



— CONNECT • LISTEN • SUPPORT —

LESSONS FROM THE
ŁĘCZĄC/Dogwood project

In the fall of 2021, Dogwood applied with researchers from the University of Victoria for a Partnership Engage Grant, “Embracing Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Overcoming Environmental Racism.” The goal was to bring Dogwood together with members of the W̱SÁNEĆ Nation to better understand how settler culture has limited the work of environmental and climate organizations, and too often has ignored or undermined the work of Indigenous people to reclaim their land and cultures.

The grant application was successful and the lessons Dogwood staff have learned since, and will continue to learn, from connecting with members of the W̱SÁNEĆ nation have deepened our commitment to directing energy and support to W̱SÁNEĆ ecological, legal and cultural work.

For more than 20 years Dogwood has been an organization dedicated to empowering people in B.C. to stand up for the places we live and care about. Our campaigns are based in organizing people around issues they care about and using their collective power to defend land, air and water against corporate greed and political apathy.

But until recently, our work often didn’t include — or wasn’t informed by — the people, perspectives or leadership of Indigenous communities whose territory we and our supporters have been taking action to defend.

Dogwood launched our No Tankers campaign on W̱SÁNEĆ territory in 2007 because Gary Lunn was the federal minister of Energy and Natural Resources at the time, and the town of Sidney was a part of his riding. Later, we worked on the Trans Mountain campaign in parallel with the W̱SÁNEĆ, but without forming meaningful or lasting relationships with people in the nation, other than MLA Adam Olsen once he became involved in provincial politics.

We excluded the people with the most at stake, working towards narrow campaign goals without incorporating the knowledge and priorities of the W̱SÁNEĆ. We didn’t acknowledge their relationship to the land or the priorities they had in protecting it, and we missed opportunities to connect on our shared interests.

Dogwood has since formally committed to decolonization both in our public-facing mission and within our organization. This has required unlearning patterns of behaviour and rethinking our systems and policies. And it’s forced us to acknowledge how we — with a staff and volunteer base of mostly settlers — benefit from power structures that exclude and marginalize Indigenous peoples, and people of colour.

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A major step in this process was to go back and learn about the history and culture of the people whose land we build campaigns around, and that some of us work and live on. Connecting with W̱SÁNEĆ leadership and elders is a part of that learning — with an effort to listen and find ways we can help advance the priorities set by community leaders and elders.

For Dogwood, this was made possible through SSHRC grant funding, relying on existing community connections and new ones, and an agreed-upon organizational commitment to decolonization and being better allies.



Guiding belief: Decolonizing an organization starts by decolonizing ourselves

As mentioned above, Dogwood set out to learn about B.C.'s colonial history, the violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples and cultures both in past and present day, B.C.'s current systems of marginalization, the resilience of Indigenous communities in the face of oppression and opportunities we have to support restorative work nations are undertaking.

UBC professor YELKATŦE (Robert Clifford) from W̱SÁNEĆ nation recommends this book by Cole Harris on the structure and process of colonization, and land dispossession that began right here in Victoria: *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia*.

Knowing the truth of our settler history is an essential part of understanding the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples' past, present and future.

Dogwood staff and board members agreed on the

importance of Indigenous allyship and decolonization, and staff were encouraged to use work hours to learn, read, listen and participate in local acts of allyship.

We found and shared **written materials**, especially those locally based like *Saltwater People* by the late Dave Elliott Sr. and *Challenging Racist British Columbia*. We attended **webinars and events, and engaged in other learning opportunities** about Indigenous rights, white settler systems of oppression, B.C.'s history of colonization and racism, and the ongoing oppression of Indigenous people, including the attempted genocide of peoples and cultures all across "Canada." As a staff of mostly settlers, we were curious about our roles and responsibilities in dismantling harmful practices, ideas and systems that marginalize and harm Indigenous peoples and people of colour.

Amplifying Indigenous voices, actions and knowledge

We made a conscious decision to integrate more voices and points of view of Indigenous peoples into our communications with supporters, not just because our organization's interests often overlap with that of Indigenous water and land protectors, but as we became educated on Indigenous rights and history, it also became clear that Indigenous voices are deliberately silenced or ignored.

