

**THE LIFE HISTORY OF A FIRST NATIONS EDUCATOR:  
NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation begins with the loss of my immediate family and search for healing. I share my life experiences because I want to move beyond the pain and suffering but also because I want to leave a written monument to honour the memory of my family.

My research purpose for writing my Indigenous life history focussed on my search for healing; correcting stereotypes of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal students; understanding the impact of major federal government policies upon Aboriginal people; and examining the role of Aboriginal parents in their children's education. I chose the Indigenous life story methodology because it allowed me to remember and be reflective about critical incidents of my life stages: childhood, adulthood, motherhood and educator. These Indigenous life stories exemplified the relationship between an Aboriginal family and the wider Canadian society regarding the impact of major federal laws and educational policies. The Indigenous life story methodology also challenged me to critically explore the following research topics/questions: ways of healing from deep emotional pain; overcoming stereotypes about Aboriginal women and Aboriginal learners; examining parental involvement; and facilitating Aboriginal student success.

My search for spiritual and emotional healing has led me to face the difficult challenges with the assistance of others. When elders mentioned that I must return to Nanaimo, my birthplace, I followed their guidance. I returned and visited my parent's graves every year for four years. With the assistance of my paternal uncle and later with my maternal aunt, I was able to complete this task. On the fourth year, I walked the land where our home once stood with my maternal aunt. Even though this experience was difficult, I remember thinking that I could not change the path of my immediate family but I had to accept their passing.

Besides discussing the loss of my family, I included my children's and my educational

experiences to illustrate that First Nations children and adults are often stereotyped as being inferior and therefore, not able to achieve at the same level as mainstream students. One of my sons was told that "he was only average and would not amount to anything." No matter how hard he worked, he was only average. The teacher had decided where he felt my son's achievement level was and maintained this academic grade. Today, he is a lawyer with a Master's in Law. This dissertation includes one story from each of my children plus my own experiences with education.

As an educator I emphasize the importance of Aboriginal identity. Students need to be able to identify with their Aboriginal or Native background in order to meet the challenges of post-secondary education. Once the students make the effort to identify with their Aboriginal heritage, they are able to focus their full attention on their academic studies and not be afraid of someone revealing Aboriginal identity.

In conclusion, I used the story of unpacking a suitcase of all of the negative experiences of hurt, sadness and real life experiences of physical, sexual, and psychological abuses, so that our communities will start to heal and look toward more positive and healthier approaches to life for our children, grandchildren and great, great grandchildren.

