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HOST: It's hard, as we go into the triple digits of days that some of us have been at home, isolating from friends and society, to maintain hope. When Waneek Horn-Miller talks about the health issues endured by the Indigenous people of Canada, she emphasizes that hope is what gets her through. Her mother taught her that. She was a Hope-maker. This is The Conversation Piece. Here's Waneek Horn-Miller speaking at The Walrus Talks Health in 2016.

WANEEK HORN-MILLER: I'm Waneek Sunshine Horn-Miller, and I am a Bear Clan woman from the Mohawk nation of Kahnawake, Quebec. And I'm very honored to be here on a CRE lands I'm way far out of my depth. So, um, I always say that I'm here in peace. If there's any crease in the room, you know, um, I'm here to speak on something that I'm very passionate about, and it's incredibly hard to ask a Mohawk woman to only speak for seven minutes because we're very longwinded and heavily opinionated. Um, but this is something that I, I is very important to me. It is very, um, the concept of hope and without hope, there is no health in the Indigenous world. We are a collective people. You could be born a Mohawk or a Cree or [inaudible] or Haida, but when they're you hear of a death or a suicide or a crisis in one end of the country, you feel it.

Like, I feel it in my bones. When I see a Facebook message of a young woman gone missing, please spread, please pass around. My heart stops my heart aches. My spirit hurts. And we have heard recently of many health crises, whether it's the high rates of diabetes or cancer or the worst suicide, and each death hurts, it rocks us to our core. And I always sit there and I think why, what can I do? What can I do? And I, I get into very contemplate of mode and all I can do is look back on my own life. And how did I get here today? I'm a 40-year-old mother of 2.5 children. I didn't just eat all the food in the green room. I am pregnant. So you can ask me, don't worry.

I was born three or four daughters to a single mother. My father went to residential school and I didn't grow up with him. My mother was born in 1940. And if anybody in here was born in 1940 as a woman, you know, it was expected of you to get married, be a good housewife, make lots of babies. And well, my mom was very stubborn and she was born into a world where you needed a pass to leave the reserve where you couldn't vote. Where if you got a university education, you were disenfranchised. And it was the era of residential schools. And she said, I was just not made for that time. She always tells us daughters, I should have been born now because I'm like you guys. But thank goodness she was born when she was, because when she got older, she became one of Canada's very first native rights activists.

Her name was Kaniehtio Horn and she was opinionated. She's beautiful. She was intelligent. She made a lot of people nervous because they couldn't quite get the beauty and the smarts thing that they went together. And when she decided I started having children, she was 31 years old. That's grandma territory, where I'm from. And when she started having us daughters, she knew that she had to instill hope in us, hope was important for her. And she had to give us a reason because before you can even dream, you have to have hope. She made two very important decisions for her daughters. She, as a single mother, got a job and moved us. When I was just under a year old from our reserve to the city to Ottawa. And she made two decisions, no drugs or alcohol, or even cigarettes were allowed in our home. I mean, I was born in 1975, everybody smoked



She moved us kitty corner across the street from the YMCA. She rented a two bedroom apartment. She rented out both bedrooms to two elderly people. And we slept out on a pullout couch, like a bunch of puppies. And every penny she had, she bought us a membership at the YMCA. And she put us into sports. She wanted us to learn to have perseverance that never that stick with it. Never give up, never say die, never quit. She wanted us to learn to achieve. And she wanted us to learn respect for our opponents, see beyond race and color to the skills and the abilities of our opponents and the biggest thing that she ever did. And I'll never forget. When I made the declaration that I wanted to go to the Olympics. She promised me she would always be there. She promised me she would be right there.

And I mean, not dumping me off at swim practice and saying, see you later. She actually sat on deck and watched me probably because I was really bad, but she was there. And I always knew I had her in my corner. If no one else to have hope you at least to have, have to have one person in your corner. And she knew if we were to have hope, we would have to see it in the environment that was mirrored back at us to have hope and everything in the food. We ate that it was healthy, that it wasn't poisoning us and the water we drank that it was healthy in the house. We lived in that we were safe that we could go to close our eyes at night and know that we were safe. But most of all, we needed to see hope in her eyes, mirrored, back at us.

When she looked at us, she was making us resilient, but she also knew resilience was like a muscle and you needed to work it out. It's not something you can sit back and say, well, I'm resilient. Now it's a daily exercise that you have to work at. And you know, the resilience and hope. And my dream of being an Olympic athlete helped me get through some of the hardest moments of my life. When I said I wanted to be an Olympic athlete, I had a goal and my mother made sure that she had everything in her power to make me believe it was possible. It got me through the traumas, like the Oka crisis and getting stabbed by a Canadian soldier. My resilience and hope made me have courage to keep going. And most importantly, I was stubborn like her and I never wanted to be anybody's victim. And from my mother's decisions of just those two, she knew she couldn't change everything. Every problem that she saw, but she can make those two decisions for her daughters. She got a doctor. My oldest sister is the first Mohawk woman doctor. My sister Kahente, is a professor at Carleton university. I'm an Olympian. And my little sister is an award-winning actor.

And you know, if we are really going to address the health issues that were Indigenous communities are facing, we have to stop to seeing Indigenous people as a collective people, but see Canada as a collective society. And we have to look at what's going on and ask ourselves if you were living in third world conditions of third world health care, and you knew it because don't get me wrong. They know there's a differential in the healthcare. If your education was underfunded, if you were going to the store and paying extraordinarily high food prices,

Would you have hope? Would you be sure that anything is possible? My mother proved that one woman with an eye on the collective making four daughters believe in hope. She created four more hope makers.

Can you imagine if we all became hope makers? Like my mother, just what this country could be? Thank you very much.

HOST: Waneek Horn-Miller is an Olympian, an activist and a broadcaster and she's one of more than 800 thought-leaders to have graced The Walrus Talks stage. Our YouTube channel is the place to find over 800 speakers at The Walrus Talks. We're also coming up with a plan to

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Waneek Horn-Miller from The Walrus Talks



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