Our sense was that as we guided our supporters toward the truth of colonialism and the role settlers played in separating Indigenous people from their land, families and cultures, folks would start seeing the connection between issues they care about, like pipelines and tankers, and the world views of Indigenous people that have been left out of environmental conversations for too long, and at great detriment to not just the climate movement, but to society as a whole.

Indigenous voices and stories are inherently important because they come out of the land we live and rely on. Beyond what might be beneficial connections or relationships for our campaigns, Dogwood's goal is to learn how to be of service to Indigenous communities working toward their own desired outcomes. For any group of people or staff at an organization seeking to ally or partner with an Indigenous community, it seems important to ask what their priorities are and work from there.

Dogwood seeks to support Indigenous rights and pathways to resilience with no strings attached. We aspire to build reciprocal relationships based on shared values and love for the land, rather than extractive or transactional interactions. And we recognize we can only move at the speed of trust.

Connect with and learn from W̱SÁNEĆ people

As we educated ourselves, Dogwood staff reached out to the W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council through existing relationships with UVic faculty, to see if they would be interested in connecting.

YELKATTE notes this was an important connection to have to start building. Without this, it may take a little more time to build and connect, or take additional attention in terms of how best to do so given the heavy burdens already on communities and leadership.

WLC agreed to our request to get to know each other, and allow local Dogwood staff to learn from W̱SÁNEĆ elders, understand the nation's priorities and use our resources to help promote W̱SÁNEĆ environmental leadership based in respect for their sovereignty and their traditional ecological knowledge, as described in their letter of support here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PoDpGBh18uOzQ6Wc8IA6v8kRWR1n-JGm/view?usp=sharing>.

In-person gatherings and volunteer work, ongoing communications and learning sessions helped us connect with W̱SÁNEĆ people, the territory and ways of being, thanks to SSHRC funding, John Price at UVic,

and members of both the W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council, school board and the broader community. Because of those connections and the opportunities that came from them, local Dogwood staff members, volunteers and supporters have budding pathways to support W̱SÁNEĆ community initiatives and interests now and going forward.

A gathering on SḴTAḴ (Mayne Island) — August 2022

The first event we held together was a two day gathering attended by Dogwood staff, settler SḴTAḴ residents, W̱SÁNEĆ community members and SSHRC funding connectors. Staff and SḴTAḴ settlers were invited to listen to W̱SÁNEĆ people describe themselves, their families, language, land and history. We shared meals and talked. We screened short films by W̱SÁNEĆ filmmakers about the significance of SḴTAḴ and other culturally important spots throughout what settlers know as the Gulf Islands, ȚEṮÁĆES.

We learned about pressing issues currently facing WSÁNEĆ community members, like the harms of damaged ecosystems, affordable housing, reclamation of land, and beach pollution caused by boat liveaboards and Butchart Gardens. And we stood together in the ÁLELEN, or village site at the head of “Miners Bay” and committed to keep learning.

So much of what we heard from elders was weighted in the devastating fallout of residential schools on their people and communities, violations of rights and dignity, systemic racism and oppression, and a lack of representation or acknowledgement in colonial-built decision-making spaces.

That said, WSÁNEĆ people are leading initiatives that will bring wholeness back to the land and people. Land restoration work is a big part of moving forward for the nation, as is building up capacity for the WSÁNEĆ Land