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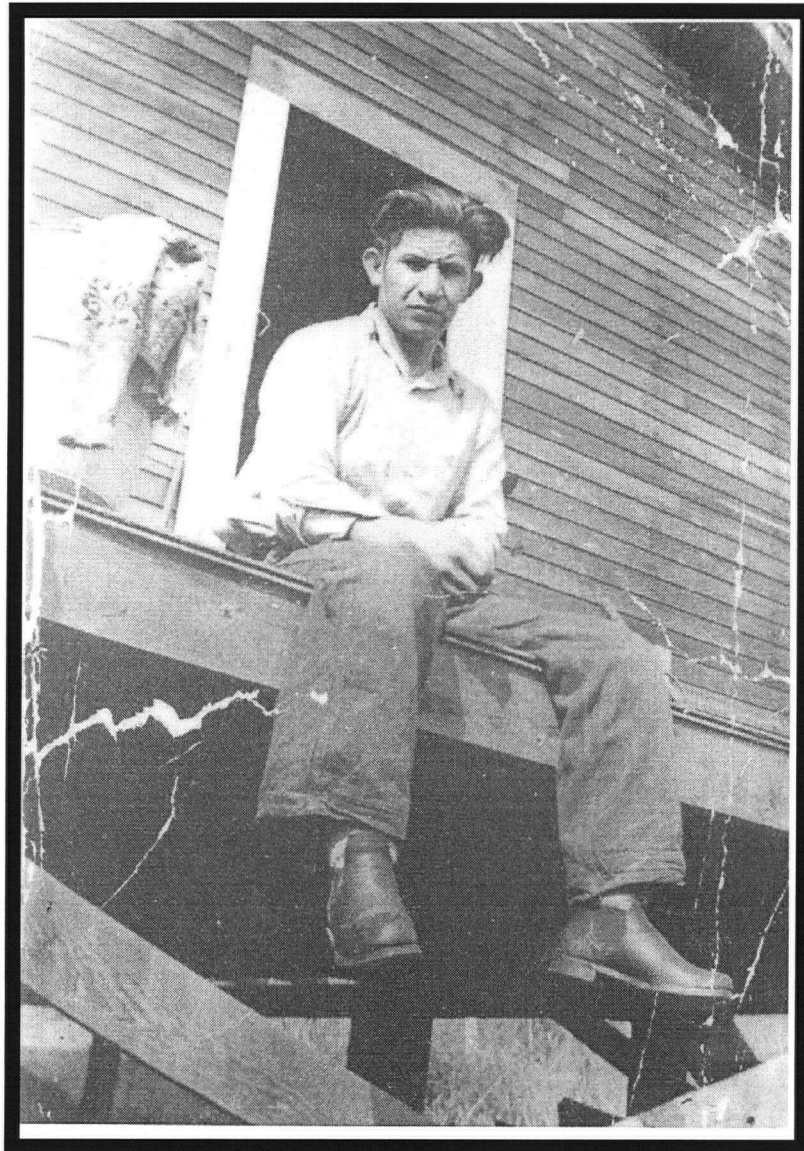
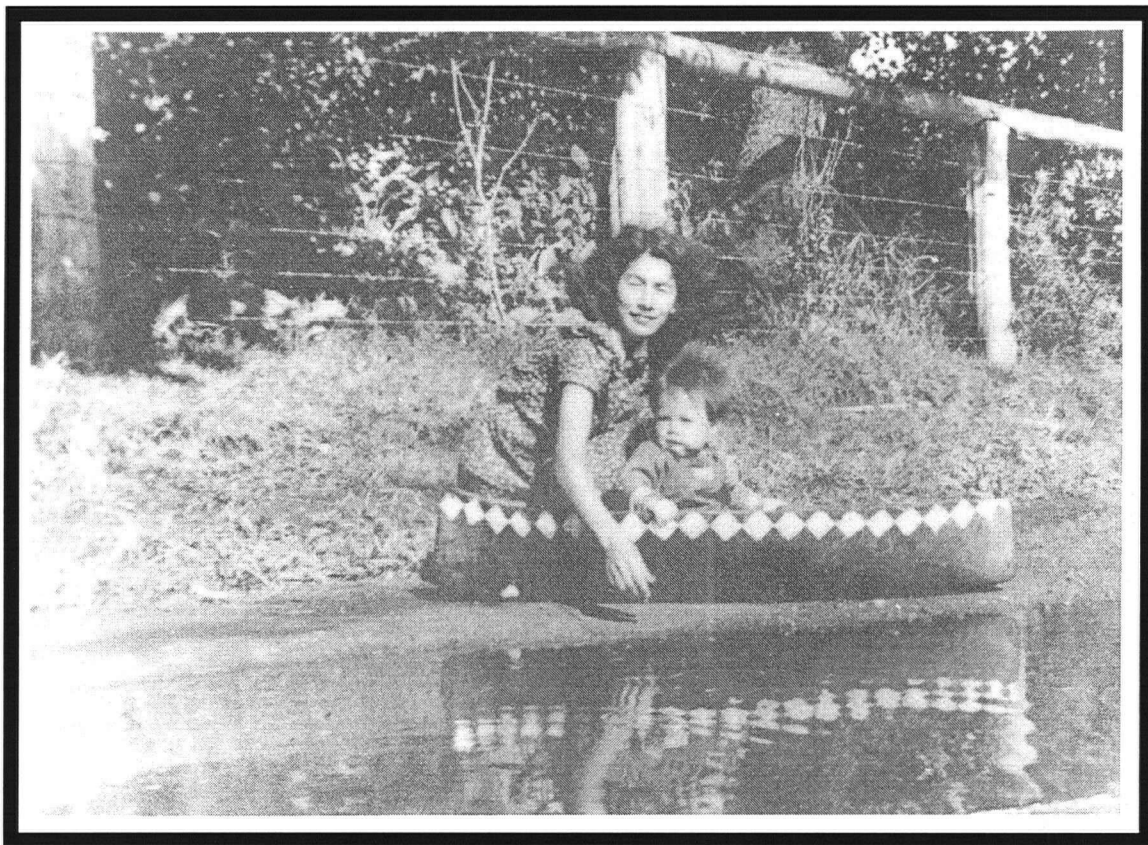


Figure 1. *In Loving Memory of My Father, Mack Thomas.*

Courtesy of Maisie Cardinal.



