

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Winners! Of so much more than 'just' Season 7 of The Amazing Race Canada

When you talk with Dr. James Makokis, you realize that the same calmness, faith and fortitude that seemed to propel him and his husband, Anthony Johnson, to victory – albeit, most definitely *not* an effortless one! – in Season 7 of [The Amazing Race Canada](#) (TARC), are the attributes that James brings to his work. As both a sought-after physician specializing in gender transitioning, and an Indigenous family physician dedicated to supporting his patients, he provides a thoughtful blend of Cree and western medicines.

“That a medicine chest shall be kept at the house of each Indian Agent ...”

In addition to a commitment to providing empathetic, responsive health care to all his patients, James is equally committed to [Treaty Number Six's](#) “promise to health”: his ancestor’s vision of applying both Indigenous and western medicine to the thoughtful, comprehensive care of Indigenous peoples.

“It’s about creating space for the application and use of both Indigenous and western medicine,” James explains. “Indigenous medicines are the original medicines of this continent. They were what helped our people survive and flourish, living long, healthy lives, prior to the introduction of western medicine.

“If we look at the life expectancy of Indigenous people prior to colonization, it was 100 years (based on our own oral history)! Now, it’s 10-or-more years shorter than the average Canadian, and that’s *with* western medicines,” James explains.

“Reconciliation and improvements in Indigenous health and life expectancy aren’t going to be just a matter of funding; positive changes are going to require getting right to the core of the problem – living fully within our Treaty agreements – and even beyond that.”



Anthony Johnson (L) and Dr. James Makokis (R)

Living and growing together, on Turtle Island

A committed student of the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada, James refers to the [Two Row Wampum - Gusweñta*](#) and the [Treaty of Niagara 1764](#) (also known as '[Canada's Indian Magna Carta](#)'), and their messages of mutual respect and equality. He points out that both agreements laid the groundwork for a country and peoples that “respected both medical systems; both educational systems; both legal and governance systems ... all the things that make up a healthy society.

“But those things haven’t been followed or adhered to,” says James. “It’s about remembering what our original relationship is supposed to be, on [Turtle Island](#). That doesn’t mean the Canadian government should be legislating laws for us; it’s remembering and recreating our original relationship; how we were supposed to live and grow here together, on Turtle Island.”

“When we think about reconciliation,” he continues, “we also have to think about Indigenous medicines. Interventions around Indigenous health cannot only include western medicine. To succeed, they have to include traditional (Indigenous) medicine, too. There has to be funding for Indigenous health practitioners and our medicine.”

More Indigenous physicians does not equal an increase in the practice of traditional/western medicine

While the number of Indigenous physicians is increasing, James is quick to stress that does not correlate to an increase in Indigenous physicians practicing traditional, Indigenous medicine.

“Indigenous physicians are not always aware of their own medicine,” James notes. “In fact, there are very few Indigenous physicians who practice Indigenous medicine side-by-side with western medicine.”

In a [2017 interview](#) with the Saskatoon *Star Phoenix*, James described when his interest in traditional medicine began. “I had the opportunity as a family medicine resident to go and do a month of a traditional medicine elective and that gave me the opportunity to go back home and work with our own medicine people and elders, and that’s when I really started learning about our medicines ... It really transformed the way I looked at the land. Instead of seeing weeds or just plants, it was all of these things that we can use to

help ourselves. So even when you're driving along the road you can see everything that was available to us, and how much help we had at our disposal to improve our people, that has been lost."

In the same interview, James explained the benefits of traditional medicine: "The biggest benefit is that Indigenous peoples feel safer using our own medicines.

"There is a whole methodology of health care delivery with traditional medicine that goes beyond just taking a pill, which is usually what happens in western medicine. There's a process of support for that individual and their family to get better, and to address the underlying problem of their health issue. They feel more comfortable using something that is a part of them, because in Cree beliefs, we believe that we're related to our medicine and that ties back to our creation teachings of how we came to be on this island."

Of his efforts to incorporate Cree medicine, thought and worldview into his medical practice, James says, "It's extremely important for Cree people to receive culturally safe care that includes our own medicines and access to ceremonies and healing ways of being and knowing."



