Hello, my name is Wendy Wright, and I’m the Director of the Smithers Public Library which is on the unceded territory of the Gidimt’en Clan of the Witsuwit’en Nation.

Our town is approximately 10% Indigenous but when we include the nearby Witsuwit’en community of Witset that number is closer to 20%. Witset falls within Hazelton’s catchment area but since Smithers is a regional service hub many Witset residents are more likely to visit our library, so we have an arrangement with Hazelton where we are able to register Witset residents for a Hazelton library card on the spot which they can then use in Smithers as part of the Northwest Library Federation.

Our panel has discussed some common aspects of serving Indigenous families & communities & has pooled our knowledge. Each of us will now speak to a different area of this topic.

I’m going to talk about a policy and a position that the Smithers Library created to increase relevancy and engagement.

Very few Indigenous children enroll in our SRC program, and several years ago we discovered that there had never been an Indigenous staff member at our library. To correct this historical imbalance and better
reflect the community we serve, the Board adopted an Employment Equity Policy which states that if there are multiple qualified candidates for a position, Indigenous candidates may be shown preference.

We also created a second Summer Reading Club position specifically for an Indigenous student. Their duties are the same as the first student who they work with to plan and deliver the program, but with an added focus on enriching it with elements of Indigenous culture and promoting it to Indigenous families. The job description states that knowledge of, and connection to, the local Indigenous community will be considered a strong asset.

In addition to reading Indigenous stories, past examples of activities involving this position include bringing in (see slides):

- A traditional Gixsan-Witsuwit’en storyteller
- A community war canoe project
- Indigenous artifacts
- A button blanket craft that included learning the names of the local nation and clans
- And our National Indigenous Peoples Day tent, where long line-ups of Indigenous children preferred to wait to have their faces painted by the Indigenous SRC student instead of other staff.

One student brought her mother in to teach the staff Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes in Witsuwit’en, which we in turn taught to the children at our annual Campfire Cookout & Singalong.
The most notable success arising from this policy and position is that because we delivered copies to the Office of the Witsuwit’en and band council, Friendship Centre, WorkBC & local anti-racism group, we now get lots of Indigenous applicants for all library positions. Last year both of our SRC students were Indigenous because they were the most promising candidates out of the dozens of applications we received, and we have hired 5 Indigenous staff members in the past four years.

There have been Challenges as well. Whether or not more Indigenous children enroll depends upon the student’s connections in that community. Only one student has increased Indigenous enrollment, and when they left early due to health issues, those families left too. Not all students have cultural knowledge to share, while others have lots but cannot adapt it to the age level of the kids or to a library program.

The unexpected outcome of this position is that everyone in our SRC is introduced to Indigenous culture, which advances reconciliation in our community.