



Zaagibagaang: A Case Study in Spirited Public Leadership¹

Introduction

In 2015-2016, Cohort 6 Rebuilders: Vanessa Northrup, Veronica Smith, Christina Bowstring, Nicole Buckanaga, Melissa Boyd, Lorna LaGue, and Barb Fabre created an Action Plan with the stated goal: “Enhance the understanding of the MCT² government throughout all six of the reservations - Empower the voice of MCT members by providing education.”

As Rebuilders wrapped up, Lorna LaGue agreed to carry forward the work of the group. While she was participating in the Rebuilders program, she was serving as the Constitutional Reform Director for the White Earth Nation. Jill Doerfler had been working closely with Chairwoman, Erma Vizenor, for several years on constitutional reform efforts at White Earth. Jill is a first-degree descendant who grew up on the White Earth Reservation and went on to study blood quantum and tribal citizenship for her Ph.D. She started a position as a professor in American Indian Studies at the University of

¹ This case study was originally drafted by Jill Doerfler as a part of the 2020 Native Governance Center and University of Minnesota Duluth American Indian Studies Department Native Nation Rebuilders Program Curriculum Project. Miigwech to Lorna LaGue for providing assistance with the initial draft as well as later comments and edits.

² The Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT) is a federally recognized Tribe consisting of six nations/bands/reservations in Minnesota. www.mnchippewatribe.org

Bois Forte Band of Chippewa www.boisforte.com

Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa www.fdlrez.com

Grand Portage Chippewa www.grandportage.com

Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe www.llojibwe.org

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe www.millelacsband.com

White Earth Nation www.whiteearth.com

Minnesota Duluth in 2008. Lorna and Jill worked closely together on efforts to implement the Constitution of the White Earth Nation (CWEN), which was overwhelmingly approved by voters via a referendum in 2013. However, the constitution was not implemented due to resistance by some elected officials. By 2016 elected officials were successful in completely halting all efforts to implement the CWEN.

Lorna and Jill recognized a pattern emerging at White Earth, where the people had struggled to get reform for decades. Reform efforts would start, get to some point, even to the point of a vote, but then the effort would stall with the next election for positions on Tribal Council. Issues seen as more pressing would be prioritized and the reform efforts fade away. Those who worked for change would grow frustrated and give up. Then a new group of people who did not build off the past efforts would see the need for change and rather than build on previous efforts, they would start from scratch. They noted that with elections held every two years, the reform efforts would be doomed if the pattern was to continue.

They wanted to try a different approach. The key component was understanding sovereignty comes from the people, not the elected officials, so if reform was ever to become a reality, the people must be engaged. But first, the people needed to gain an understanding of both the history and creation of the MCT as well as the current, unique structure of the MCT. This is what the Rebuilder's Action Plan was built upon, the "spirited public leadership" tenant of nation building as defined by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and Native Nations Institute.

Spirited Public Leadership

Individuals Who Recognize The Need for Fundamental Change and Can Engage With Community to Make That Happen:

In successful Indian nations, there is typically a group of individuals who recognize the need for fundamental change in the way things are done and can bring the community along with them in building that future.

Lorna and Jill noted the need for education and discussed possibilities. They began discussions with the Bush Foundation about the possibility of funding a grassroots community effort related to nation building. Previously, the Bush Foundation only funded Native nations but, because of the trust they had built, the Bush Foundation created a non-Tribe application for their Nation Building Grant Program.

Jill and Lorna wrote an application for a planning grant. The cohort 6 Rebuilders group had agreed that the grant should reside with a neutral party and not one of the MCT bands so that it could not be politicized. Jill offered to administer the grant through the Tribal Sovereignty Institute in American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth. The grant was titled: "Anishinaabe Engagement, Education, and Empowerment" or 3E for short. The stated purpose was: "... a four-month planning grant, proposing that we combine the critical aspects learned from the previous constitutional reform efforts at the White Earth Nation with the important essentials learned through the Native Nations Rebuilders Program to create a comprehensive strategic plan. While we don't know what the exact outcome of the strategic plan will be, we anticipate that it will be a two-year project with action items for citizen engagement, education, and empowerment among the citizens of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT)." The planning grant was awarded in May 2016.

