



A MINI COMMEMORATIVE BIOGRAPHY

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## Grandfather William Commanda

For many friends all over the world, this marks the hundredth birth date of the late William Commanda, founder of the *Circle of All Nations*. Perhaps you will be wondering, who was this man, and of what relevance his story is today. I had the distinct and profound privilege to meet him on April 11, 1997, and he grew in me much as he animated so many others, and today, on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, I share this annotated mini-

biography of someone who was a legend in his own time, and whose legacy will continue to impact us in unimaginable ways into the future. I do not believe it was any accident that he was born on what has become Remembrance Day.

After a century of tremendous change in the lives of all across the world, we are now a global society that increasingly recognizes that it must listen anew to the voice of the elder

sibling of humanity – the Indigenous voice – a voice to lead us back to our common home, the Mother Earth, and to our common heritage: interconnectedness. *We must remember.* We are deeply grateful that William Commanda worked so tirelessly to ignite such a trail for so many, and that he worked so tirelessly to create a *Circle of All Nations, a Culture of Peace*, to inspire us on our journey.



WILLIAM COMMANDA - 6 MONTHS

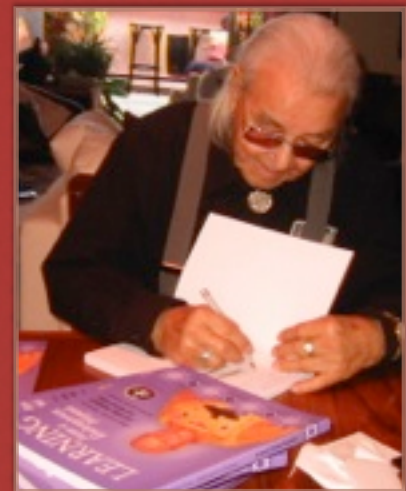


"AN ALGONQUIN TYPE"



MAMIWININI - NOMAD!

# A WILLIAM COMMANDA LEGACY



## HIGHLIGHTS

1. ANCESTRY
2. FAMILY
3. CANOE BUILDER
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5. SACRED WAMPUM BELTS
6. THE CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS
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## A Mini Backgrounder

A most unique individual, William Commanda, Keeper of the Sacred Wampum Belts, forged a remarkable path of resistance and inclusion, animating the land based heritage of his Indigenous ancestry of the American North East during a century of unprecedented global change, commencing with his birth at the beginning of the First World War, determinedly forging a trail of peace and love, and leaving a profound legacy of a global eco-community, the Circle of All Nations, entrenched in a responsibility for

Mother Earth and respect of all, and sustained by his constant prayer and reminder, Ginawaydaganuc - We Are All Connected. He was loved by all - from the grass roots to environmentalists to government, and was honoured to be bestowed with Wolf Project, Harmony, Bill Mason Conservation, Canoe Builder, Bernard Assiniwi, National Aboriginal Achievement Lifetime Awards, two Honorary Doctorate Degrees, the Key to the City of Ottawa, and appointment to Officer of the Order of Canada.

# Ancestry in the Ottawa River Watershed

The Gatineau River, historically, *Tenagatin*, the river of dramatic elevations, was a central waterway within the traditional territories of William Commanda and his ancestors. The Gatineau from the North and the Rideau from the South both converge with the Mighty Ottawa flowing from west to east, and at the cross point of the convergence lies the Chaudière Falls; it is still the symbolic centre of the vast territory of the Anicinabe People of Algonquin ancestry who span the continent, and the water drum continues to resound as the heart of the within the capital city, for Algonquins, First Peoples and countless others.

William Commanda, Indigenous North American, who described himself as *Mamiwinini*, *Nomad*, was born at 8.30 in the morning on November 11, 1913. The time of his birth was precisely registered in his mind – he uttered his first cry as the train tooted its whistle in *Maniwaki*, *Mary's Land*, at the confluence of the Gatineau and Desert Rivers, within the reserve of the River Desert Band of Algonquin Indians, now known as Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. The Morning Star was still visible in the sky that winter's sunrise, so his mother named him *Ojigkwanong*. The name itself revealed the intimate ancestral knowledge of

stars and planets, associating him with fisher and squirrel, the creatures that climb up and down the roads of life head-first, and with the dawn, first light. Indigenous Peoples the world over believe one's name signifies one's purpose in life, and much care is taken in choosing a child's name. William Commanda's native name reveals the deep relationship with nature and the larger cosmic dimensions of life that was central to the ideology of his ancestors. It also hinted that he was to become the transmitter of a profound sacred heritage – as Carrier of the Sacred Wampum Shell Belt Heritage of his People. He animated this relationship in various ways throughout his long life. The Morning Star came to draw him back to this larger reality, this Great Mystery a little over two years ago. He died at his home on the reserve at 4.40 on August 3, 2011, slipping away into the dawn. For many of us, however, he is still larger than life.

While there were many transitions in the lives of the Indigenous Peoples of North America with the coming of the new people, the train was the dramatic signal of the changes that would come with the new century, changes of national and global significance. William Commanda was born on the eve of the First World War, on what we have come to know as

Remembrance Day. For those who remember him for his envisioning of *Circle of All Nations*, *A Culture of Peace*, he was born to shine a torch of light in an ever-darkening world, advancing a vision for peace-building and racial harmony and respect of Mother Earth in an unprecedented melding of the ancient with the contemporary, and the Indigenous world with the new Canada, and with the global world. Today, modern technology links time and space to transmit important messages as did the smoke of his ancestors over so many centuries.