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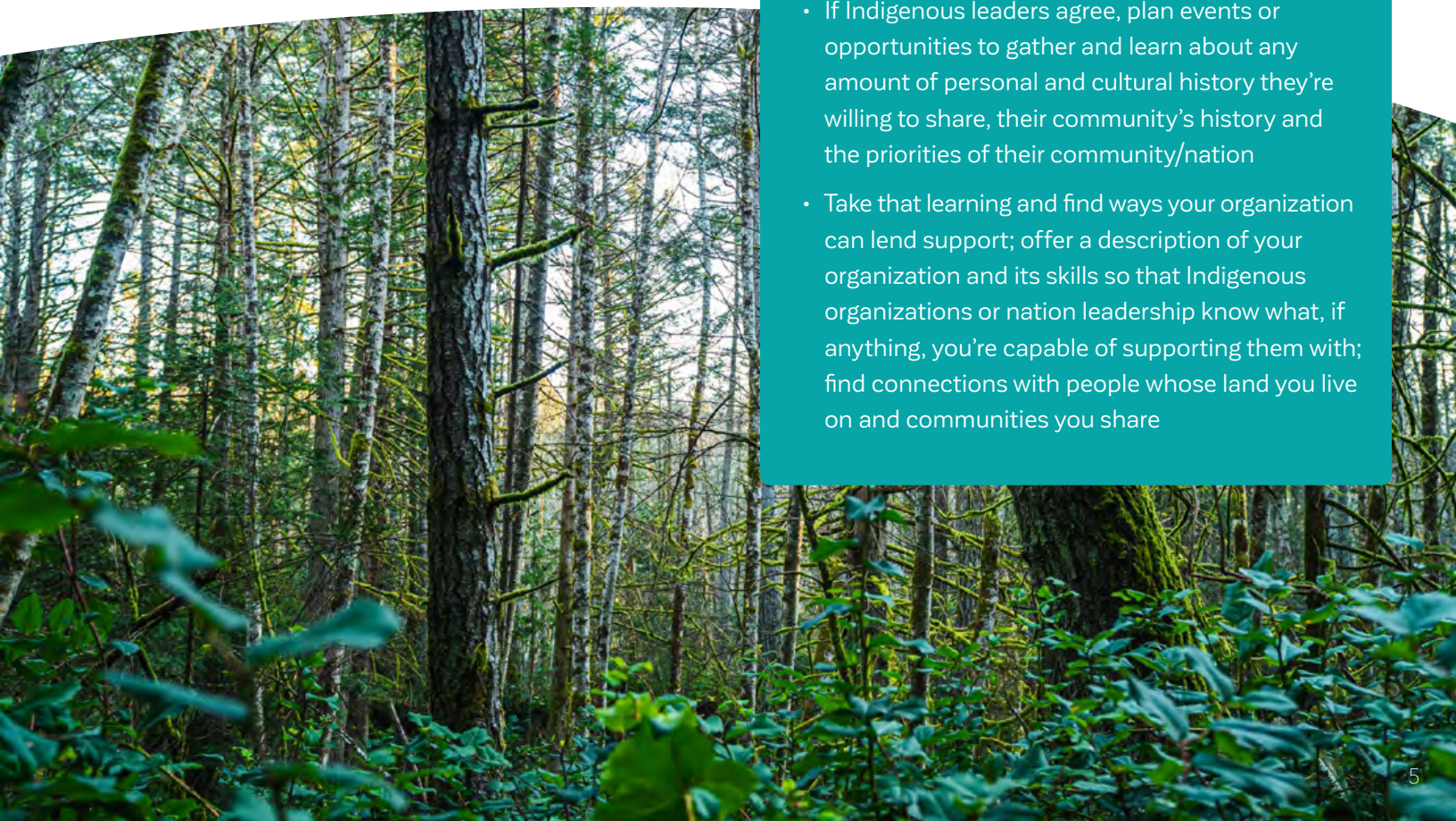
Trust, a society created for land to be returned to the WSÁNEĆ people, and bringing SENĆOTEN into every conversation.

After a weekend together, staff at Dogwood had a much better sense of how we could connect our resources, like a large supporter e-mail list and staff time/capacity, to support the land restoration, culture revitalization and traditional law education WSÁNEĆ people are doing.

Ultimately, we’d like to have a strong enough connection with people in the WSÁNEĆ community that Dogwood’s support would be easily called upon and/or integrated into work as we can be helpful.