Phase I: May 2016 - December 2016

Lorna emailed the Rebuilders from Cohort 6 who created the original plan to share the good news that funding from the Bush Foundation was awarded. The goal was to create a strategic plan with actionable items to proceed with educating MCT citizens throughout all six of the reservations and key off reservation communities. She thanked and acknowledged that the group originated the ideas for the project. She asked for additional feedback, participation, and for assistance in creating a Core Leadership Group (CLG). She noted: "Ultimately, we hope this short-term project will lead us into a longer project with a larger group of people who become trained in facilitating educational sessions throughout all of the MCT, but first things must come first, and that will be the creation of a comprehensive strategic plan, which will be the task of this CLG group."

Lorna and Jill worked to create a CLG with representation from each of the six MCT reservations as well as key off reservation communities. The group was formed to represent different ages, different genders, and different strengths and areas of expertise. Rebuilders were targeted because their participation in that program was a

demonstration of their interest in Tribal governance. The diversity among the group proved to be a benefit as they quickly learned the value each and every person brought to the table. Throughout the grant, Lorna and Jill handled all of the logistics, which freed the time of group members to focus on engaging in productive conversations, generating ideas, and, later, sharing the materials in their own communities. It also allowed different forms of leadership to develop among group members. For example, there were two Elders who were highly influential in both setting the tone of the meetings as well as guiding the dynamics of the group. From the beginning, the group was guided by Anishinaabe teachings and values, which was key for creating a positive and supportive environment. In these initial meetings the group agreed on the values that would be guiding meetings and the expectations of membership to align with the grant requirements. Following Anishinaabe values, everyone carries a responsibility to contribute to the group. Throughout the summer of 2016, three individual daylong meetings were held leading up to the three-day retreat during which they created the actual strategic plan. All sessions began in a good way with a prayer, rotating among the group members. This practice provided opportunities for various members of the group to contribute.

Lesley and Paul Kabotie of Indigenous Collaboration, Inc.³ led the group through the strategic plan retreat, which included a consensus building process to create vision statements. The group was asked: “What Is In Place in 2026 That Tells Us We Have Established Desirable, Appropriate & Accountable Systems of Governance?” It was very useful to have this process led by trained professionals with no stake in the outcomes other than that the outcomes reflect the group as a whole.

³ Indigenous Collaboration, Inc is a Native-owned/woman-owned corporation providing consensus-based consulting services, event facilitation, organizational tools and technologies that support engagement and collaboration, specializing in Native communities.
<https://indcollab.com/>

Consensus Vision Statements

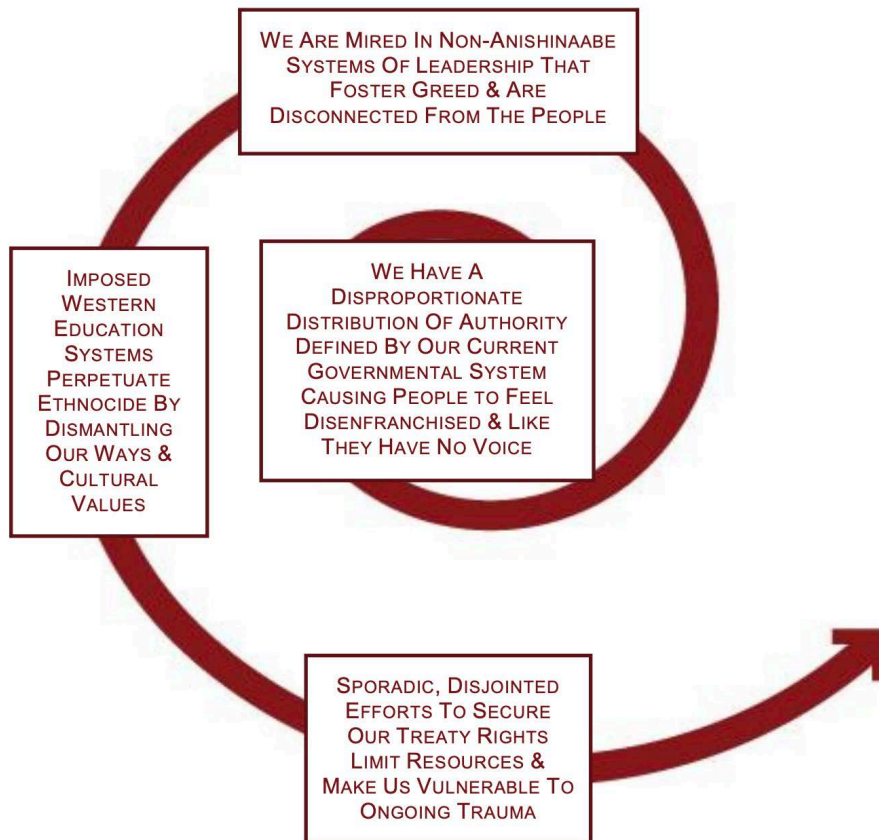
The following statements represent the group’s consensus after discussing the individual elements of the vision for tribal governance. The following Vision Elements capture the group’s insight on their collective intent in each arena.

