Strong Path: Jesse Thistle shares his story with Canada's law firm

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When Jesse Thistle received his traditional name, he was hoping for something cool like Majestic Eagle or Powerful Bear. Instead, the Elders gave him the Cree name *Maskeweskinaw*. "It means Strong Path," Jesse told almost 1400 BLG clients and firm members at a special event to mark National Indigenous Peoples Day. "Hopefully my story will shed some light on why I earned this name."

A Métis-Cree born in Northern Saskatchewan, Jesse is an award-winning academic and bestselling author. He also knows what it's like to live in a car, go to jail just to receive healthcare and teach yourself to read in your 30s. "I'm not your regular scholar," Jesse said. "Most guys like me are dead, in jail or locked away in some mental institution far, far away."

Jesse's story is about intergenerational trauma, a form of PTSD that's passed down through families — Indigenous ones more than others in Canada — and often shows itself in addictions, abuse, misogyny, mental illness, criminality, transience and homelessness.

But Jesse's story is also about the power of understanding, love and forgiveness.

Jesse's mother left when he was three. Shortly after, his father lost Jesse and his two brothers to the Children's Aid Society and the boys were sent to Brampton to be raised by Jesse's troubled paternal grandparents.

By age 15, Jesse was getting drunk and high at raves. At 17, he dropped out of high school. His "homeless career" began at age 21. A decade later he was a professional criminal with an insatiable crack addiction and a police file that was three-and-a-half inches thick.

Jesse says he was failed by "the machine." Without health insurance, he couldn't get into rehab. Without ID, he couldn't access money with dignity. Without a health card, he couldn't go to a walk-in clinic. Mental health organizations couldn't help him — he wasn't suffering from mental illness, after all, it was the drugs. Shelters and detox centres pressured him to leave after only a few days, sending him back to the streets with no bus tickets, food, healthcare or place to live.

Ironically, he found freedom in jail.

Jail meant clean clothes, a warm bed, good food, doctors, dentists and distance education. At age 32, weighing 132 pounds, Jesse was offered a court-mandated stay at an Ottawa rehab centre. If he completed his year, it would count as his jail time. If he didn't, he'd return to jail for an extended stay. "They were playing hard ball," Jesse admitted. "I felt like the system cared about me for once."

In rehab, Jesse took his sobriety one minute at a time, replacing his cravings with long distance running and 30 cups of coffee a day. He relearned how to brush his teeth, gained 100 pounds, earned his high school diploma and finished at the top of his class in the Carleton University bridging program. Along the way, he found the courage to dream and have hope again.

Three years post-rehab, with the love and support of his girlfriend (now wife) Lucie, Jesse was at York University, looking for answers to who he was, where he came from and why his family and the machine had failed him. "I needed forgiveness of them, myself and society," Jesse acknowledged. "I knew if I didn't get it, I'd be back on the streets using one day."

At York, Jesse took the AA principles he'd learned in rehab and fearlessly applied them to his family's 200-year history of unresolved trauma.

He learned that his mother's people were the rebel Métis fighters who challenged Canadian imperial expansion and were crushed in the 1869 Red River Resistance and 1885 Northwest Rebellion. "Canada stole lands, denied rights and banished us to poverty for well over a century," Jesse said. "We became squatters on land no one wanted. This is the world I was born into."

His paternal grandfather's people were the Highland Scots who had been cleared from their lands and shipped to Cape Breton Island by the British in the 19th century to make way for industrial sheep farming. His paternal grandmother's Algonquin side had been traumatized by residential schools. "Neither of my grandparents were equipped to raise children. The odds of history were stacked against them."

For the first time in his life, Jesse saw none of it was their fault. "I have come to understand and forgive history, my mom, my dad and myself," Jesse said. "It's hard-ass work. But intergenerational trauma just gets worse over time. Someone, eventually, is going to have to do that work."

Jesse's personal journey led him to draft a new definition of Indigenous homelessness that has revolutionized the way activists, governments and academics think about its causes. "It's not just about being houseless," Jesse said. "It's about being disconnected, through colonization, from 'all my relations': our land, kin, stories and songs."

"My strong path mended my heart through understanding," Jesse concluded. "We're just broken-hearted people hurt by life. We all deserve a second chance. We all deserve to be loved."

As Canada's law firm, BLG commits to not only honour the cultures and contributions of Indigenous peoples, but to confront difficult truths about the country's shameful colonial

legacy. The firm expects all members to complete The Path: Your Journey Through Indigenous Canada, a four-hour Indigenous-developed course offered by the Canadian Bar Association. We're also grateful for the opportunity to strengthen relationships with First Nation, Inuit and Métis governments, nations and organizations through our national Indigenous Law practice, led by partners of Indigenous descent.

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