William Commanda's ancestors are the Algonquins of the *Mighty Kichissippi* – of the Ottawa River Watershed. The earliest historical ancestor is the Grandmother of the old Lac Commandant, now known as Lac Papineau. She was there before 1763, the date of the signing of the Royal Proclamation, the earliest definition of a historical relationship between the First Peoples of North America and the English. Her son was the first known Grand Shaman of the territory. Grandfather Louizon Commanda, a descendent, was the chief of William's reserve at the turn of the century; he built the big house on the Ottawa River crossroad that linked the great Chaudière Falls with the Grand Remous circular rapids and the far north, and pointed east and west to the Gatineau

## ... a mini annotated biography

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river and into the reserve and Bitobi Lake; William Commanda was born at this big duplex log house with a stable for horses; the home was constructed to accommodate travelling visitors. The place imbued William's life with a particular energy for connection – visitors from around the world visited him constantly till he died; it was where his sacred prayer, *Ginawaydaganuc, We Are All Connected*, was ignited.

His other historically significant ancestor is Luc-Antoine Pakiniwatik, his great, great grandfather; one of the Algonquins of the Lake of Two Mountains, (its Algonquin name of *Oka* acknowledging the golden fish, *d'ore, walleye* that used to bless the waters in such profusion), it was he who negotiated the establishment of the reserve in Maniwaki in 1853, intended according to William as a sanctuary where the *Indians* would be able to preserve their language, culture and traditions, while sharing their territory with the newcomers, who they could see were already arriving in the new land in such numbers as to overwhelm the small bands. He negotiated this agreement by making three canoe trips via the Rideau River and Lake Ontario to Toronto; he initially wanted to secure Allumette Island as this sanctuary for his people, an indication of how important the Ottawa River was to the people.

Pakinawatik was also the recipient of a medal from Queen Victoria, affirming his role of leadership. These little details of the family history reveal their extensive presence on vast expanses of land. William Commanda's reserve was established in 1853, before the establishment of the Canada of 1867 or the creation of the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Reserves were also established at Golden Lake and Temiscaming – though on the one hand they have served to separate and divide the people on provincial, linguistic and countless other lines, the bigger message is this: they serve as irrefutable evidence of the presence, rights and responsibilities of the Algonquins throughout the watershed, and indeed on both the Ontario and Quebec sides of the border.

Pakinawatik was also carrier of four Sacred Wampum Belts, mnemonic artifacts of sacred and historical record keeping importance, created from quahog shells from the North Atlantic Ocean. In 1970, William Commanda became carrier of the Wampum Belts. Thus he carried a distinct sacred, ideological, historical and land-based heritage into his life and work.

# Family

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William Commanda was the second child and first son of Alonzo Napoleon and Marie Louise Cayer Commanda. There were eight children in the family, and the family did not escape the struggles and hardships of so many other native families – childhood deaths, untimely deaths, abuse, poverty, alcohol abuse, exploitation, land appropriation and systemic and overt racism. Yet a remarkable resilience also shone through the darkness.

A Jim Durant article in the *Saturday Night Post* describes Alonzo Commanda as the world's best guide – his strength, ability to read the stars, travel in the dark and track beaver were legendary, and his ability to paddle his canoe through rapids while standing always drew admiring sighs from the lady tourists. His brother, Gabriel Commanda, is today acknowledged as the founder of Val d'Or. A veteran of the First World War, it was he who forged the trail to the gold (many consider the highway to the north the Commanda trail). Honoured today in that city by province and community, celebrated in an annual walk for racial harmony, during his lifetime he too bore the pain of so many First Peoples with hybrid identity in their homelands. After serving in the war, he was deemed

civilized and a citizen of Canada; when he revealed the gold, he became Indian, with no rights to stake a claim to the grand natural resources of his land, and he died blind and penniless. William Commanda's brother Louison played his own leadership role in the community – he introduced the Alcoholics Anonymous program to the reserve from its time of origin, saving many from despair and suicide, and his story still inspires Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples from afar during the annual AA Roundup on the reserve – the Indigenous influence on that movement has not yet been seriously examined.

There was much poverty, hunger and hardship to be endured through the years of depression. Indian peoples were not able to hunt and fish and trap as they had been accustomed to – fishing nets painstakingly made of cedar were destroyed, canoes were confiscated, and Alonzo Commanda's trapping shack was appropriated by the province and sold to new settlers; when William Commanda was nine, he recalls his father's moose being confiscated by game wardens, leaving the parents in despair and the young family hungry over a hard winter. While there was welfare money to help townsfolk in Maniwaki through the Great Depression, there was no equivalent for the Indians; when eventually some resources were secured for the reserve, the

Indian Agent demanded such servility to process them that many Indians could not bring themselves to beg or to subject themselves to the insults and abuse that was often came with the interaction – William's brother-in-law Joe Jacko was one of them. But other memories of William's early years reveal the magic of living the bush life - family winters in Tomasine Lake, under the cosy rabbit skin blanket woven by Grandmother Manianne Commanda, sleeping on sweet smelling mattresses of balsam, peering at the winter stars, trenching beaver, checking trap-lines, meeting wolves, foxes and bears, snow sliding on skins, and being part of the great rhythm of nature.

It is so interesting that there was no drinking during those periods – drinking happened when people were at the town sites or at the fur trading posts, where his family, like so many others, was cheated regularly by the fur buyers.

