“For as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the waters flow”

—Treaty 1 signed on August 3, 1871, between Queen Victoria and the Anishinabek and Nehiyaw Nations of Southern Manitoba.

From where she stands, the sun is shining, the grass is growing and the river is certainly flowing. The poetic expression, as it is written in the Numbered Treaties, very much resonates the view from the window.

MAMAWIPAWIN: 
DAWN OF A NEW ERA

BY MELNI GHATTORA
IDENTIFYING THE NEED

“Youth today are not taught in reserve schools, in community schools, about what Indigenous forms of government were. So we have youth today who are walking around and saying that this Indian Act is a piece of [expletive], but many do not know what an alternative is,” says Kiera Ladner. “And so it’s about trying to create knowledge of that opportunity, knowledge of that option, and knowledge of the traditional forms.”

Ladner, a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Politics and Governance and associate professor in the Faculty of Arts, is about to embark on a new chapter at the University of Manitoba; the next chapter in her journey to understanding ways for Canadians and Indigenous Peoples to live in a mutually supported manner.

In 2009, the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and the Manitoba Research and Innovation Fund (MRIF) announced funding for the development of the Indigenous Governance and Community Based Research Space, a new and innovative research infrastructure at the University of Manitoba.

This was exciting news for Ladner. “To be able to enhance research space at the university and to be able to do things that we really don’t have the chance at doing right now is phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal and it’s going to mean so much to my research agenda that I can’t wait. I sit on pins and needles and ask when can I move in? When can we get this up and running?” she says.

Construction on Mamawipawin (Cree for gathering space) is nearing completion with an anticipated soft opening in mid-June. The research facility will occupy the fourth floor, Ibsister Building, at the University of Manitoba.

OPENING DOORS

The three part research lab is made up of a circular multifunctional research space, a training room, which will house the standing lab, and a portable lab for off-site research. The strategically thought out design reflects critical Indigenous teachings about community, and individuality.

“The circular space represents life and Indigenous understandings of the world. Everything happens in a circle; life is not linear, society is not linear, knowledge is not linear, and it has no beginning and no end,” explains Ladner.

What really sets this lab apart, quite possibly making it the only one of its kind in Canada, is how the finished space will be used. The lab is architecturally equipped with a dedicated ventilation system to support research protocols like smudging ceremonies and other Aboriginal traditions. It will also house state-of-the-art computer equipment and software, as well as the latest in audio visual technology.

“There is nothing like this in Manitoba or at other universities in Canada,” says Ladner. “I’ve envisioned a way to create an infrastructure to support a different end, hopefully to create a model for other researchers. I can’t wait to see what we can do; it’s a wait and see approach.”

MOBILIZING KNOWLEDGE

Ladner and her team will not only have the ability to bring elders into a culturally friendly and culturally relevant environment; they also have the chance to bring members of remote communities into the space through live video conferencing.

User-friendly technology such as Skype allows her to stay connected with research associates in New Zealand and other parts of the world. This real-time research will allow her to create an exchange between scholars at the University of Manitoba and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, where she has already established collaborative relationships. The two groups will meet to discuss various issues; this year they will discuss official languages and the recognition of Indigenous languages in Manitoba.

At the outset, these groups will work alongside one another at an upcoming meeting slated for late August. It will mark the official grand opening of Mamawipawin. By early next year, the teams will move towards virtual collaboration.
Ladner aims to provide a lens into knowledge that Canadians simply do not know. "I teach a course in Indigenous governance and most years I have fifteen to twenty people walk in and most of them do not know anything. Maybe they have a range of knowledge that is based mostly on stereotypes and wrongful knowledge," she says. "When you go into a class and say 'What is a treaty?' And you get responses like 'Well Indians get all these things,' you kind of go 'Ouch, what are we missing?'"

For Ladner, it’s about providing that knowledge base by establishing a community website, or a web interface, or through the use of social networking tools; Ladner is prepared to do whatever she can to get the message out to others. "Mamawipawin will also try and reach those who are not typically reading academic journals by putting up material to answer questions like 'What is a treaty?' or 'What were residential schools?'; 'What is Aboriginal governance?'" she explains.

According to Ladner, many times educators in the public school system are teaching subject materials that aren’t necessarily correct. What she is hoping to find out is how that problem is going to be fixed. "It’s not going to be fixed overnight. Using the vehicles that I have been provided by this new infrastructure, the research that will be done in the research space, and through the Canada Research Chair, will enable me to create research materials that can be used. These can hopefully help address some of the misinformation or some of the lack of information, both in Canadian society and Indigenous communities," says Ladner.

**BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME**

The University of Manitoba does not offer a PhD program in Political Studies. Students who have completed their Masters program, here at the university, and are looking to work towards a PhD move on to other institutions around the world. Mamawipawin has already proven itself to lend a hand in garnering a positive response from one PhD student. Damien Lee, who was courted by several universities to complete his PhD in native studies, confirmed he will be heading to the University of Manitoba this coming fall.

"The key issue is offering a safe space for Indigenous students to learn that is free of having to constantly provide background on ‘the Indigenous situation in Canada’ to non-Indigenous students," says Lee, currently a graduate student at the University of Victoria.

"The problem is, there might be other academic programs that are dedicated to Indigenous studies but in most cases those spaces become occupied by non-Indigenous students wanting to learn about Indigenous issues, resulting in space being taken away from Indigenous students who are interested in resisting colonialism. Having a space for Indigenous students all to themselves is very important to building a culture of resistance."

Lee, who was adopted into his Anishinabek community in northern Ontario at the age of one, feels that a dedicated research lab is important to his research, "for me personally it’s going to be key because it’s what I’m looking for, to put it simply. To have a space with other students who are coming from a reserve or urban Aboriginal context, to be able to hit the ground running and not have
to worry whether that space is safe to discuss real issues and solutions.”

While a space like Mamawipawin is very attractive when making an important life decision, Lee admits that the opportunity to work alongside Ladner and Peter Kulchyski, a professor in the native studies department, was the deal maker in deciding where he would complete his PhD. That said, notes Lee, “Mamawipawin is a very nice incentive for doing my research at the University of Manitoba.”

In total, there will be two PhD and four Masters students working alongside Ladner.

FUTURE FORECAST
Ladner plans to launch a youth pilot project that will include up to ten University of Manitoba students from various disciplines. From there she will involve high school students from across the province and within the next five years, hopes to draw students from across the country.

“The idea is to expand from university students to non-university students and then to expand on a national basis. We plan to bring high school students to the university during summer months to engage in activities surrounding Aboriginal governance,” explains Ladner.

These students will have full access to all of the equipment within the research facility.

“What I urge these students to do, especially the ones that are coming together on the governance project, is to engage in research and to think about research in a diversified way. The end result of our community-based research on governance [this youth project] need not be a research paper. It might be working with kids in a community to create a photographic essay or a video documenting an elder’s story on governance. It could be creating a website for a community, the sky is the limit.”

While the future of Mamawipawin and the research that will come out of the facility is unknown, there is one thing that Ladner wants to achieve, “I hope that my research project has touched the lives of Aboriginal youth in our province, that it has more people thinking about Aboriginal governance in communities and rebuilding communities. It’s the dawn of a new era and it’s going to be fun.”