| Towards Applying Our Knowledge & Values to Secure The Future for the Next 7 Generations & Beyond | | Towards Wholeness in Spirit & Mind And In Balance With the Universe - Minobimaadiziwin | | | Towards Sovereignty, Freedom & True Nationhood | |
|--|---|---|--|--|---|---|
| Our Constitution Creates a Governing Structure That Is Culturally Relevant, Ethical, Fair and Responsive to the People | Our Children Are Thriving In a Culturally-Based Environment That Includes All Aspects of Mind, Body & Spirit Created by Our Anishinabe Experts & Knowledge Holders | Language, Culture & Our Values Are Modeled & Integrated Into Our Governing Systems & Individual Lives | We, the Ojibwe People, Are Empowered to Participate in Government Openly & Freely | Exercise Our Sovereign Authority & Responsibility to Assure Mother Earth’s Rights to Be Nurtured and Protected From Desecration | Our Population Is Thriving, We Have Fair Distribution of Wealth & Program Services Promote Community Re- Investment | Thriving Economy Where Everyone Contributes & Benefits, Driven By Traditional Values of Self- Sufficiency |

“We, the Ojibwe people, are empowered to participate in government openly and freely” is the keystone statement. The other goals cannot be achieved until progress is made on participation in government. The group agreed that education about the MCT Constitution as well as basics of governance and nation building need to take place in order to empower citizens.⁴

⁴ A summary of the plan as well as the full plan are available at <https://zaagibagaang.com/strategic-plan>.

Indigenous Collaboration, Inc. also led the group through an exercise which required honest discussions and evaluation of the question: “What are the Issues Blocking Us From Realizing Our Vision?” The chart below is a representation of the outcome of the activity.

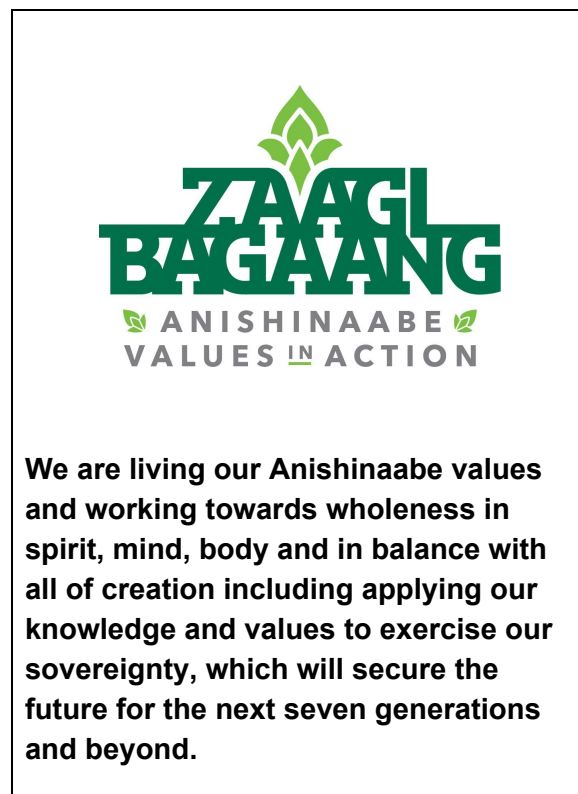


From there the group developed actions that would launch the group’s vision. By recentring the vision and focusing on a starting point, the work seemed less overwhelming. The activity allowed for different members of the group to take the lead on actions that they were most passionate about and/or best fit their skill set.