What changes over his long life – from the bush to cars, television, camera, computers – he had an avid interest in all of these, and when he died, many knew him as the dotcom *techno* elder!

# Canoe Builder

If there is one central image to be associated with William Commanda, it would have to be the birch bark canoe. He remembered his mother helping him create his first canoes when he was a toddler, floating them down gullies created by rainwater; then, a young boy, he learned to make model canoes for tourists. With his craft came his independence. His mother's brother, Uncle Andre, was an artist and craftsman, and while most Indians made serviceable canoes, it was Uncle Andre who taught him the art of making *fine* canoes – he told the story of ruining his uncle's best crooked knife once, and having to hang around shame-faced for some time before Uncle Andre let the lesson resume – a lifelong commitment to hard work, responsibility, respect and creativity were the gifts of the apprenticeship.

In 1940, William Commanda married Mary Smith from Baskatong (her family moved into Maniwaki after being displaced from their home with the creation of the Baskatong reservoir); and she had been raised with many traditional skills in the bush. His family expanded with her – he adopted her son, Sonny; later, her niece Evelyn joined the family. In their lives together, William and Mary shared their passion for animating the traditional art and

craft of their ancestors - building birch bark canoes and snowshoes, moccasins, skinning and tanning leather, and doing leather, bead and quill work – with his step-children, Sonny and Evelyn, grandchildren and with the many other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples; one of the latter was David Gidmark published his book on the *Indian Arts and Crafts of William and Mary Commanda*, celebrating their skills and passion.

In the fifties, Kirk Wipper, founder of the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, began his avid collection of North American water-craft; he met William Commanda on his travels, and they commenced a lifetime friendship. Today, there is a display dedicated to three Commanda canoes housed at the Canoe Museum. Also on display there is the famous buckskin jacket of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau – it was made by Mary Commanda and William fashioned the moose bone buttons. They built canoes for tourists, at Expo '67 in Montreal, and at the Exhibition in Ontario Place, Toronto. In 1981, they travelled to Denmark to build a canoe for Queen Margarethe – and two books were published in Danish, commemorating this activity. Over the years, well over seventy Commanda canoes were created, most often made of winter bark, which was hard to peel off trees – but especially secured by William so they could

be etched upon. The stencils that William prepared, executed by his grandchildren, are iconic motifs that underline the deep connection with nature and constitute a unique Commanda signature on the water-craft. These canoes have taken his energy to many countries around the world.

William Commanda shared his canoe-making skills with Todd Labrador, Mi'qMaq canoe maker, in 2005, when he was 90. Valerie Pouyanne, a French woman from Montreal and Maureen Bartholomeus, a student from France, produced a documentary, *Good Enough for Two*, for him. As much as it shares canoe-making strategies, so it also explores William Commanda's vision, animation and sharing of the journey of the good life. The name says it all – a phrase ever on his lips in response to a greeting, it holds the essence of his peace-building message – *Someone has to be good enough for two!*

Canoe transported William Commanda on to his journey beyond this life – he laid in state in his canoe in his *Circle of All Nations* lodge in Maniwaki in a birch bark canoe that he himself had made – and the final gesture on the day of his funeral was a paddle on his lake in a canoe created by his grandson Chuck Commanda – a promise that his legacy will journey on into the future.

# A Tireless Worker

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William Commanda worked hard from childhood until the day he died, on the eve of his annual *Circle of All Nations* Gathering. He did everything – in his youth, he was a shoe-shine boy, he drove logs on the river, tried farming, sharpened files, went logging and on Sundays in the camps, cut hair; he trapped beaver; he worked as a guide; ran a dog team transporting supplies for Canadian International Paper company from one logging site to another; he worked for the paper companies that eventually became Weyerhaeuser as a log buyer, and he worked hard to inspire sustainable harvesting of veneer logs from Quebec to New Brunswick, Maine to New York (sadly, the Pandora's box unlidded, it released unbridled greed – not respect for the great gifts of nature); he travelled long distances across the provinces each week to do this work, and the winters did not deter him.

His leadership skills were recognized by the companies and he was entrusted with great responsibilities. He made many friends along the way; he also suffered much racism – at restaurants, motels, and within the business from every direction; further, both French and Indians were resentful that he was entrusted with forest sustainability, log selection and

the company cheque book. At the same time as he did this work as a *company man*, he also served his community as acclaimed chief – he refused to participate in Indian Act election practices, but when his community called upon him to serve as leader, he did, in the old times style – from 1951 to 1970.

His was a unique political stance, determined by his heritage as a descendent of leaders, and his active pursuit of knowledge of his history. As a child, he was the attentive water-boy, listening to the stories of elders around camp-fires. He learned to read and write and count as an adult, taught on the road by Duane Cole, his boss and lifetime friend in the lumber business.

An indefatigable student, he learned about his ancestors from National Geographic magazines presented by tourists; he followed local and global news daily; and he read with passion till his death, painstakingly poring over text with a magnifying glass. He accumulated a library of books and documentaries on the history of his people and his land.

A major influence on his political development was the work of Huron activist, Jules Sioui, who inspired First Peoples in Canada and the United States to create

the North American Indian Nations Government - it was this body that motivated the people to unify and take their fight for rights and recognition to the United Nations. Its efforts eventually got diverted by the federal government with the creation of the National Indian Brotherhood (now, Assembly of First Nations), but William Commanda remained loyal to the principles of the founding political effort, holding the title of Supreme Chief of the organization from 1952 till his death in 2011.

