

Weaving Indigenous knowledges into care: the Sweetgrass Method



Pat Dudgeon

On the 13th of July, we welcomed some deadly Indigenous psychologists, Dr Mark Standing Eagle Baez and Dr C. Allison Baez, to the University of Western Australia (UWA). They had travelled from their home, the Táp Pílam Coahuiltecan Nation (in Texas, USA) to meet with our group of researchers, community members, Elders, and more to share Indigenous knowledges from 'across the pond'.

Dr Mark Baez is a citizen of the Coahuiltecan Tribe and has Mohawk, Pawnee, and Mexican heritage. He is a psychologist, president of the Society of Indian Psychologists, and associate professor of Clinical and Counselling Psychology.

Dr Allison Baez is a training and technical coordinator with Tribal Tech, LLC, and a proud member of the Táp Pílam Coahuiltecan Nation. Her research centres on Native populations, emphasising the integration of best practices through Indigenous cultural lenses.

We were also delighted to welcome Dr Gayle Morse, a Mohawk psychologist and professor at Russell Sage College, who joined us during her visit to Australia. Her presence provided another valuable opportunity to strengthen connections and exchange knowledge with Indigenous psychology colleagues from across the world.

Their visit commenced with a grounding Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony at the UWA School of Indigenous Studies, delivered by Noongar Elder, Auntj Tjalaminu Mia (Auntj TJ), Auntj Alta Winmar and Noongar and Yamatji man, Michael Spratt. Auntj TJ cleansed the spirits of all guests, offering safe passage and good Wirrin (spirit) while walking on Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar. To end the ceremony, Auntj TJ and Michael Spratt led guests through a dance on the sand painting of the Wagyl (the Rainbow Serpent).

Following the Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony, guests and our visiting scholars were led to their venue for the Community Yarn,



Visiting Indigenous scholars with the Boorloo trip hosts. Left to right: Dr Mark Baez, professor Troy Visser, Dr Allison Baez, professor Pat Dudgeon and Dr Gayle Morse. Picture: Darius Toh.



Dr Allison Baez and Dr Mark Baez presenting on the Sweetgrass Method. Picture: Darius Toh.

the Indian Ocean Marine Research Centre Auditorium. The yarn was led by Yamatji man, Michael Mitchell. It provided a space for Dr Mark Baez to share more about himself and his work with community members and staff, particularly in the development of the Sweetgrass Method. This method is a culturally grounded framework which weaves Western evidence-based practices with Indigenous practice-based knowledges.

Community members were invited to ask questions, share their stories and yarn about what works in community to improve social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) for Indigenous peoples. It was a safe and warm environment, built from shared understandings and a willingness to listen deeply to each other and their experiences. In this space, we connected, listened, and learned from each other, an experience which many community members expressed their thanks for.

On the following day, D Mark

Baez and Dr Allison Baez delivered a public lecture at the University Club of Western Australia on the Sweetgrass Method. The event was opened by MC, Noongar woman Belle Selkirk, and opening addresses came from our co-hosting organisations leads, Shannon McNear and Victoria Hovane, from the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA), and professor Troy Visser, from the UWA School of Psychological Sciences.

Dr Mark Baez commenced this joint lecture with a song and drumming, intended for calming and medicine, and to bless guests in the audience.

"We're here to share medicine. As we used to gather back in the day... we would come together and share medicine and what works," Dr Baez shared with the guests. "This is medicine, so we want to share that with each of you."

Dr Allison Baez shared with the audience the purpose of their work and for being in Boorloo.

"To share knowledge with one another and to have that

exchange with you all here in this community," she said.

"This [work] emphasises integration. Not replacement of Indigenous knowledge with clinical practice, but an actual blending, or as Mark calls it, the 'weaving' of both."

Throughout their presentation, Dr Mark Baez and Dr Allison Baez drew on community-based experience and research, exploring how relationality, spirituality, and cultural identity can ethically and effectively be incorporated into mental health assessment, prevention and intervention.

They centred their presentation on Indigenous social determinants of health, engagement in care, and practical strategies for clinicians working alongside Indigenous communities in respectful and collaborative ways.

Audience members were given time at the end of the lecture to ask questions and receive answers from our international guests. Students in the audience took the opportunity to ask essential

questions, like 'how do we build trust?' and 'how would you adapt the Sweetgrass Method to individuals?'.

This global collaboration and exchange of knowledges was not just powerful and beneficial for our community members, staff and up-and-coming psychologists, it was essential. It was inspiring and heartwarming to see these connections forge and listen intently to the Indigenous wisdom and knowledges being shared from Indigenous communities across the globe.

This event was hosted by the Boorn Centre and School of Psychological Science at UWA, AIPA and the ARC Centre for Indigenous Futures. There will be future work planned with Dr Mark Baez, Dr Allison Baez and Dr Gayle Morse.

We look forward to more collaborations and opportunities to share our wisdom, knowledges, histories and solutions in the near future.

Professor Pat Dudgeon AM is a Bardi woman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She is Australia's first Aboriginal psychologist, Director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP) at the University of Western Australia.

● This article is part of a series of *Koori Mail* columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the CBPATISIP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide-prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.