



A home away from home for Indigenous environmental justice

BY DEBORAH MCGREGOR

Deborah McGregor (Ndizhnizkaaz), from Whitefish River First Nation (Wiigwaakingaa n'doonjibaa), has been teaching for three decades in areas relating to Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous environmental governance, and Indigenous research methodologies. She has lived in Toronto for four decades with her husband and two sons, all the while also living and working in her community. Her life's work is to identify pathways for self-determined Indigenous futures and planetary well-being.

I am Anishinaabe from Whitefish River First Nation, part of Robinson–Huron Treaty territory. My research has for decades been focused on Indigenous knowledge systems in the context of Indigenous environmental governance, water security, and environmental and climate justice. I joined York University in 2015 as Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Indigenous Environmental Justice (IEJ) and was immediately drawn into various research circles across campus. One of the unending arrays of acronyms I encountered time and time again was “ORU.” What was an ORU? I had no idea. Finally, I asked and was told that it meant “organized research unit.”

I was no further ahead.

Not to be deterred, however, I bumbled my way through York's website with “ORU” on my fingertips. I scoured the list of ORUs in search of any that might support an Indigenous-led, community-based research program. Bingo! I found the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and soon joined as a faculty associate. I was impressed by the fact that the Robarts Centre supported Indigenous-focused research and attracted diverse faculty interested in Indigeneity. I shared research interests on Indigenous governance with then director Gabrielle Slowey and was introduced to the amazing Laura Taman, the Centre's coordinator. I was also honoured to be invited to deliver the keynote address at the 4th Annual Robarts Lecture in Canadian Studies as part of the Annual Robarts Graduate Student Conference in 2016.

Robarts played host to the thriving History of Indigenous Peoples (HIP) network and supported the award-winning Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute (MISHI) (see <https://www.huronresearch.ca/history/2020/03/11/manitoulin-island-summer-historical-institute/>).

I was introduced to inspiring colleagues through Robarts, particularly Professor Carolyn Podruchny, who has made great efforts to include Indigeneity at York University. During my initial years at York, Robarts provided me with a much-needed research home and, quite frankly, oriented me to the research culture at York University. What I value (and continue to value) most is the ongoing excellence in research leadership, expertise, and experience offered at Robarts, now led by Professor Jean Michel Montsion. Robarts offered me not only a community of scholars, an intellectual forum through which to collaborate and share ideas, but also a physical space in which to house my research projects and my students. As a CRC, I had a number of projects on the go, but no central place with the capacity to support multiple projects and initiatives—that is, until I found Robarts.

Upon launching my CRC research program, I coordinated the first-ever Indigenous environmental justice symposium in Canada in 2016, which also served as the foundation for my SSHRC-funded *Indigenous Environmental (In)Justice: Theory and Practice* project (see <https://www.yorku.ca/research/project/iej/iej-project/>).

Robarts has been instrumental in supporting and assisting me in managing different research initiatives, including my current project, *Indigenous Climate Change Futures: Envisioning Well-Being for the Earth*. In 2018, Robarts held my *Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Reconciliation and Environmental Governance* connections grant, representing a collaboration with Indigenous organizations and communities. Indigenous community collaborations require thoughtful and respectful consideration, and I was much relieved that Robarts's coordinator extraordinaire, Laura, was able to assist me with the successful conduct and administration of this grant. The outputs from this grant have resulted in enhanced First Nation–York University research collaborations and peer-reviewed publications. This project supported a number of early career researchers and community-based scientists with their early aspirations (see McGregor et al., 2023).

As a faculty associate, CRC, and research leader at York University, I was expected to deliver on an array of research activities while also offering training opportunities for students. With the Robarts Centre as our venue, students were engaged in organizing numerous events, including IEJ speaker series and panel discussions, as well as the recording of podcasts. The IEJ project established a knowledge network via a website and social media, with the support of Robarts communication channels. Robarts has been an instrumental part of mobilizing knowledge from a number of the research projects I have initiated.

Throughout my involvement with the Centre, I have greatly appreciated how Indigeneity has been embraced as an essential aspect of Canadian Studies. The Robarts Centre has been a wonderful facilitator of Indigenous community engagement research. The Indigenous research landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade, with meaningful engagement rapidly becoming the expected norm. Robarts has been instrumental in enabling such research in “good ways.” The Centre's decades of experience with exceptional scholars who came before me, with Drs. Anna Hudson and Carolyn Podruchny leading the way, definitely eased my transition into working with Robarts!

My experience at Robarts inspired my decision to accept the position of inaugural director of the newly established Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Languages (CIKL). Robarts enabled me to understand what an ORU is capable of in terms of serving its constituents. My research commitments and priorities have always been aimed at benefiting Indigenous communities through scholarship and service. Robarts has been absolutely instrumental in helping me achieve this vision.

In all honesty, my work would never have achieved the impact it has done had it not been for the support of Robarts's directors and (once again!) the incomparable Laura Taman. As my second CRC term comes to a close, the door to other career opportunities has opened. My appointment as Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Planetary Well-Being, at the University of Calgary, will generate new opportunities for unique partnerships. I neither wish nor intend to say farewell to Robarts as I take on this new challenge; my desire instead is to find new ways to continue the productive collaborations I have begun here. Indeed, my experience with the Robarts Centre now serves as part of my vision going forward: one of my goals is to establish a research centre, much like Robarts, at the University of Calgary. Can't wait! ■

REFERENCE

McGregor, D., Latulippe, N., Whitlow, R., Gansworth, K. L., McGregor, L., & Allen, S. (2023). Towards meaningful research and engagement: Indigenous knowledge systems and Great Lakes governance. *Journal of Great Lakes Research*, 49(Supp. 1), S22–S31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jglr.2023.02.009>