While their mutual respect and love played a key role in their harmonious teamwork, so did an ever-present sense of humor.

Team Ahkameyimok: Don't give up; keep going!

With "Team Ahkameyimok" (from the Plains Cree language, meaning "Don't give up. Keep going. Persevere.") stenciled on their bright orange t-shirts, James and Anthony's commitment to representing their team motto's message of determination was always

evident, as they overcame one TARC challenge after another. While their mutual respect and love played a key role in their harmonious teamwork, so did an ever-present sense of humor.

For example, there was Anthony's "Buttery Nanaimo Bar" song that he sang to himself as he awaited his turn (after bungee-jumping) to recite the ingredients of the classic Nanaimo Bar. Based on a memory technique, called "Memory Palace", that he had learned prior to competing on TARC, Anthony's lyrics included, "There's butter in my basket; brown sugar in my keybox; there's cocoa on my sofa; there's graham crackers on my TV; there's eggs on my antlers; there's coconut on my Island; there's almonds on my table ..."

But not all was fun and games, and Team Ahkameyimok relied on their motto to get them through some particularly difficult times. One such experience was the French-language challenge at Le Manoir Richelieu, site of the 2018 G7 summit, where a member of each team was required to re-enact the delivery of one of the Prime Minister's statements made to the press, at the summit. For the re-enactment, the contestant had to memorize a short statement and deliver it (in English and French) to the (staged) press gallery, while responding to gallery questions in Japanese, German and Italian.

The challenge was exceptionally difficult and stressful for James for a couple of reasons: as part of his residential school experience, James's father had been forced to abandon his own language and learn another; and, in the guise of the Prime Minister, James had to deliver this statement espousing the principles G7 nations adhere to regarding human rights, the Rule of Law, territorial integrity and democracy, all while standing in front of a Neoclassical portrait of a white woman standing, reading a book to a group of Indigenous women sitting on the ground, at her feet.

Describing the challenge, James says, "I had so many layers going on in my head ... Thinking of 2008, when I was in medical school and Stephen Harper apologized to residential school survivors. Then, in 2009, at the G20 Summit, he said Canada has no history of colonization ... I've researched things government leaders have said about my people," he continues.

"I had to read those statements ... I had to stand in front of the Neoclassical painting of a white woman reading a book to Indigenous women; women portrayed as smaller, sitting down at the feet of the white woman ... It displayed the narrative that Indigenous people don't know anything; that we need someone else to teach it to us; that we're smaller, somehow insignificant and that we did not have our own system of learning and education.

"Those are the experiences we've had, that we're constantly confronted with," says James. Yet, for all the negativity and difficult emotions that it conjured, the challenge was a reminder to James and Anthony of their purpose and mission on TARC: to increase awareness of, and respect for, the people who make up Canada's diverse cultures and communities.

Canada: Meet James and Anthony!

James' and Anthony's foray into TARC was not undertaken on a whim, or for the purpose of potentially winning some cash, or vehicles, or a trip around the world. In the show's popularity with Canadian television audiences (two million viewers watched the Season 7 premier), and as the show's first and only Indigenous, two-spirit couple, they

saw an opportunity for valuable exposure of issues close to their hearts and culture, and to help people who might be struggling with those issues.

In an interview on CTV's [The Social](#), James said, "... so many people don't have the opportunity to feel included; in fact, they feel excluded. And so, when we were racing, we were racing for all of those people from diverse communities. That's who was with us on that mat when we arrived; all of those people who were behind and beside us."

"By being open about who we are – an Indigenous, gay, two-spirit, married couple – it brought attention to those issues in a way that had never happened before," explains James. "There we were, on mainstream TV: Our red skirts with rainbow ribbons to bring attention to missing and murdered Indigenous women, and the role of women in Indigenous society (that has been displaced by the imposition of elected Chief and Council systems where only men have a voice); and for two-spirit, transgender youth, by wearing skirts, we wanted to show that was okay and good."

