedoniquotte, who gave us a send-off meal to remember: crispy chicken strips, smiley-face fries, and a show-stopping dessert — layered Jello stacked with peach rings, rainbow candy strips, and gummy bears lounging under miniature drink umbrellas. Summer in a bowl.

Then came our final teaching: **fire**.

Chris and Caleb introduced us to building fire using only a firesteel and what Mother Earth provides. A firesteel is a metal rod made from an alloy that, when stuck with steel, provides sparks as hot as 1,500°C. Those sparks ignite tiny shavings that combust instantly, even in damp conditions. We didn't just throw together random kindling. Each camper group built their fire one layer at a time, learning the role each material played in coaxing spark to flame.

1. **Cattail fluff** is perfect for catching the first spark. It ignites easily and quickly catches a spark, but burns fast. It needs a partner to keep the flame going.
2. **Cedar bark tinder** was next. Its fibrous, oil-rich texture holds the flame longer and steadier.
3. **Tree sap** then soaked the cedar and cattail, intensifying the heat and helping the fire stay alive even in wind or moisture.
4. **Basswood bark kindling** bridged the gap — steady and slow-burning, it carried the fire forward and prepared it for weight.
5. **Dry branches** were the final layer to create a sustainable, structured blaze.

Each layer served a purpose: to catch, to feed, to grow, and to last.

The campers didn't just learn how to make a fire — they learned how to tend it, respect it, and honour it. Because fire isn't just warmth or light. It is sacred. It is one of the four elements of the medicine wheel:

Aki (Earth)

Nibi (Water)

Noodin (Wind)

And finally, Ishkode (Fire)



That day, as each camper coaxed a simple spark into a flame, and then that flame into a full blaze, they engaged directly with Ishkode, learning to carry it with care and reverence.

This was the campers' favourite activity by far. To create fire from the land, with their own hands, using tools passed down through generations, it was the perfect ending. Symbolic of everything Rock Camp stands for: teaching, relationship, medicine, and respect.

As the afternoon cooled and the shadows stretched long, the campers packed their bags one final time. They boarded the bus with full bellies, soot-dusted hands, and hearts lit with something new. Three days of learning, connection, and shared wisdom came to a close. But the sparks we lit weren't going out anytime soon.



Over just three days, “The Rock” taught me more than any classroom ever could. We learned how to start a fire with nothing but patience, cedar, and cattail fluff. How to stop a nosebleed with crushed yarrow. And how to navigate the dark with nothing but the feel of a tree’s bark and the sound of a drum in the distance.

But beneath these lessons in survival and medicine was something more powerful: a return to relationship. Relationship with land. With tradition. With each other. And with ourselves.

The youth reminded me that healing isn’t just about setting bones or prescribing medications. Healing is community. It’s laughter. It’s passing on a basswood bracelet or guiding someone’s hands through their first suture. It’s the quiet moments when stories settle in your heart and start to shape who you’re becoming.

For me, that future is in orthopedic surgery — but not just in an operating room. I see myself working in a hospital surrounded by First Nations communities — like Bluewater in Sarnia or Brightshores in Owen Sound — offering care that is grounded in both clinical excellence and cultural respect. Spaces where medicine isn’t just something done *to* people, but ***with*** them.

This experience was part of MedLINCs, the Medical Learning in Community program at Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry. For 10 years now, MedLINCs has partnered with the Chippewas of Nawash Health Centre, connecting Indigenous youth with medical learners and land-based mentorship. Programs like this are vital to growing future doctors who understand the power of relationship and respect.

Miigwech for sharing this journey with me.

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