**Figure 2.** *In Loving Memory of My Mother, Sarah Thomas, with My Oldest Brother.*

**Courtesy of Maisie Cardinal.**

## CHAPTER ONE

### A LIFE HISTORY

On November 15, 2003, four of my six children gathered with me to celebrate my youngest daughter's twenty-third birthday, and to commemorate the fiftieth year of the loss of my immediate family. This tragic experience has plagued my life because one day I had everything in the world, the love and companionship of family, and then the next day, my family was gone. My mother Sarah, my father Mack, my uncle Jimmy and my brother Mack junior, and two sisters Elsie and Patricia were lost in a house fire.

I was alone. My brother and sister stayed with my paternal uncle, while I went to stay with my maternal aunt and maternal grandfather, about one hundred miles away. I never saw my brother and sister for a long time.

Once not so long ago, I decided to write my life history. I wanted to recognize the heroism of my older brother Clifford Thomas. Because of his quick response to wake us (*my sister and me*) and to send me for help, I am here today to remember my family and to honor my brother.

After I made the commitment to write this dissertation about my family, I have really had mixed emotions. I started to wonder, why am I so adamant in developing this life history. Do I consider myself someone who is of great stature? Like a president, prime minister, ruler, queen and /or someone of great stature? What is my gender? Am I male? The response to all of these questions that I have been asking myself is of course, no, I do not consider myself in the realm of royalty, presidential and I am not male.

I come to this decision to write this life history humbly, not looking for pity or

compassion from anyone because I have dealt with this pain. When I look back at the experience, I never mention that I am an orphan because there is natural curiosity to ask for the details and when the tragic information is revealed, there is an overwhelming well of sympathy for asking about such painful moments. I know that I must include this experience like Paulo Freire (1994) who in *Pedagogy of Hope* writes:

That rainy afternoon, with the sky dark as lead over the bright green land, the ground soaked, I discovered the fabric of my depression. I became conscious of various relationships between the signs and the central core, the deeper core hidden within me. I unveiled the problem by clearly and lucidly grasping "why." I dug up the archeology of my pain (p. 30).

Now Freire (1994) explains the reasons for his pain.

Since then, never again has the relationship between rain, green mud or sticky clay sparked in me the depression that had afflicted me for years. I buried it, that rainy afternoon (p. 30).

I was really moved by the words of Paulo Freire because I could identify with his experience. He is recounting his experience that related to "knowing the fabric in which his suffering had been born in order to bury it" (p. 31). These words illustrate the pain that I carried within my being.

It is important to recognize what we carry within this suitcase. *[In Mary Young's dissertation Pimatisiwin: Walking in a Good Way (2003), she uses the suitcase in the literal form. When she went to residential school the Sister would not allow her to unpack her suitcase and now she has to revisit her experience. In this thesis I am using the suitcase as a symbol of the pain that I carry within my being].*

In order to move forward with my life, elders have told me to recognize the pain, I cannot hide, nor do I wish to conceal it. I have had to learn to get beyond this pain and now I want to honor the memory of my family. Today, I want to leave a written monument and this is the

reason that I have chosen to write my life history and show how I overcame this tragic experience. Once I dealt with this tragic loss, I was refreshed, renewed and now able to take on more meaningful educational experiences.

Before I start my life history I would like to make it clear that this is my story about my family, my mother, my father, my brother, my sisters and my children but this will not include any of my personal life with my husband. He is supportive of my work and I likewise support the efforts that he has made during his life but his stories will not be included here.

In the story of Mary John (Moran 1988) in her home community of Stoney Creek, she describes her life experiences. In one chapter she describes the fact that her parents arranged her marriage and how scared she was. She did not want to get married but her loving parents arranged her marriage, and therefore she had to follow through with her parents' wishes.

