When the University of Victoria’s Jessica Ball began working on the Indigenous Fathers Project, she asked aboriginal dads what they wanted to see. The answer? Other dads.

“They said, ‘We need to see more positive images of aboriginal fathers and we need to hear stories from actual aboriginal fathers who have been able to make it as dads,’ says Ball, a professor in UVic’s school of child and youth care and head of the project.

Fatherhood: Indigenous Men’s Journeys offers just that. The DVD, which launches this week, looks at six different first nations dads around B.C. and their takes on fatherhood through interviews and footage of the dads interacting with their children in their own environment. The men, who range from ages 27 to 60 and live both on and off reserve, speak openly about everything from trauma in their past to the joys of being a father.

“When I went to do my healing, I had to deal with all the effects of secondary trauma from residential school and colonialism. It’s clear that it’s not just residential school people who are affected, it’s all of their offspring and succeeding generations that are affected,” says Ron George, one of the fathers interviewed on the DVD. “I brought up my two older daughters the very same way I was taught and treated by my mother and other adults around me who had the residential school experience and colonialism, the racism.” George became involved with the Indigenous Fathers Project, a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Father Involvement Video Fund to make it happen. Ball was overwhelmed by the response she got from the indigenous community.

“There was no shortage of guys who wanted to be in it, which is very unusual for aboriginal research,” she says. “After just that first little announcement that there was going to be a study in Canada, I was inundated with phone calls. Guys were e-mailing me and sending me letters and journals and things they’d written for community newsletters saying, ‘I’m a dad and here’s my issue’.” At 27, Mike Glendale is the youngest father featured on the DVD. He says he wanted to participate in the project in order to address some of the stereotypes that exist about first nations dads. “I love fatherhood, and there are a lot of stereotypes that kind of go along with aboriginal fathers. A lot of the times it’s true, but it’s not the whole story so I thought being involved would be an important thing,” he says. “Plus I just love being a dad. Probably just the biggest reason for me was that somebody wanted to come and shoot what goes on in the house.”

Glendale, who is a television producer and host of A Channel’s The New Canoe, says he has structured his life and career around being with his two children.

“Everything I do and how I plan my career is central to that idea that I’m a father first and everything else comes second.”

All six of the men in Fatherhood share intimate details about their lives, from a history of substance abuse to stories of growing up without a dad of their own. Ball says this was particularly moving, as the interviewers didn’t ask any direct questions about the past.

“Every single one, 100 percent of the guys brought it up spontaneously. They said, ‘Because of what has happened to our cultures, our families or to me personally, I have no idea what to do as a dad.’ That surprised me, that without even asking about it it was ubiquitous,” she says.

Both George and Glendale say they had no problem telling their stories. George, a hereditary chief of the Git’dum’den Clan and former President of the United Native Nations and Native Council of Canada, says his position as a leader compelled him to share his experiences.

“I felt as a former national leader I was duty bound to fess up, to speak out that leaders aren’t exempt from being affected by colonialism,” says George, who says he suffered from a marijuana addiction during his time as a national leader. “It’s incumbent on us to all ensure that we become healthier leaders.
in our communities. By disclosing how it effect-ed me, I’m maybe help-ing people understand the problems we all face.” Ball says the DVD has been screened several times already and has gotten a very positive reception. The documenta-ry’s format—each dad is fea-tured on his own individual six-minute segment—makes it easier to use in workshops and helps people identify with the fathers. “They’re very representa-tive because they’re talking about where they’ve come from, and that’s the same place a lot of the guys are stuck in; pov-erty, substance abuse, and just not knowing how to connect as a dad. Their stories are evocative of themes that are com-mon to many aboriginal men,” she says.

Another reason the DVD has been so well received is that it’s one of a kind. “There isn’t anything else. It’s the only thing that’s filling the gap right now because there’s nothing for aboriginal men becoming fathers in the whole country,” says Ball. “It feels really good that we’ve done something important.”

The project’s importance was crystallized for Ball during a recent visit to Ontario for a conference. “They said, ‘These guys seem like heroes.’ Then a couple of people who work up in northern Ontario with a lot of aboriginal people said, ‘They are heroes. Every one of them is a hero.’”

People interested in ordering a resource kit, which includes the Fatherhood DVD, can contact Jessica Ball 721-7214 or email jfjzr@uvic.ca. More info on the project can be found at www.cdp.org/fathers.

Island Beauty

One of the best things about local children’s author (and recent M Award nominee) Sylvia Olsen’s latest book, Yetsa’s Sweater (Sono Nis, 40 pages, $19.95), is the sheer Island beauty of it. Not only is it richly illustrated by Qualicum Beach’s Joan Larson, whose vivid pastels give it an almost photographic quality, but Yetsa’s sweater turns out to be a Cowichan sweater, giving Olsen the opportunity to recount the fascinating but still little-known Coast Salish gender history behind these instantly recognizable sweaters. (This is, after all, the woman whose master’s thesis inspired the NFB documentary The Story of the Coast Salish Knitting.)

But there’s nothing academic about Yetsa’s Sweater, just the lovely tale of a granddaughter helping her grandmother prepare the wool, then spin and knit a Cowichan sweater. A beautiful book that offers a slice of vanishing first nation life wrapped in a simple family story, Yetsa’s Sweater is a delight for anyone who knits, spins or just loves a good yarn.

Winging It

Okay, since having children, my new pet peeve are kids books where the rhyme and meter just doesn’t scan. To wit: “Mikey and Boo look away from the skies / To eat some dinner and rest their eyes. / Mikey loves a good yarn.”

Review

Andrew MacLeod

To combat that vulnerability, he says, PACE aims to connect chil-dren with nature. Arbes says he hopes to find a bio-diesel powered bus that can be used to get chil-dren and families out into wild places. “It’s like eco-scouts minus all the milita-ristic trappings of the boy scouts.”

Besides natural immersion, Arbes says, the group will celebrate earth-centred holidays, include children in hands-on stewardship projects like pulling broom out of Garry oak meadows or restoring streams, and teach self-sufficiency skills. It’s empowering, he says, for kids to see they can grow their own food or make their own clothes.

For Arbes, who runs a landscaping business, PACE is also a way to stay active while raising his own children. “I still don’t have enough time to do all of this,” he says. With a teenager and a five year old, they have to come first. And yet he’s passionate about making a difference for the planet. “That’s my fear, that in trying to save the world I’ll be a crappy parent.”

If he can combine activism with parenting, all the better. So whether it’s organizing trips outdoors or putting on edu-ca-tional puppet shows, he says, PACE’s activities have to be kid-centred and fun. “I believe the work of making a better world has got to be fun. Nobody wants to join if it’s going to be a downer.”