Jill and Lorna held a follow up meeting in early fall to review the strategic plan and to design the process of moving forward. Group members had many excellent ideas. It was difficult to narrow down and prioritize but taking the time to fully talk though the possibilities helped the group to come to a consensus. Culture and values both guided the process and would be key for moving forward. The group was adamant that any educational materials reflect our culture. The group agreed to create a comprehensive website with accessible information delivered via short videos as well as downloadable

documents including items such as the original and current MCT constitutions. It was agreed that the information would be presented in layman's terms so it would be understandable and relatable for citizens.

As the group wrapped up the planning phase, it was noted that they needed a name that reflected who they were. After much discussion, the group decided to rename the effort: Zaagibagaang. Zaagibagaang is an Anishinaabe word describing the buds of trees and flowers as they blossom in the springtime. The word served as an excellent representation of the work they wanted to do going forward. Also, they envisioned Zaagibagaang not only for the group members but as a process for all our people, where individual voices and gifts burst forth. This term has a very positive connotation and it fit well with their goal of empowerment. It signals that culture is central to the project and also peaks curiosity.



The group recognized that they would need significant technical assistance in creating the videos, a logo, images for the website and more. Jill and Lorna drafted an RFP and the group offered edits and suggestions. They circulated the RFP and, ultimately, the group selected the Hunt + Capture⁵ a communications and marketing firm to assist.

⁵ Hunt+Capture is owned and operated by Lacey Criswell and Amanda Hankerson who were excited to learn about the Anishinaabe culture; they employed Delina White (Leech Lake) as a contractor to help

Lorna and Jill also began expanding the group, taking care to keep diverse representation and considering which strengths and skills that individuals would bring to the group. Then they wrote a grant to the Bush Foundation for the next phase of the work, which was focused on implementing the strategic plan. The grant was awarded.

Phase II: January 2017 - June 2018

Phase II is where Zaagibagaang really went to work.⁶ Lorna and Jill decided to have an outside facilitator for the first large group meeting because it would both allow them to be full participants as well as support others taking on some leadership roles. Facilitator Pamela Standing⁷ had all members of the group complete the CliftonStrengths⁸ assessment. Group members responded well to this positive activity. The assessments were used throughout the project. It was a great way to develop trust and relationships among the group.

Next the expanded group began meetings with Amanda and Lacey of Hunt+Capture. Amanda and Lacey did a superb job of walking the group through the process creating a logo and the tagline “Anishinaabe Values In Action.” They also helped the group create a call to action, “Get Informed – Get Involved.” They worked extensively with Zaagibagaang group members taking many photos as well as hours of filming at many locations. Group members were generous with their time and contributed excellent ideas throughout the process. Lorna and Jill continued to handle all logistics and maintained contact with Amanda and Lacey between meetings to guide the process and make any decisions that could not wait for a group meeting.

make connections and guide decisions that had to be made in the field as they shot footage and took photos. www.huntcapture.com

⁶ While the Tribal Sovereignty Institute in American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth was the fiscal sponsor for the first grant. It was decided that the [Indigenous Peoples Task Force](#) (IPTF) would serve as the fiscal sponsor going forward. Executive Director, Sharon Day, had been with Zaagibagaang from the beginning. The IPTF board approved. This arrangement continued the goal of having a neutral, non-political entity fiscally manage the grant.

⁷ Pamela Standing is the Executive Director of Minnesota Indigenous Business Alliance. She specializes in culturally-based business and strategic planning. www.mniba.org

⁸ CliftonStrengths assessment “is designed to uncover each individual’s unique strengths based on survey results.” Research shows people who know and use CliftonStrengths are more engaged, more productive and happier and healthier, a better understanding of strengths helps to “transform great potential into greater performance”. www.gallup.com



Photo from the April 22, 2017 meeting held at the Holiday Inn in Duluth, MN. Group members were working on the organization, structure, and content needed for the website. Photo taken by group member Bill Boutwell.

After months of work, zaagibagaang.com was launched with more than 15 short videos in English and Ojibwe as well as historical and contemporary information about the MCT. Many documents such as the original MCT Constitution, current MCT Constitution, MCT Constitutional Interpretations, MCT Election Ordinance, Enrollment information, and more were made easily accessible for the first time to everyone. The group continued to add information based on ideas and requests from the community including an FAQ page and a “Test Your Knowledge” interactive quiz. A Facebook page was also created to compliment the website and served to help inform the public about the materials and resources.