She went to the chief's house with her parents. Her parents spoke with the Chief and arranged the marriage of his son to Mary. Now, when I remember the days before my marriage, I think of a moth beating its wings against a lighted lamp. I knew that there was no escape for me. The chief, my parents and the watchmen had decided that I was to marry Lazare John, and from that decision there was no appeal (p. 66).<sup>1</sup>

When I was reading this section, I remembered my grandfather, Chris Paul's experience. He told me about his personal experience. He was brought to Nanaimo, British Columbia, to meet with a family. He was there and his future bride was there. The two sets of parents discussed their children and later agreed on the wedding of their children. Two weeks later my grandfather and his Nanaimo bride, Phoenia Wilson, were married. In the case of my grandfather, I was curious about how he felt about his wife. I remember asking him about this arranged marriage and he said that "soon after one was married, one begins to love your partner, wife,

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<sup>1</sup> In our villages we had watchmen. They were villagers who were appointed by the chief to arrange marriages, guard the morals of the young people and watch over the people of the reserve. The watchmen were sometimes stern and hard. A few were different: They were appointed by the chief because they felt a concern for the welfare of the



companion like this individual was your personal choice.”

Further, Dion (1979) described a Cree marriage ceremony as follows:

The wedding ceremony though simplicity itself was respected and seldom abused. Upon arrangements being completed by the parents or guardians of the couple to be wed, the bride accompanied by an aunt or grandmother, too with her a new pair of moccasins and bowl of food to the home of the groom. Upon his acceptance of the footwear, she sat down beside him and they ate the bowl of food together. An old man or old woman was asked to speak to the young couple and recommend the union to the Father of All (p. 16).

Although the wedding has less pomp and ceremony, nevertheless the couple was married. When the couple started their family the children served to strengthen their personal bonds to each other. Dion (1979) writes,

That tie was respected and seldom broken; each child born of such a union helped to strengthen the bonds, and the term, “lived happily ever after,” could be applied to many of the weddings of our olden days (p. 16).

Further to the short discussion about the Cree wedding ceremony there are other elements about Cree life that illustrate the belief in Creator and a respect and order in daily living.

The first thing in the morning the elder of the home gave thanks to the Father of All for the privilege of seeing another day, another sunrise, and prayed for health and strength to tide time over the day ahead. He never failed to give thanks before meals. ...At the young son's first kill, be it a bird or small animal, the parent carefully save the meat and dry it. Then later, when convenient, he would have it cooked along with other special foods; a number of invited guests, after eating their thanksgiving feast, would in turn wish the young hunter a long and prosperous life. The little daughter was similarly feted when she picked her first berry, or brought in her first stick of wood, or a bit of water (pp. 15-16).

The parents had the authority over their children and there was an overriding respect for the words of the elders. During puberty a young woman was in an isolated place with an elder, teacher and/or woman of knowledge. While she was away from the community, the young

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people (Moran, *Stoney Creek Woman*, p. 66).

woman received knowledge about her responsibility to herself, her future mate, her family and to her future children. In other words, she knew her responsibilities in this life.

As the children grew up they were never without an advisor who was an elderly man or woman. Obedience to parents and respect to elders were virtues always stressed upon. A child or young person was never allowed to pass in front of an older person. ...The young girl attaining the age of womanhood received special attention. A teepee was set away from the main camp where she spent at least two days with a wise old woman who by constant talk prepared her for the life ahead (p. 16).

In *Stoney Creek Woman* Moran (1988) writes about Mary John's arranged marriage but never mentions the details of her personal life with her husband. I think that she honored her husband by leaving out the details of their personal lives and I too would like to honor my husband in a similar way.

In this life history, I will describe my childhood, my adulthood, my parenthood, my return to undergraduate and graduate university degrees and my university instructor experience. As the background to this framework I focus on the important Federal policies like *British North America Act*, *Indian Act*, *Gradual Civilization Act*, *White Paper*, and *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Our lives as First Nations people are controlled by federal government policies. When the Prime Minister signed the *British North American Act*, he did not consult with the First Nations leaders to establish a country. After this country was established the federal government established laws to civilize, Christianize and assimilate First Nations subjects through the restrictive measures of the *Indian Act* and further assimilation policy with the *Gradual Civilization Act*.