In a CTV post-win interview, as he reflected on their win, James said one of the main reasons it was such an emotional experience for him was, "Knowing how many people were supporting us and saw themselves in us; and all the messages of support that we received, saying things like, 'We also won! We were right there with you!' It felt so good to bring people that sense of joy and pride."

Not just one, but many

There are other Indigenous societal issues of great relevance to James and Anthony that they sought to raise awareness of (and money for), through their participation on TARC. As opposed to the usual exercise gear worn by most race participants, James and Anthony represented their causes with their clothes and conversation.

With their handmade, red skirts and bandanas, they honored [missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls](#). In recognition of the life-sustaining importance of water – and the dramatic inequities that exist in the availability of safe drinking water, particularly in [Canada's Indigenous communities](#) – the couple wore blue t-shirts emblazoned with "Water is Life." After a particularly difficult challenge that brought back memories of his father's struggles post-residential school, James talked about the lasting, intergenerational trauma effects of [residential schools](#). And at every opportunity, Anthony and James spoke of their desire to help fund the construction of a cultural healing centre in Kehewin Cree Nation.

"You invited that conversation into our home ..."

Tuning into TARC every week during Season 7 to watch and cheer on James and Anthony became, for many viewers, a lesson in being Canadian; a lesson in the many colors, shades and vibrancies of humanity that make up the fabric of Canadian society.

And while, with their humor, strength, empathy and knowledge, James and Anthony undoubtedly helped members of diverse communities, they also helped viewers from all communities come to a greater understanding of people who aren't 'just like you'! In other words, every week, on national TV, Anthony and James delivered a rare lesson in empathy.

In discussing their honest and open exposure of themselves as an Indigenous, two-spirit, married couple, James says, “It was extremely important for me and Anthony to do. We knew millions were watching ... kids and families ...”

After a speech that he gave recently at [the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health](#) Conference 2019, James says a young, gender non-binary person came up to him and thanked him for everything that he and Anthony had done, through their participation on TARC.

“Routinely, people would thank us for being on the show and say that because of it, ‘my six-year-old or eight-year-old ... has started asking questions about Indigenous peoples, or transgender and two-spirit. You invited that conversation into our home and now our families and children are better because of that.’”

“It speaks to the importance of having diverse representation on TV,” James adds. “Representation does matter! And it’s important for people who don’t normally see themselves portrayed in the media, to see themselves there.”

From reality TV, to reality

Back home and back at work, James and Anthony continue to see the effect of their experience with TARC. “One of the most amazing things that’s come out of it,” says James, “is when my young, transgender patients, many of whom aren’t Indigenous, tell me their families have become more accepting, because Anthony and I are who we are.”

From his practice (Cree/western medicine) as the sole family physician at the Kehewin Cree Nation Health Services, James and Anthony – a project consultant and [Navajo \(Diné\)](#) artist – work together at the health centre, as they aspire “to rebuild the Cree health system,” explains James.

“Anthony works at revitalizing Cree midwifery practices, and bringing birth back to the Kehewin Cree Nation, as an act of sovereignty and community re-building.”

Whether Indigenous or not, James’ patients in both his clinics – at the Kehewin Cree Nation Health Services and in his South Edmonton Clinic satellite office, where he specializes in transgender health and medical hormone transitioning – benefit from his application of traditional and western medicine.

As James looks back on the six provinces, one territory, 14 cities and more than 20,000 kilometers that he and Anthony traversed in their efforts to not only win TARC but also to expose Canadians to Indigenous- and gender/sexual/spiritual-related issues and subjects they may not otherwise have been exposed to, James comments, “We were well aware that we wanted to share some of these things, and we were going to use TARC as a platform to do it. The experience, and the response, has been life-changing.”

**The Two Row Wampum – a beaded belt of white and purple wampum shells, crafted by the Haudenosaunee in 1613 as part of their agreement with Dutch settlers who had entered and were settling on Haudenosaunee lands – represents an Indigenous canoe*

and a European boat travelling side-by-side down the river of life. Each is equal and does not impede or overtake the other.

Photos courtesy of The Amazing Race Canada.