# Sacred Wampum Belts

William Commanda's political perspective was grounded in no uncertainty about his rightful position as *Mamiwinini of Turtle Island*, as his peoples described the continent of North America: as First Person. As carrier of the Sacred Wampum Belts, he assumed a decided responsibility to the land and the peoples – to his own people as well as the newcomers who had come to occupy the land. While the deep significance of the Sacred Wampum Belts is vast, in essence they meant some core things to him.

The most ancient one, the Seven Fires Prophecy Wampum Belt, which he stated was created before the coming of the Vikings, foretold the coming of the new peoples and the changes they would bring to the lives of the First Peoples. William Commanda is believed to be the carrier of the Belt during the unfolding of the Seventh Fire, the time when humanity would be called upon to make serious choices about its relationship with Mother Earth and each other. So he worked to help us make that transition towards the Fire, the Light – and he pointed in a direction that is unfolding dramatically each day.

The 1700 Three Figure Wampum Belt was created as the Sharing and Welcoming Belt, its

three figures signifying that the Indian in the centre was welcoming the newcomers, then the French and English, to their lands, agreeing to share their values and their grand nature resources in the on-going evolution of the country; the fact that this was considered a sacred agreement was noted in the symbol of the Vatican. In modern times, the three figures reflect also the First Peoples, the original settlers and the new immigrants, as well as the First Peoples, the federal and provincial/territorial governments.

For William Commanda, the value of respect for the grand natural resources was of primary importance, as revealed when the Wampum Belts were brought out in public to the First Ministers Constitutional Conference in 1987 – he noted that the waters and lands were polluted everywhere, and he demanded that this be remedied; he himself worked unceasingly to advance respect for Mother Earth. He also remained deeply committed to the welcome his ancestors had offered the newcomers – and so till his death affirmed the *friendship* motif of the Belt – the holding of hands. Noting further the historical wars between the French and English, he affirmed his ancestors' peace-building responsibilities, as inscribed in the Belt. Chief of his community,

he welcomed the new Prime Minister Trudeau to Maniwaki in 1968. The Maniwaki Chamber of Commerce wanted to prepare a speech for the Chief – but of course, he preferred to go his independent way.

He welcomed the Prime Minister to “my Indian territory and to my country”. Pierre Trudeau graciously accepted the welcome. The legendary photo where the prime minister insisted on them sharing a plate of beans together resonated with the energy and promise of the *friendship* Wampum Belt. They engaged in a passionate political discussion, about justice, rights, immigrants, voting and taxes. Though William reported that his brother Louizon kicked him under the table, to quieten his fervor, he believed the Prime Minister understood the concerns and aspirations he expressed – undoubtedly, this exchange contributed to the overturning of the infamous 1969 Indian Affairs White Paper aimed at assimilating the people.

The third Belt, the Border Crossing Belt, created between 1793 and 1796, and used in the Jay Treaty negotiations, recognized the nomadic reality of the First Peoples, and their right to cross the border designed to separate Canada from the United States, in his



## .... a mini annotated biography

words, *without molestation*. It also signified the larger concept of borderlessness, animated, for example, in his support of the *Sun Bow Five Walk for Mother Earth*, from First Encounter Beach in Boston, Massachusetts, to Santa Barbara, California (that is, "The Canadian in America!"), and in his receipt of the Key to the City of Ottawa in 2006. This latter acknowledgement was notable at three symbolic levels – the man from Maniwaki receiving the key to the City of Ottawa, the man from Quebec being honoured in Ontario, and the Indian from the confines of

the reserve being celebrated in the National Capital Region, which holds the spirit of all of Canada.

With absolute surety, William Commanda was able to maintain his strong and independent Indigenous spirit and presence and also embrace all others throughout his life – and occupy the centre – through his great capacity for forthrightness and love.

### A FEW SPECIAL MOMENTS ON THE JOURNEY OF LIFE



### TEACHER



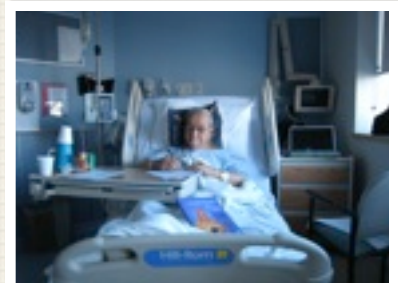
SACRED MESSAGES



PRAYER FOR THE WOMEN



HONORARY DOCTORATE



WRITING TO THE QUEEN

# Animation of the Circle of All Nations ....

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William Commanda was fully grounded in his Indigenous heritage and recognized and embraced the urgent need to awaken all people to the plight of Mother Earth, having observed the devastating impact of environmental abuses on her body at every turn from his childhood. He believed Indigenous Peoples had a key role to play in this process.

In the sixties, William Commanda commenced his work of outreach to *Indian* tribes across the continent – a first gathering was held in Eganville in 1967; over fifteen hundred people, largely Indigenous, participated the next massive gathering in Kitigan Zibi in 1969. Thus he was at the forefront of the historical gatherings of Indigenous peoples of North America fifty years ago. In the early seventies the flooding caused by damming the Gatineau upstream resulted in the destruction of the meeting grounds he had established at Bitobi Lake. Get-togethers of the Native people continued, but increasingly William saw the need for opening doors to non-natives.

His next phase of active work and outreach commenced in the eighties, and in 1987, with the first public presentation of the

Sacred Wampum Belts, his advocacy for Mother Earth and environmental stewardship took strong voice. Increasingly, he was invited to government conferences, and irrespective of the topic – education, justice, art – he reminded folk that the common denominator was Mother Earth; today, many have come to realize how prescient he was.

