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Children Have Power

Shannen's Dream Club at PETES, the First Nations Youth Activism Group and Lisa Howell

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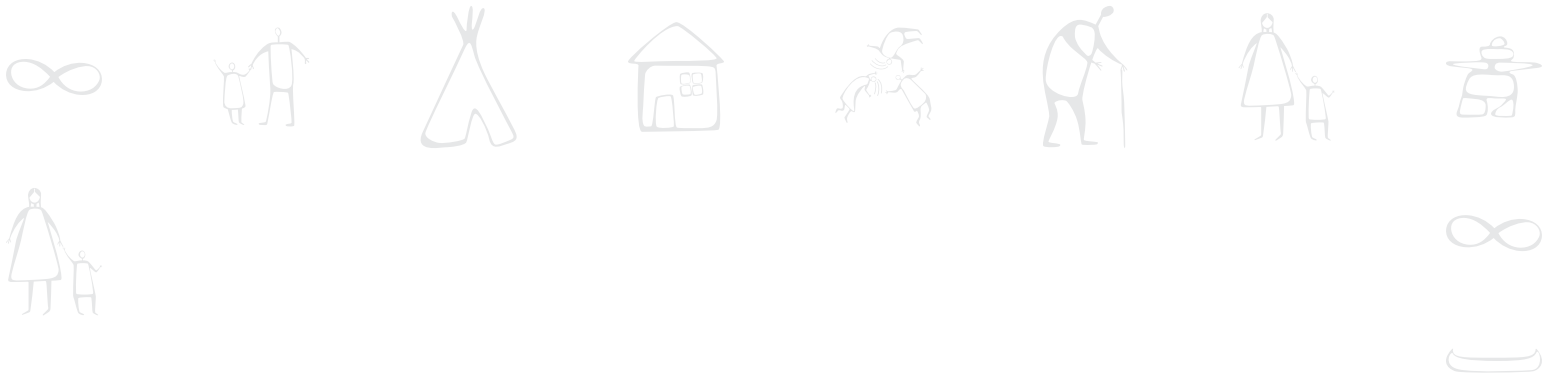
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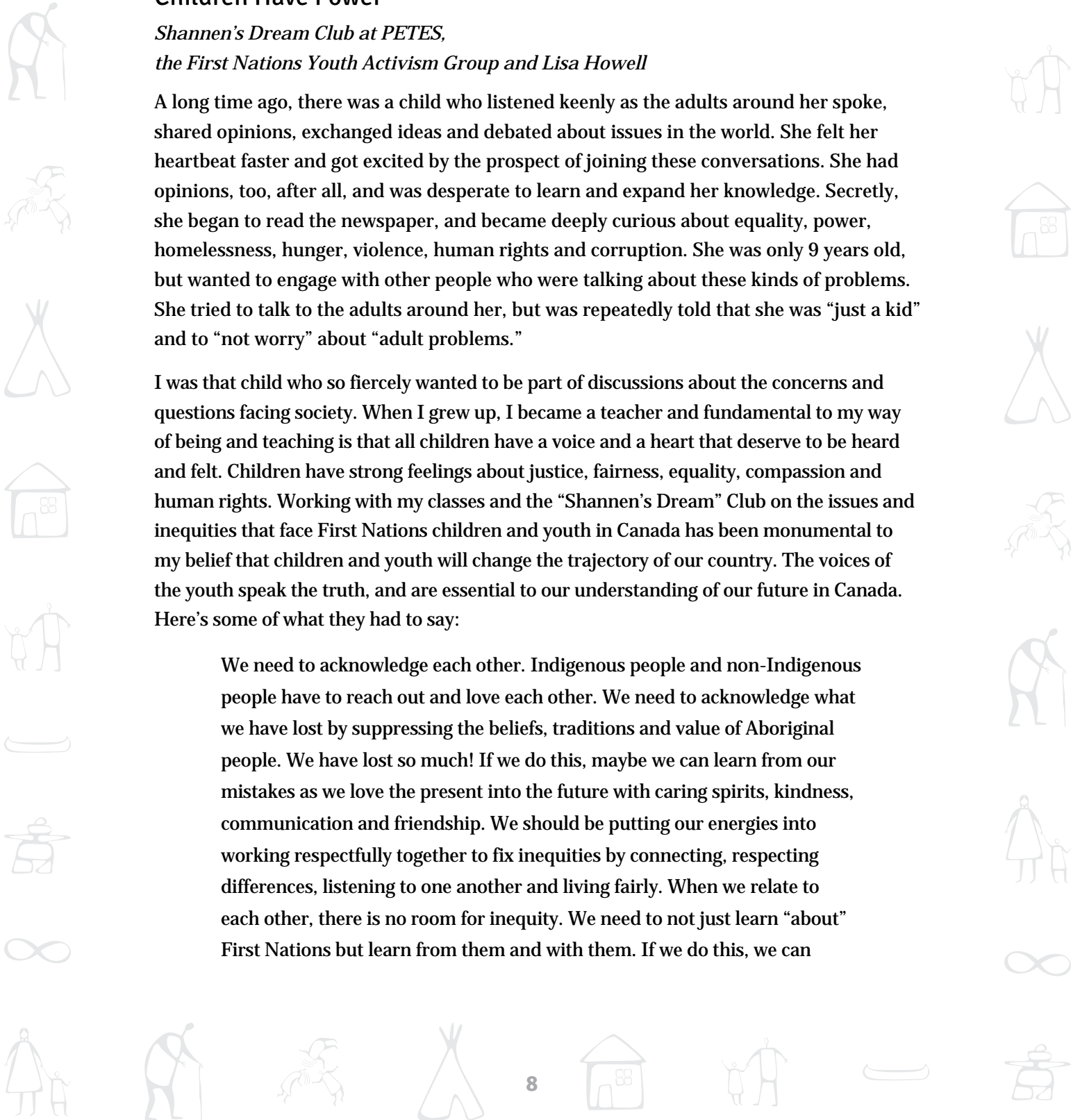
Children Have Power