Suggested first steps for settler organizations:

- Learn B.C.’s colonial history; learn about the Indigenous people and history of the land you live on
- Reach out to Indigenous community members with an offer to support their priorities and programs; ask if they have the capacity and willingness to build a relationship
- If Indigenous leaders agree, plan events or opportunities to gather and learn about any amount of personal and cultural history they’re willing to share, their community’s history and the priorities of their community/nation
- Take that learning and find ways your organization can lend support; offer a description of your organization and its skills so that Indigenous organizations or nation leadership know what, if anything, you’re capable of supporting them with; find connections with people whose land you live on and communities you share





ACTION taken by Dogwood after the initial gathering and early introduction

Virtual panel discussions

Dogwood peppered resources and stories into communications streams as a way of introducing or encouraging supporters and allies to decolonization. The SSHRC grant allowed us to host speakers for an expert webinar series focused on W̱SÁNEĆ initiatives, current issues and laws, all for an audience of mostly white settlers living on W̱SÁNEĆ land. Land back, language revitalization and history are just a few things covered in these learning sessions.

- WLC director Gord Elliott and UVic professor Tara Martin on the return of SISĆENEM to W̱SÁNEĆ nation
- UBC Law Professor YELKÁTFE, Rob Clifford on W̱SÁNEĆ laws and his field school
- Elders and language experts J'STINEN, COSINIYE and SELILIYE on their lives and SENĆOŦEN language revitalization
- Kusemaat, Shirley Williams on keeping cross-border cultural connections

Session recordings

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1lEaBsNqP3MCEuxJsCSn3B1_rYqAmZrgI

Removing invasive species

After a weekend on SḴTAḴ with W̱SÁNEĆ leaders, local Dogwood staff were inspired to learn more about indigenous plants, local habitats and help with land restoration work led by Indigenous community members. Christina found something that fit the bill: invasive species removal through PEPAKEṈ HÁUTW̱, which led to Christina regularly joining W̱SÍKEM Ivy Project, a monthly gathering created by Sarah Jim inviting local people to come remove English ivy from the last remaining forest on Tseycum land. Dogwood has since reached out to its supporter list in the area inviting them to join as well.