In fact, on the international stage, it was he who ignited the prayer for the global environment at the pre-Rio Earth Summit conference hosted by President Mitterand in France in 1991. In 1995, at the age of 82, he served as spiritual elder for the *Sun Bow Five Walk for Mother Earth*, raising awareness of environmental and Indigenous and peace-building issues; in the ensuing years, his annual *Circle of All Nations* Gatherings attracted thousands of people interested in this work from all over the world, singlehandedly putting Maniwaki on the global map. His tireless participation at all events he was invited to, both internationally (conferences in Europe: France, Switzerland, Denmark, Germany, in Japan, South Africa, South America and the Bahamas) and in the National Capital Region of Canada, gradually raised the profile of his efforts, and his over the last decade of his life, he was showered with many honours.

The most special of his awards was the Wolf Project Award, presented by a grass roots organization for his inspiring efforts to promote racial harmony – and he certainly engaged with a stunning range of humble and high profile people over his lifetime – the ones who animate his entirely unfunded *Circle of All Nations* with energy, creativity and hard work; Indigenous elders - Anishinabe, Hopi, Navajo, Mayan, Kogi, Ainu, Zulu; the Dalai Lama, President Nelson Mandela – the list is indeed long. He also served as Special Advisor with the Wolf Project.

The profound characteristic that most people will remember him by is his great humility. Despite the accolades, he remained open and respectful of all – he put a new energy into the concept of equality, and brought everyone to the leveling field of the other word used to describe his people, *Anishinabeg* – the good people. His commitment to communicating with everyone was reflected in his use of language. His first tongue was Algonquin – a complex language, he said, holding many more ideas than English and French. He would pass a feather across his lips, as a commitment to speaking only good words, speak in Algonquin, then he would translate himself into English and French, to reach everybody

## ... and Advocacy for Mother Earth

equally. Still, while he reached most people directly through the heart, his brilliant mind held more than most could comprehend.

Some of the people he reached were federal inmates at La Macaza Penitentiary. The National Film Board documentary by Lucie Quimet, *Encounter with an Algonquin Sage*, offers a glimpse into this part of his work. Here he expounds on the importance of forgiveness - *find a place in nature and think about what you may need to forgive yourself for – then you will understand the capacity of forgiveness and can learn to forgive others.* He himself had learned forgiveness and compassion after a profound spiritual experience while on his deathbed with cancer in 1961 – and then he launched his own campaign of reconciliation with those who had oppressed his people and abused his Mother Earth, firmly believing in the power of transformation. A deepening of that core message is located in the title of his other documentary, *Good Enough For Two!*

The most beloved part of his work to animate the *Circle of All Nations* was undoubtedly his annual spiritual Gathering, when he opened his home to thousands of friends for a weekend for relationship-building around the themes of social justice, racial harmony and peace

building, respect for Mother Earth and Indigenous wisdom; for healing and ceremony, individual and community development, art and creativity, socialization, drumming and dancing; and for animation of unity amidst tremendous diversity. Indeed people of all types of backgrounds found that if they immersed themselves in the experience, they were profoundly transformed and deepened, and they found that it was indeed possible to create a *Circle of All Nations, A Culture of Peace.*

# Transforming the Capital City

When I think about this part of his work, I am amazed to realize how incredibly William Commanda has directed shifts in the capital city's psyche over the past two decades. This warrants a much larger consideration, but for now, I note a few influential items. In 1987, William Commanda presented the messages of the Wampum Belts publicly for the first time at the constitutional debates in Ottawa – a preoccupation obviously still central to the Indigenous, historical, political and environmental priorities of this day.

He also made his presence felt by reviving the ancient energy of canoe building at the Source - Victoria Island - in the eighties; then he animated the place by cooking wild meats himself and bringing wood and ceremony to support homeless and lonely people in Ottawa in the nineties, (indeed anticipating the food bank needs that have presented so starkly since).

Despite historical divisions, he drew all Algonquins together to embrace his vision for a National Indigenous Healing and Peacebuilding Centre at the Sacred Chaudière Site. He began the spiritual reanimation of the island: he supported the 13

Moons Indigenous Elders Gathering in 1997, annual June 21<sup>st</sup> Pipe Ceremonies and Aboriginal Awareness Day celebrations, hosted Sustainability Relationship Workshops, Wolf Project Racial Harmony events, organized the 2006 Waterlife Gathering (inspiring major cleanup of the Ottawa River and inspiring Ottawa Riverkeepers and ongoing water stewardship), served as Honorary Chair of the effort to designate the Ottawa River a heritage river, hosted the Millennium Peace Gathering, sparking countless community peace initiatives, including the Ottawa Peace Festival and activities at the United Nations, hosted annual Paddle for Peace events to demonstrate the fundamental linkage of peace and environmental work.

He animated the fight to protest drilling for uranium, and to protect the American Eel, influenced the decision to stop the establishment of a megadump in Danford Lake, disturbance of the Loons migratory stopping point at Moira Lakes, challenged hydro redevelopment at the Chaudière Falls, underscoring its sacred heritage to the Algonquins, and he ignited the prayer and fight to protect the ancient landscape of the South March Highlands; he planted a Peace Tree at the City of Ottawa, and engaged with its Multifaith committee, supported

the National Capital Peace Council, and firmly entrenched *Aboriginal* in the City's consciousness; he awakened the federal government to Indigenous and Algonquin history and presence in the capital city, supporting and influencing Parks Canada, Canada Council for the Arts, and the National Capital Commission; he blessed the Human Rights Tribute with His Holiness The Dalai Lama, welcomed President Nelson Mandela to his country and presented him with an Eagle feather (and also supported many South African High Commission events); greeted Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth with a medal she had presented to him at the time of her coronation; and presented the Three Figure Wampum Belt message to Prince Charles. It is no wonder his spirit is now shining on the Peace Tower – it is the symbolic entrenchment of his prayer, *Ginawaydaganuc!* in the heart of the traditional lands of his ancestors.