Throughout the endeavor, Zaagibagaang members demonstrated leadership. They contributed their strengths, talents, and gifts in many different ways. They were willing to step outside their comfort zones on many occasions because of the supportive environment that promoted growth. The Elders in the group made especially important contributions to



conversations about values and how understanding our past was key to being able to envision our future. The group had in depth conversations regarding the impacts of the MCT Constitution and the IRA governmental structure. Together they learned that

although our sovereignty has been diminished, it can be revived with a capable governing system that matches our cultural beliefs, a strategic orientation, and leaders who are committed to building a better future; all concepts learned in the Rebuilders cohorts.

As a group, Zaagibagaang members never advocated for any one specific type of reform, nor did they defame the current elected officials. They were committed to providing information so people could form their own opinions and envision new possibilities.

Zaagibagaang group members created a brochure as well as selected and purchased promotional items to help get the word out about the website. They handed these items out to friends and family and had informational tables at various community events to get the word out. They spent a year sharing information and facilitating conversations

about our history as well as the current MCT Constitution. As Zaagibagaang gained momentum, the MCT began to host Constitutional Convention Meetings, which were educational sessions. They held seven sessions from August 2017 to February 2018.⁹



Zaagibagaang team members had informational tables at those events, distributed brochures and promotional items, and had numerous conversations with attendees about the materials made available on the website.¹⁰



⁹ All the handouts and other materials from the MCT sessions were also made available on the Zaagibagaang website, including the reports from the meetings.

<https://zaagibagaang.com/2017-constitutional-education-sessions>

¹⁰ Pictured above: Dani Pieratos, Nikki Pieratos, Karlene Chosa, Donald Chosa, and Louie Johannsen at the MCT Constitutional Convention meeting in Bois Forte. Pictured right: Joyce LaPorte at Fond du Lac.

As the end of the grant period neared, group members observed that they had achieved the grant objectives and were making good progress toward their broader goals. Concepts like “separation of powers” and “branches of government” have become much more widely known and discussed as compared to when their work began. In addition, the MCT Constitution, ordinances, and other materials were now easily accessible to everyone. Zaagibagaang had empowered people with information and more people were starting to get involved. Yet, Zaagibagaang still had a long way to go to achieve the goals set out in the strategic plan.

Simultaneously, the MCT constitutional reform effort was moving ahead. During the fall of 2018, ten delegates were selected from each of the six reservations (60 total) to advise the Tribal Executive Committee on reforming the MCT Constitution. Some members of Zaagibagaang volunteered and/or were selected/elected to be delegates. They continued to share the information and resources from Zaagibagaang. While Zaagibagaang’s efforts were always neutral and non-political, it was especially key that the group continue to follow that principle as efforts for constitutional reform began.

Zaagibagaang members discussed possible next steps in an open dialogue in which they both acknowledged how proud they were of the accomplishments they achieved by working together but also some frustrations that they encountered a significant amount of apathy in their communities. Several core members of the group expressed a strong desire for their work to continue. Ideas for what additional information could be created and how the group could continue efforts were discussed. Jill and Lorna wrote another grant and were again funded by the Bush Foundation.

Phase III: October 2018 - December 2019

Phase III began in the fall of 2018. During this phase Zaagibagaang focused on more in depth education with the understanding that “you only know what you know,” meaning that it was difficult for people to envision how things could be different because they had little or no knowledge of the possibilities surrounding Tribal governmental structures. As much information that had already been created and shared, community members were still asking for more.

More detailed information was needed. There was a specific need for materials that detailed how Anishinaabe values can connect to and be enacted in governance. These

educational sessions would set the stage and for several sessions on the variety of alternative options available for a governing system and sharing concepts from other Tribes throughout the U.S. The goal of these sessions was to show MCT enrollees that there are many options for how a nation can be organized and we have the power to create a system that works best for us and for our future generations, conforming to the original intent of education, engagement, and empowerment.

Zaagibagaang began to plan the sessions. Since the inception of Zaagibagaang, the group had the practice of beginning with an opening prayer and then getting the meeting started by asking group members to share updates from their respective reservations/urban locations. Initially this practice helped the group to bond and connect, but it took on additional importance as the MCT effort for constitutional reform got underway. It was important to compare and contrast which messages were present in which locations. Zaagibagaang members often commented that they appreciated that the meetings were conducted respectfully and were productive. The members found value in discussing current MCT Constitutional reform efforts in an environment in which they could speak freely without fear of political retaliation. In addition, they knew they could call on each other when needed for support. Having the space to talk through ideas with other team members helped to reveal common challenges as well as possible solutions. Because they all cared deeply about their communities and the MCT, this has been emotional work and being able to vent frustrations and then turn to strategy and action was cathartic and empowering.