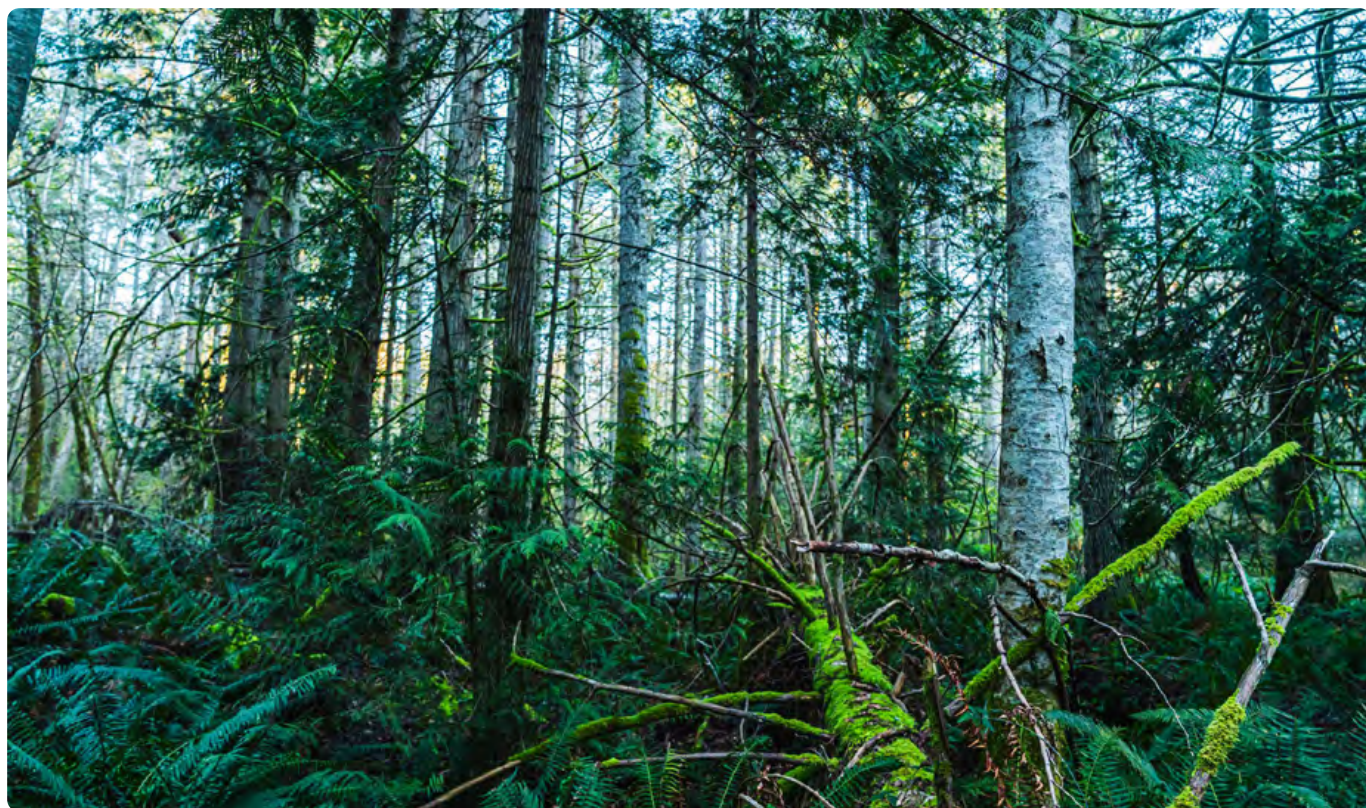
Connecting with YELKÁTTE's field school

YELKÁTTE was a special guest in Dogwood's webinar series, educating attendees on W̱SÁNEĆ law, land rights and systems of governance. He mentioned he led a land-based field work for law students at UBC and UVic, and that Dogwood staff and others would be welcome to come check it out. So we did! Local staffer Christina attended a day of the school that included special guest speaker Mavis Underwood about Indigenous feminism and restoration of [an ancient village site at what many now call Cordova Bay](#). Dogwood was also added as an auditor of YELKÁTTE's field program, allowing Christina to join several small group sessions with the students and members of the W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council to explore legal avenues for land back work on the territory. YELKÁTTE also allowed Dogwood to host a special guest speaker event for one day of his school, featuring prolific Indigenous filmmaker and activist, Doreen Manuel (see below).

Special event: guest speaker Indigenous land defender, educator and filmmaker, Doreen Manuel

Dogwood staff invited allied environmental organizations working on the territory to an event to hear Doreen Manuel speak, and also give us a chance to connect on how to better support local Indigenous-led programs and initiatives. The event happened in conjunction with YELKÁTTE's field school, giving his law students the chance to learn from Doreen. She shared her long history of defending Indigenous rights and land against colonialism and racism, with particular attention to racist policies fought by her dad, George Manuel, in collaboration with W̱SÁNEĆ leaders like the late Philip Paul. Doreen also gave us practical advice on how to be better allies with Indigenous nations.

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Community of Practice group for W̱SÁNEĆ Land Trust

Dogwood staff member Christina Smethurst joined the Community of Practice group, set up by Shauna Doll, Eryn Rogers and others, to connect the people and resources of local environmental organizations with the W̱SÁNEĆ Land Trust. A monthly meeting will keep Christina/Dogwood looped in on how we can support land back work on W̱SÁNEĆ territory without burdening the already busy nation with updates or asking for information.

Driving volunteers and supporters toward resources, fundraising and actions

Having a connection to the W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council and members of the community has brought Dogwood's attention more closely to what's happening on the territory. Christina has signed up for regular nation newsletters, has extended offers to folks at the Leadership Council, School Board and Land Trust to keep Dogwood in mind as a group ready to help when needed, and is in the loop

with the Community of Practice group. Christina has been leveraging Dogwood channels, particularly a weekly e-newsletter and e-mail blasts, to amplify actions, events and programs to thousands of people with the goal of bringing more capacity and awareness of W̱SÁNEĆ priorities and initiatives.

