

Unveiling Body Sovereignty: A Transformative Workshop Exploration **By Kirsten Glass**

Amidst the welcoming confines of the OLARA building, a small crowd eagerly awaited Ellis Rondquist's insights into the Indigenous concept of body sovereignty – the workshop an exploration delving deep into the intersections of body, land, and self.

Before the workshop began, a natural hum of conversations and connection filled the gathering space, located between the All My Relations and Indigenous Education offices. Chairs and tables, set in a semi-circle, welcomed attendees. Off to the side, some drifted into a boardroom lured in by refreshments, others mumbled they should get something too — a pop and perhaps a snack.

The crowd, numbering around 30 settled for the Body Sovereignty Workshop as the session started with a land acknowledgment and a heartfelt welcome message setting the tone of the afternoon.

“We are here to make good changes, that’s why we are here. That’s why we are given different ways of thinking and being and speaking.” Elder Joanne Brown said, “In the web of life, we are all precious. We know that everybody is a good body. So, thank you for existing.”

The host and speaker for the rest of the workshop was Ellis Rondquist, a Bachelor of Social Work major also pursuing a minor in Sociology. Rondquist delved into topics close to their academic heart: body sovereignty, body autonomy, sexual sovereignty, comprehensive sex education, personhood, and intersectionality.

Their benchmark for success was straightforward, to educate and empower. “If one person can walk away from the workshop understanding that their body is theirs or was able to connect to one thing, one fact, about any of the topics we talked about, I have succeeded,” said Rondquist.

Central to the workshop discourse was the concept of body sovereignty. Rondquist defined the term body sovereignty as specifically an Indigenous concept and way of knowing, saying “It connects the body to the land. Your body is land, your body is sovereign and it’s your personal territory.”

They also contrasted it with the more widely known and twinned concept of bodily autonomy, which positions the body as an individual entity — you control it, but it is distinguished from its surrounding systems.

“Body sovereignty encompasses that you live in relation and connected to all things around you. The food you eat, the land you live on, the water you drink, all these things contribute to who you are. Within that you are the one who governs your body; you tell it what to do. It’s a holistic approach.” They said.

The event was a brainchild of Rondquist's mentoring sessions during their summer practicum with the TRU Student Affairs office. Cassie Greenough, their supervisor, saw the potential in Ellis's enthusiasm and nudged them toward creating an educational event.

Further momentum came from Rondquist's involvement in the All My Relations - Knowledge Makers Research Publication Program and their paper "Reclaiming and Indigenizing Sex and Pleasure" which will be published in the program's academic journal's ninth volume this fall.

Jeneen HERN-Jensen, assistant director of All My Relations Indigenous Research Network, hailed Rondquist's efforts saying, "Ellis did an outstanding job bringing people together and creating a welcoming space to explore Body Sovereignty."

HERN-Jensen believes that it is an essential element of decolonizing education. "It's crucial to foster spaces where people can approach topics, they might already know but using Indigenous ways of knowing" she added.

"I'm glad I came. I came to support Ellis, but I learned so much." Said TRU student Tarun Agarwal, "There's a lot about boundaries that I feel I need to dig into now. I came with no expectations but I'm leaving with a lot." He mentioned that for him the workshop was a successful eye-opener.

Moving ahead, Rondquist is optimistic about future endeavors. "The original intent was to run an intro series and then an advanced one," they said, noting that there was room for expansion within a few of the topics the workshop covered.

"This is especially true for sex education, but I didn't want to leave it out. It's connected to sexual sovereignty and sovereign erotic," said Rondquist, "There is just so much more I want to share. I've only just started."