First Nations peoples were not allowed to organize politically or to gather collectively; the federal government was able to control the physical and political movement of the First Nations leaders. Even though First Nations had lived through a century of control, the federal

government decided that if First Nations/Indians lost their special status through the *White Paper* policy, then there would be no "Indian Problem." With the 1951 changes to the *Indian Act* First Nations leaders were now allowed to meet and organize politically. With the impending changes in the *White Paper* the First Nations leaders rallied to the cause to save First Nations treaty and Aboriginal rights. The *Indian Control of Indian Education* policy became a joint national/political agreement with each of the provincial organizations working together with the Director of Education at the National Indian Brotherhood, the precursor to the Assembly of First Nations, the national First Nations status organization.

When the British Crown entered into agreements with First Nation leaders this was a nation to nation Treaty relationship using the peace pipe to show understanding and a mutual respect for our relationship with the Creator. Sometime later [*although history does not give the exact time*], the federal government changed the nation to nation relationship to a dependent and ward relationship where First Nations needed to seek permission to leave the reserve, to vote, and to sell their produce. The residential schools were responsible for forbidding the First Languages and practice of their traditional religions.

I feel that it is important to write the life history with references to the federal government policies to show that there was no freedom to chose your land, sell your produce, build relationships with the newcomers and make decisions about First Nations children's education. Besides this, I feel that it is extremely important to bring to mainstream society's attention that First Nations peoples are proud and caring peoples who believed in the Creator and therefore were not heathen, pagan, and uncivilized as mainstream literature portrayed them. Our traditional ways of life were different from the Europeans' but our way of life was not understood or respected. Newcomers felt that our way of life needed to be changed and later assimilated.

## **Literature on telling one's life and/or about life history**

I am not alone in writing my life history. Bataille and Sand (1984) mentioned that there are two models for telling one's life: the First Nations oral tradition and the written tradition of EuroAmericans. The oral tradition is based on storytelling and has a long history in songs, chants, lullabies, prayers, oratory, jokes and personal narrative.

## **Creation stories and ceremonies**

The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and the Office of the Treaty Commissioners worked together with Saskatchewan Treaty elders in order to gain an Indian understanding of Treaty. The Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan describe First Nations as children of the Creator who have been given everything that they need to survive both physically and spiritually. Cardinal and Hilderbrand (2000) transcribe the words of the Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan as the following:

The Creator has given us animals for food and shelter  
Water to drink and make things grow  
Trees for shelter, fuel and ceremonies  
Plants for medicine,  
Rocks to help make fire and arrowheads.  
The Creator gave us everything that they needed  
to survive both spiritually and materially (p. 6).

Although this section is written in a text by Saskatchewan Treaty elders, I feel confident that every area in Canada had been given the prayers and ceremonies to survive.

Each of the First Nations have their own creation stories and ceremonies and therefore have their own prayers and songs that are unique to their geographical areas. Maracle (1997), an Iroquois journalist, writes,

The Confederacy operates by the rules and procedures of the *Kayaneren=tsherakown*, the Great Law, which relates the history and prescribes the government and religion of the Iroquois. Under the Great Law, each clan is represented by a chief who is appointed by the head woman, the clanmother (p. 23).

Venne (1997), a Cree legal scholar, describes how the Cree First Nations dealt with the signing of Treaty 6.

The smoking of the pipe was acceptable for the Cree and the treaty commissioner for the conclusion of the agreement within Cree territory. Smoking the pipe would signify to the Creator the intention of the parties to keep the terms of the agreement in a strong binding manner. ... It was more than a pipe ceremony: it was a solemn undertaking by both sides before the Creator that this agreement would last into the future. Often, the Elders speak of a third party at the negotiations. They are speaking of the Creator, who was a witness to the process (p. 188).