# Vision for The Sacred Chaudière Site ....

**William Commanda Message**  
**February 22, 2010**

I present a report on the mandate, vision, plans and priorities for the development of the **Asinabka National Indigenous Centre** on Victoria Island, at the Sacred Chaudière Site in the heart of the National Capital Region, as it has developed in consultation with Algonquin, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals parties during the past thirteen years.

With the exception of one Elders' Gathering, and funds provided by Heritage Canada to the National Capital Commission to articulate the vision in a draft memorandum and advance the development of the architectural plans in 2004, this work has been entirely unfunded.

Ottawa sits on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Peoples, and this confluence of the Ottawa, Rideau and Gatineau Rivers has long served as the sacred meeting grounds of my ancestors. *Asinabka*, the sacred heartland, also a cultural landscape of national historic significance, includes the Chaudière Rapids, Chaudière Island and Victoria Island.

A multi-faceted vision has been developed to revitalize this special gathering place. Its core objective is to advance healing at three fundamental levels:

- Healing individual and collective relationships with Mother Earth;
- Healing, strengthening and unifying Indigenous Peoples; and
- Healing relationships with all others.

We propose the establishment of the **Asinabka National Indigenous Centre**. It is envisioned as a site to provide spiritual sanctuary and to

advance dialogue on healing and strengthening Indigenous Peoples; to showcase the culture and heritage of First Nations, Inuit and Metis Peoples in a world class setting of interest and relevance to local residents and national and international visitors; and to serve as a think tank for environmental stewardship and peace building.

Its manifestation will constitute a dynamic, dramatic, and inspirational statement to the world and ignite a prayer for *Sustainable Relationships* and hope into the future.

I am grateful to the spirits of my ancestors, and to the many people who have helped inspire, develop and advance this work over the years. I know this effort will move and serve many people in upcoming years.

## *GINAWAYDAGANUC*

- Over the past decade, Elder Commanda has developed and promoted the Indigenous vision for *Asinabka* tirelessly, entirely at his own expense
- It is a fully inclusive vision to revitalize and honour the true jewel in the heart of the Nation's crown, consistent with dreams of many others over the years
- It celebrates the ancient and recent history of the area, promotes peace, environmental stewardship, and Indigenous heritage

- The vision for *Asinabka* offers a unique, positive way to heal the pains of the past and shine a torch into the future
- It is a vision for healing relationships amongst and with Aboriginal Peoples, and with *Mother Earth*
- It is a vision for reclaiming, honouring and profiling the unique culture, heritage and values of

Aboriginal Peoples, recognizing their crucial importance to Canada's future

- This will benefit the entire nation, as Aboriginal Peoples remain the glue to bind a fragile democracy and culture together
- Such a gesture will also only strengthen and enhance Canada's reputation internationally
- This national centre will celebrate all Aboriginal Peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Metis from across the country, and its eco-tourism value is great
- It will serve as the think tank to reclaim, revitalize and protect Indigenous languages, culture and heritage, contribute to healing the scars of the past, and transforming the future
- It will showcase and celebrate the values, artistic and cultural heritage, music, pow wow dance, spirit and food of Aboriginal Peoples
- A revitalized and strong Aboriginal Peoples will share their culture and heritage with others in the spirit of peace-building
- The ancient values of *Respect for Mother Earth and All Our Relations* will be reinstated, and serve and support all Canadians
- This legacy of forgiveness and reconciliation will strengthen the nation's self-respect and honour and heal differences