Witnessing work & volunteering

Dogwood staff attended and volunteered at events recognizing new works of art by W̱SÁNEĆ artists on SḴTAḴ — a pole unveiling by TEMOSEŊ Chazz Elliott and Matthew Parlby-Elliott, and murals created by Sarah Jim. Local Dogwood staff members and Dogwood team volunteers helped in the kitchen for the Yellow Wolf powwow in August.

The ƆETXIŁĆ project

The ƆETXIŁĆ project, supported by UVic faculty and the SSHRC, provided impetus to initiate long-overdue conversations with W̱SÁNEĆ community members. Our hope is that the relationships starting to form as a result continue long past the formal bounds of the project. All we can do is keep showing up.

What's next

Supporting W̱SÁNEĆ Land Trust and W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council

As noted above, Christina Smethurst was invited to join a Community of Practice group of land trust and environmental organizations, brought together to use the power of their organizations to support the work of the W̱SÁNEĆ Land Trust. Monthly meetings will include updates from W̱SÁNEĆ representatives and stakeholders and conversations around using each of our org's capacity and skills to uplift WLT. Christina and other staff have subscribed to W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council newsletter to keep an eye out for other opportunities to volunteer. Communications Director Kai Nagata has a keen interest and talent in bow hunting deer, and has been in conversation with W̱SÁNEĆ community members about reducing invasive fallow deer populations on the islands while also feeding local people.

A gathering to learn and connect with special guest(s)

We'd like to organize a third in-person gathering, bringing together environmental groups and members of the W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council to discuss more ways our lives and work overlap. This could potentially be done through the Community of Practice group. We'd also like to continue to gather with other environmental organizations to continue the discussion around supporting the W̱SÁNEĆ community and its priorities going forward.

Volunteering on the land

Dogwood staff member Christina Smethurst will continue to volunteer for Indigenous-led work to remove invasive species that are choking or killing off indigenous plants on the territory, including continuing to pull ivy for the W̱SÍ_KEM Ivy Project.



Send people to help when it's requested by W̱SÁNEĆ community members

Dogwood has data tracking systems allowing us to monitor the digital actions and interests of folks on our e-mail list. When one of our supporters takes an interest in content about local Indigenous rights, teachings or events, they'll be added to a list of folks we'll call upon when Dogwood learns of a mobilization or action in support of the W̱SÁNEĆ nation.

And more...

Dogwood will remain open and listening for more ways to connect with and support W̱SÁNEĆ programs, initiatives and interests going forward. It's a standing offer we plan to nurture as much as is helpful and wanted.

Reflections from Dogwood staff

For any settler-led organization interested in building a relationship with a community, nation or people whose land they live and work on, it's important to start internally. Reflect wholeheartedly on the reasons for wanting to build a relationship and try to remove self-serving motives for making friendships or supporting of Indigenous-led work. Fill in basic gaps in your knowledge, and process some of the feelings that come up (such as guilt, shame or anger) rather than asking Indigenous people to do that work for you.

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Come from a place of earnest interest, and be curious

For an ENGO with resources, connecting with local Indigenous people can help amplify the work a community is doing, get settlers to show up to help to serve Indigenous initiatives, and listen to the stories and experiences of community elders. Communications platforms can help highlight Indigenous voices, amplify projects and events, and enhance safety during conflicts. At the same time, trying to tell other people's stories contains inherent pitfalls. What does it mean to share your platforms or resources, so people can represent themselves on their own terms?

Settlers are responsible for halting the violence of colonization and repairing the damage our systems and institutions have caused. But that work can't happen individually — it requires sustained collective effort. What colonial institutions does your organization interact with? What access to land, money and other resources do you have? How can your power and privilege align with the goals and priorities of the people whose land you live or work on?

This work isn't something to be measured with data or numbers, and doesn't have a "completion date." At Dogwood we started off by recognizing that some of our own actions, however well-meaning, were part of the problem. We took feedback, tried to listen, fill in gaps in our knowledge and reconsider our assumptions. Now we're trying to reorient our work in ways that feel respectful and useful. Like a friendship, there is no formal timeline or end goal. The relationship IS the point.

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Dogwood

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