*Shannen's Dream Club at PETES,
the First Nations Youth Activism Group and Lisa Howell*

A long time ago, there was a child who listened keenly as the adults around her spoke, shared opinions, exchanged ideas and debated about issues in the world. She felt her heartbeat faster and got excited by the prospect of joining these conversations. She had opinions, too, after all, and was desperate to learn and expand her knowledge. Secretly, she began to read the newspaper, and became deeply curious about equality, power, homelessness, hunger, violence, human rights and corruption. She was only 9 years old, but wanted to engage with other people who were talking about these kinds of problems. She tried to talk to the adults around her, but was repeatedly told that she was “just a kid” and to “not worry” about “adult problems.”

I was that child who so fiercely wanted to be part of discussions about the concerns and questions facing society. When I grew up, I became a teacher and fundamental to my way of being and teaching is that all children have a voice and a heart that deserve to be heard and felt. Children have strong feelings about justice, fairness, equality, compassion and human rights. Working with my classes and the “Shannen’s Dream” Club on the issues and inequities that face First Nations children and youth in Canada has been monumental to my belief that children and youth will change the trajectory of our country. The voices of the youth speak the truth, and are essential to our understanding of our future in Canada. Here’s some of what they had to say:

We need to acknowledge each other. Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people have to reach out and love each other. We need to acknowledge what we have lost by suppressing the beliefs, traditions and value of Aboriginal people. We have lost so much! If we do this, maybe we can learn from our mistakes as we love the present into the future with caring spirits, kindness, communication and friendship. We should be putting our energies into working respectfully together to fix inequities by connecting, respecting differences, listening to one another and living fairly. When we relate to each other, there is no room for inequity. We need to not just learn “about” First Nations but learn from them and with them. If we do this, we can



restore relationships and fix the harm that is happening to so many First Nations youth. How can we restore such a damaged past? We think we can by protecting equality, by being generous, by honouring treaties, by learning traditions, by knowing what land we live on. We definitely need to end inequities in education and child welfare NOW. We cannot do anything, though, if we do not tell the truth. So often adults lie to cover up things they are embarrassed about or don't want to have to explain. Kids see things clearly if they are given the opportunities to. Telling the truth is to see clearly and being courageous enough to speak it. It's about living your life to make a difference. Making a difference means taking a stand. If we all stand together, we'll stand strong and proud as friends. So speak up, and use your voice. Get involved, learn, share, have opinions and live by listening to your heart and your head.

The children and youth who wrote and illustrated the entries in this journal are not secretly reading the newspaper as I once was. They are strong leaders and visionaries who understand that caring is not enough. You must act. You must speak, sing and take a stand for a better Canada for us all. Join us!