**We will celebrate together a**

*A Circle of All Nations*  
*A Culture of Peace*

**Canada's Gift to the World**

# ..Asinabka Indigenous Centre Victoria Island

## VICTORIA ISLAND

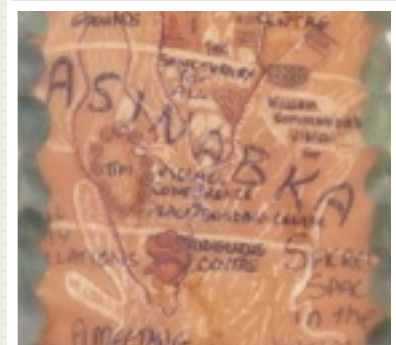
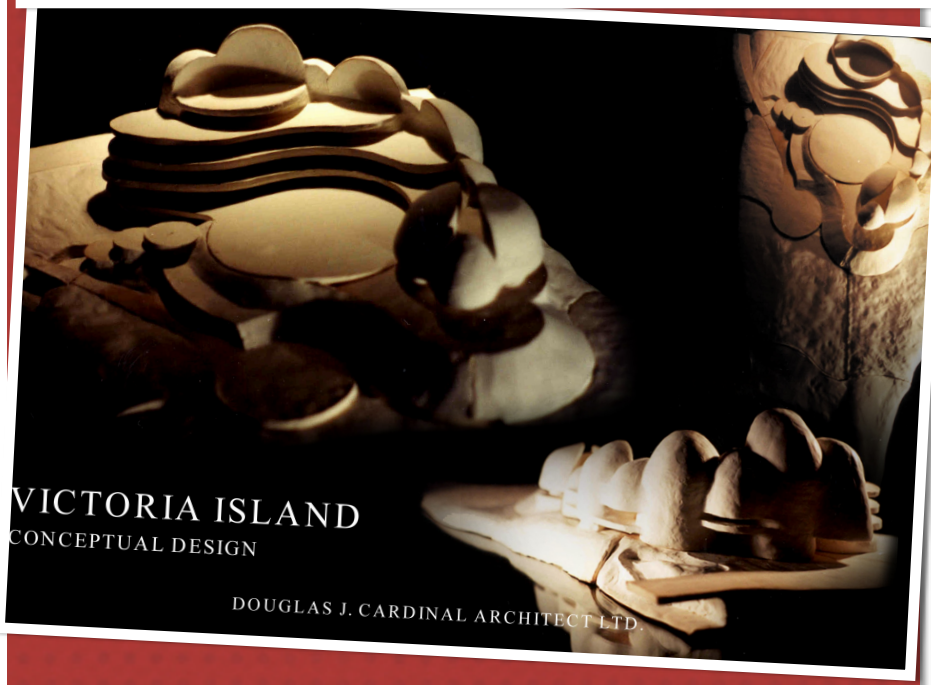
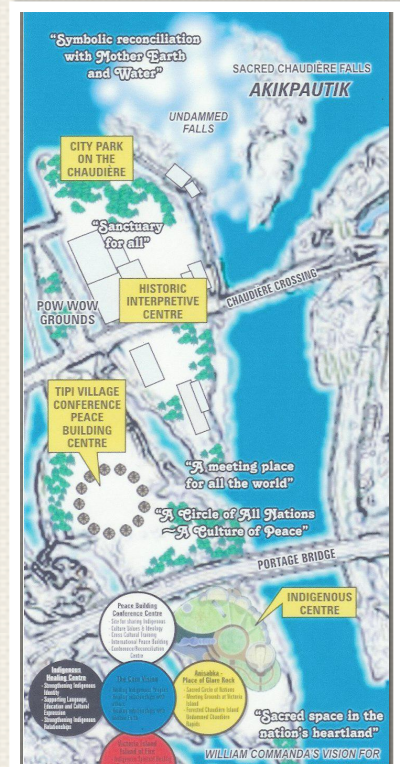
ELDER WILLIAM COMMANDA'S VISION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HEALING AND PEACE BUILDING CENTRE ON THE TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL MEETING GROUNDS OF THE ANICINABE PEOPLE, WITH THE LANDS TO BE HELD IN TRUST BY ALGONQUIN ELDERS

### THE CENTRAL TWO-FOLD VISION

CIRCLE OF NATIONS SPIRITUAL HEALING CENTRE TO UNIFY AND STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES	PEACE BUILDING CENTRE FOR ALL NATIONS, TO SHARE THE VALUES AND IDEOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
Spiritual/Ceremonial Centre	Peacebuilding 'Think Tank'
Cultural Revival - Arts, Crafts	Cultural Sharing
Language Centre	Racial Harmony
Elders' Gathering Place	Meeting Rooms
Healing Centre/Meeting Centre	Conference Centre
Archives/Library/Historic Research	Auditorium/Concert Hall
Medicines/Gardens/Greenhouse	Accommodations
Traditional Knowledge/Ideology	United Nations Meeting Space
Youth Developmental Centre	Restaurant/Gift Store
Children's Developmental Centre	Museum/Gallery
Research/Planning/Education	Children's/Youth Museum

info@universityofcalifornia.com

## AVI VISION



# Honouring a Very Special Man

William Commanda was recipient of countless awards and honours, and to describe those will take a good book! First there were the Wolf Project and Harmony, Canoe Builder, Martin Luther King Dreamkeeper and Bernard Assiniwi Awards. Scarcely had the book about him, *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*, been published when the University of Ottawa presented William Commanda with an Honorary Doctorate Degree. In 2011, he was presented with a doctorate honorifique by l'université du Québec-Outaouais, presented posthumously in November.

He was happy to know before his death that the two provinces on his homeland were beginning to acknowledge and respect the wisdom of his peoples. It was another proud moment when he became Lifetime Recipient of the 2010 National Aboriginal Achievement Award – and was serenaded by Buffy St. Marie, the world-renowned Indian activist musician. In January, 2010 Willis College announced the Dr. William Commanda Scholarship. Nominated for an Order of Canada, he was actually presented with Canada's penultimate honour, when he was appointed *Officer* of the Order of Canada. In this capacity, he completed a special cycle of that *nation to nation*

energetic connection when he met Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles – and then completing the cycle of his ancestral responsibilities from the time of the Royal Proclamation, took the long journey back - into the future.

## ... and his Timeless Legacy

Grandfather Commanda leaves a legacy yet to be animated – his vision for an Indigenous Healing and Peace-building Centre on Victoria Island at *Asinabka, The Place of Glare Rock*, the central heart of the country where the Gatineau joins the Rideau on the Ottawa. Consistent with his vision, it will be a place dedicated to the healing of our collective relationship with Mother Earth, the healing of Indigenous Peoples, and the healing of relationship with all others. There, as well as in his larger *Circle of All Nations* work, the central theme of his life will continue to inspire: in his constant prayer - *Ginawaydaganuc – We Are All Connected*.