Group members felt that Facebook live offered the best platform for the education sessions and offered ideas for guests. Lorna and Jill handled all the arrangements. Zaagibagaang member Lyz Jaakola volunteered the use of the studio at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College. She worked to ensure the studio was ready and available and had all of the camera and sound equipment. Lorna monitored the process remotely noting if there were connectivity issues as well as working to drive



engagement. Jill served as the host. Zaagibagaang members participated from everywhere by tuning in for the sessions, engaging conversation on the live feeds, and sharing the “watch parties” to ensure others remembered to tune in as well.¹¹

The second major undertaking during this phase of the work was the creation of a resource booklet titled “Get Informed – Get Involved: Constitutional Resources.” The booklet begins with basic information about Anishinaabe traditional governance structure and the underlying values that made that governmental system effective. The booklet includes basic information on nation building and then moves into more detailed information about constitutional reform. They drew upon *Structuring Sovereignty* by Tatum, et al¹² to organize the remainder of the booklet and included examples of other governmental models. Short summaries of sections of the book as well as questions to drive engagement were included, all remaining neutral in opinion. Several thousand copies of the resource booklet were printed and it was made available for download on the website. Zaagibagaang members also noted that some in the community had been requesting printed copies of the constitution so they also created a pocket constitution printing of the current MCT Constitution. Prior to Zaagibagaang, the MCT Constitution was actually difficult to find, you basically had to know someone who had a copy.

Conclusion

Zaagibagaang held a meeting in December 2019 and agreed that the group would take a pause from formal meetings. The grant was scheduled to expire at the end of the month. While there was a strong desire for the group to continue, concrete ideas for new projects were difficult to identify, especially considering the MCT delegates were now at work to provide advice on constitutional reform. Group members would continue their work in distributing the Resource booklet and Lorna and Jill would complete the grant report due in February. They agreed to reconnect and evaluate possible next steps in the late spring or summer, which is the time of the writing of this case study. The swift and dramatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has left everyone with many questions, including the future of Zaagibagaang. Jill and Lorna have had little time to devote to Zaagibagaang since the pandemic began other than to keep content on the

¹¹ Pictured are Pamela Johns and Jill Doerfler at the live session on May 30, 2019. Rebuilder Pamela Johns shared information about Red Lake’s constitutional reform effort and details of the proposed draft of the constitution.

¹² Tatum, Melissa L., Miriam Jorgensen, Mary E. Guss, and Sara Deer. *Structuring Sovereignty: Constitutions of Native Nations* (American Indian Studies Center, Los Angeles), 2014.

Facebook page. Many things are delayed and/or on hold. The MCT pushed back the April 2020 primary to June 2020.

Much work still needs to be done to fully realize the goals set out in the strategic plan but thanks to the dedicated efforts of the members of Zaagibagaang, there are now many easily accessible resources freely available including information explaining the creation, evolution, and history of the MCT. Citizens can now access information to gain an understanding of why and how some of the challenges exist. In addition, resources are now available to share examples of other forms of governance.

The grassroots educational efforts of Zaagibagaang have been non-political and are therefore not a threat to any political entity. Separating the efforts from tribal politics allowed the group to remain active and fulfill their goals even when there were differing political opinions among the group members and when an election cycle changed tribal leadership. Since Zaagibagaang was not dependent upon tribal funding, they were able to remain steadfast and continue the work regardless of tribal politics.

Governmental change does not need to come from within the governmental structure itself. Whether it be through a system of delegates or a group of grassroots community members, much can be accomplished to promote nation building.

Zaagibagaang is a new beginning. With their Anishinaabe teachings guiding them, the group members brought their gifts together and created valuable resources which were shared freely with everyone. The original goal was to provide accurate and easily accessible information to people to empower and inspire them to get involved with their own governing system. Zaagibagaang provided information to help people understand the history as well as the system as we know it today. With this information, people are better informed and can now become engaged to work together towards mino-bimaadiziwin.



Zaagibagaang expresses thanks to the Bush Foundation for providing funding. June Noronha and Eileen Briggs both recognized the importance of community taking the lead and provided invaluable support throughout the project.