By using the pipe ceremony as part of the treaty signing, the Cree First Nations, like other First Nations, used their ceremonies in their daily life. Further, Dion (1979) discusses the many ceremonies that the Alberta Prairie and Woodland Cree practiced. Dion (1979) describes the Sundance. This ceremony is called the "Thirst Dance." He describes the searching for the center pole, returning to the camp and setting up the lodge as follows:

When the time arrives to raise the great tree, a number of men get together armed with long poles and ropes. The dance maker stands at the top end of the tree which rests on a strong tripod. Here, with a rattle in one hand and the wing of an eagle in the other the headman begins to sing. After repeating his song three times, the men begin to raise the upper part of the big tree while others hold the butt end down. If the tree goes right up without wavering the headman gives thanks, if on the other hand the tree goes from side to side before landing in its place all is not going to be well with the dance (p. 39).

Dion describes how the circular lodge is built and how long the ceremony is to take place.

The next ceremony that he describes is the Chicken Dance, a men's dance.<sup>2</sup> Next, he discusses the Witigo Dance, a clown dance, Wapiti society, a women's society, Bear Dance, male dancers who sometimes charged the crowd and "always ran away from a one-eyed person" and lastly the medicine dance. This ceremony is described as being held at the end of the summer when the medicines are picked and ready for trade. This ceremony is held before the Ghost Dance and the smoke lodge.

Although he mentions these ceremonies in *My Tribes the Crees*, Dion does not explain the details or significance of these ceremonies. First Nations ceremonies are sacred and personal experiences and therefore the details are not made public. The lists of the ceremonies are included here to illustrate our spiritual connection to the Creator. Although this is not an exhaustive list, these illustrations show that the First Nations believed in the Creator and they received everything that they needed to survive both physically and spiritually. Although the laws that govern these ceremonies are not included, it is helpful to illustrate that through oral tradition Native spirituality is passed on to present and future generations.

Cruikshank (1990), a cultural anthropologist, describes "storytelling as a universal activity that provides a vehicle for the expression of ideas, particularly in societies relying on oral history" (Preface, p. ix). Cruikshank collaborated with three Yukon Native women elders to write their life histories. The three elders have the desire to leave a wealth of knowledge for their children. Cruikshank describes her frustration that the three elder women originally do not want to follow her format. After working with the three elders, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned, she writes their story.

Similarly, Kirkness (1994) a Cree visionary woman, helped to establish the First Nations House of Learning, wrote *Knot-La-Cha : The Autobiography of Chief Simon Baker. Knot-La-Cha*

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<sup>2</sup> The Chicken Dance is a kind of gallop; some dance in the same place while others prance around.

translates 'man with a kind heart'. Chief Simon Baker worked as an elder in residence at the University of British Columbia. He asked Verna Kirkness to write his biography because he wanted others to learn First Nations history and culture from his life experiences.

Further, Wickwire recorded, compiled and edited stories of Harry Robinson, an Okanagan elder and storyteller. In the introduction of *Write it on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller*, Wickwire (1989) describes their joint decision to tape all Harry Robinson's storytelling conversations with her. He laments the loss of the Okanagan language and seems to feel that it is more important to make sure that stories are not lost and therefore is quite comfortable telling the stories in English. Harry Robinson describes himself as a storyteller.

Harry has always had a precise mind and a startling memory. He has often berated me when I have forgotten a detail which had had told me years earlier. One time he told me that he could tell stories for "twenty-one hours or more" when he got started. "Kinda hard to believe," he continued, "but I do it, because this is my job, I'm a storyteller." (pp. 13-14)

### **The captivity model**

In the life history model there are a number of paradigms for telling one's life. Firstly, there is the captivity model which was used by the clergy who wanted to inspire faith in the face of insurmountable odds. In attempting to define this narrative there were early Jesuit missionaries stories like Brebuf. Drew Hayden Taylor (1998) describes the *Sainte Marie Among the Hurons*. Taylor has shifted the captivity model into a humorous story where he asks why the federal government would consider building a theme park on a place where the French Jesuits and Hurons<sup>3</sup> were killed by the Iroquois.