Yes indeed, he will always be *encore vivant* !

**“WE MUST COME  
TOGETHER**

**WITH ONE HEART, ONE  
MIND,**

**ONE LOVE AND ONE  
DETERMINATION**

**TO CREATE**

**A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS**

**A CULTURE OF PEACE”**

**William Commanda PHD,  
OC  
Indigenous Elder**

Sharing with love and respect  
in honour of William Commanda's  
100th Birthday

Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo

[circleofallnations@sympatico.ca](mailto:circleofallnations@sympatico.ca)

# A William Commanda Mini Biography

## **A Mini-Biography of Dr. William Commanada, OC, Algonquin Elder Founder, A Circle of All Nations**

**11:11:1913 - 03:08:2011**

Algonquin Elder William Commanda from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Maniwaki, Quebec was born on November 11, 1913 under the bright light of the Morning Star, so his mother named him *Ojigkwanong*; thus the larger universe figured in his personal story from the very beginning. Today, he is seen by many as the symbol of light emerging from the darkness of the first World War, illuminating a path to a new world with his vision for a **Circle of All Nations, A Culture of Peace**.

He was a respected spokesman and spiritual leader at many conferences, participated in United Nations peace and spiritual vigils, and his work is acknowledged nationally and internationally. Fully trilingual, he shared his words and prayers in Algonquin, and translated them

into English and French. Central to Elder Commanda's teachings are the concepts of equality, balance, respect and responsibility for Mother Earth, for all life forms and for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds, and he worked ceaselessly, alone and entirely without an organization, staff, structure, formal or financial support to animate the **Circle of All Nations**.

A most senior representative of the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Watershed, he was the great, great grandson of the legendry *Pakinawatik*, the Algonquin chief who in the mid eighteen hundreds, led his people from their lands at Oka on the Lake of Two Mountains to their traditional hunting and trapping grounds at the confluence of the Desert and Gatineau. He was the carrier of three sacred **Wampum Belts of historic and spiritual importance**: the ancient Seven Fires Prophecy Belt about choice; the 1700s Welcoming Belt about sharing the grand natural resources and values of the original peoples with the newcomers; and the Jay Treaty Border Crossing Belt which recognized Turtle Island as a coherent entity. His ancestors inscribed their legends, prophecies and agreements in these carefully crafted items over many centuries. He is seen by many as the carrier of the Seven Fires Prophecy at the time of the

unfolding of its final message, and the messages of all these ancient artifacts are as deeply relevant today, as they were in the past. He was acclaimed chief of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg for over nineteen years, though he himself never participated in the elections. He also worked as a guide, trapper and woodsman for much of his life. He was a **birch bark canoe maker and craftsman** of international renown, and there is a special display dedicated to his work at the Canadian Canoe Museum of Peterborough. He built a canoe for Queen Margrethe of Denmark, and he helped Pierre Trudeau repair his famous birch bark canoe. At the age of 90, he shared his canoe making skills and philosophy in Valerie Pouyanne's documentary, **Good Enough for Two**.

He promoted **environmental stewardship** and respect for Mother Earth passionately for many decades. He conducted pipe ceremonies for the Pre-Rio Earth Summit Conference hosted by President Mitterand of France in 1991, and his prayers lie behind *Agenda 21*. He participated in the United Nations first Indigenous **Cry of the Earth** conference. He served as spiritual guide to the 1995 seven and a half month **Sunbow Five Walk** from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific, to raise awareness of the growing environmental crisis; received the



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such as the identification of the American Eel as a Species at Risk, the building of a mega dump on Danford Lake and the Navigable Waters Act.

He was the recipient of numerous awards and acknowledgements of his works and talent: the Wolf Project and Harmony Awards for his **efforts to foster racial harmony and peace building** through the creation of a **Circle of All Nations** (one very well received example of this commitment being the annual international gathering he hosted at his home during the first weekend of August – the 2001 Gathering is presented in the **Circle of All Nations** documentary); a Justice Award from the University of Ottawa and a Peace Award from Friends for Peace. He promoted restorative justice, forgiveness and his outreach to prisoners is captured in Lucie Ouimet's National Film Board Documentary, **Encounter with an Algonquin Seer**.

Recently, his efforts were acknowledged in Ottawa with two special recognitions: in 2005, with an **Honorary Doctorate Degree** from the University of Ottawa, shortly after his book, **Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout**, was published; and in 2006, with the **Key to the City of**

**Ottawa**, a singular honour for an Aboriginal person from a reserve in Quebec. This was presented on Victoria Island, where the tireless then ninety five year old animated his vision for a National Indigenous Centre, for the restoration and development of **the Sacred Chaudière Site** as a special national historic centre, and as a think tank for environmental stewardship and peace building of national and global relevance.

Two other books, **Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout Book Two**, and **Passionate Waters – Butterfly Kisses** include further reflections on his work and ideology.

In December 2008, he was appointed **Officer of the Order of Canada**, for *his leadership as an elder who has promoted intercultural understanding and has raised awareness of the traditions and legacies of Canada's Aboriginal people*. Elder Commanda was deeply honoured to witness this recognition of the relevance of Indigenous Wisdom to this country.

In November 2009, the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards Foundation announced his selection as 2010 Lifetime

Achievement Award recipient. In January, 2010 Willis College announced the Dr. William Commanda Scholarship! In November 2011, he was presented with a doctorate honorifique by l'université du Québec - Outaouais posthumously.



A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS

A CULTURE OF PEACE



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