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3 Sainte Marie was founded by the French Jesuits in the land of the Wendat or Huron peoples. In July 1648 the

### **Spiritual conversion stories**

The next type of model is the spiritual conversion story, maybe, one might say, telling of becoming a Christian. In these missionary stories the prime focus is to convert the “pagan, heathen and savage.” Steckley (1999) writes about Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk who was acclaimed as a saint who interceded to God for the faithful. She is “attributed with miraculous cures ... Father Francois-Xavier de Charevoix wrote that Tekakwitha was the “New Star in the New World” because of her shining, positive influence on the faithful, meaning all Roman Catholics. Steckley mentions that Pope John Paul II has beatified Kateri, which means that she is closer to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church and recognized as a saint. When this canonization is proclaimed, Kateri is going to be the first Native to be so honored.

### **Slave models**

Then there is the Black narrative. Bataille and Sand (1984) use the slave narrative to explain and provide insight into the experiences of First Nations people. The slave narrative chronicles experiences in culture foreign to a white audience and provides insights into an individual society.

### **Ethnographic narratives**

Next, there is the ethnographic narrative which is interested in collecting information on

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Iroquois attacked the village at St. Joseph and Father Antoine lost his life. One year later, Father Jean de Breffeu and Gabriel Lalemont along with hundreds of Wendat were captured and killed. [http://www.wyandot.org/wn\\_stmar.html](http://www.wyandot.org/wn_stmar.html),



the customs of a specific tribe and is not intended to be a literary life story. The complete details of an individual's life are not included in this type of narrative. In the introduction to *Paddling to Where I stand: Agnes Alfred, Qwiqwasutinuxw Noblewoman*, Martine Reid (2004) mentioned that the use of ethnographic documents were traced back to Franz Boas, the founder of modern scientific anthropology in North America (introduction: xix). Further, Reid mentioned that anthropology had used this type of narrative as a method of explaining some of the theories of "disappearing races" (Krupat 1985; Brumble 1988) or perspectives on a worldview or culture (p. xix). Ethnographic narrative uses the anthropological approach to life history.

#### **"As-told-to" stories**

The next type of narrative is called the "as-told-to," which derives its existence from the ethnographic form. This narrative has an editor and an informant who tells her story. These two individuals create a partnership to work together to complete a story of one's life. In reviewing *Early Native American writings* the ethnographic and "as-told-to" narratives become blurred with the smallpox stories. Jaskoski (1996) writes:

William Warren's *History of the Ojibway People* was written in the 1850s but was not published until 1885, more than thirty years after the author's death at the age of twenty-eight. In collecting Ojibwa traditions during the 1840s, Warren could well have received eyewitness accounts of the 1780 epidemic. In any case, he was the first English-speaking historian to record for publication the supposition that smallpox was deliberately introduced by colonizers as a weapon of war. It is tempting to speculate whether, if Warren had written thirty years later, or if he had seen Parkman's documentary sources, he might have been less eager to defend the commander of Fort Michilimackinac (pp. 149–150).

It seems that neither Parkman nor Warren, both writing about the smallpox epidemic, had the

complete story and therefore needed each other to illustrate what happened.

Francis Parkman's smallpox record and William Warren's second smallpox story are incomplete but complementary; Parkman's is all intention, Warren's all results. As narration, each supplies the other's lack: Parkman offers confirmation for the deliberate introduction of contagion that is missing in Warren, and Warren details the conclusion of such an action (p. 150).

### **Identity narratives**

Further to these, there is a type of life story which is an identity narratives. Identity narratives explain the focus of one's life struggles. An example in the *Early Native American Writings* (Jaskoski 1996) collection of writers, Hockbruck and Dudensing-Reichel (1996) discuss the works of Caleb Cheeshateaumauk and Joel Hiacoomes who were the first Native American students at Harvard Indian College. These two students seemed to fulfill the missionaries' zeal to convert to the Christian religions:

In 1656, some twenty years after its foundation, Harvard College incorporated the first institution of high education for the aboriginal population in the English colonies. The aim of the "Indian College" was the education of Indian youths who appeared to be promising proselytes and who could later propagate the gospel as well as European civilization among their tribes. In this the Puritans were following the example of the Spanish colonizers who attempts to train Native Americans as teachers, preachers, however proved more successful (p. 1).

Caleb Cheeshateaumauk, a Harvard graduate who was fluent in English, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, wrote *Honoratissimi Benefactores*, a graduation address to his benefactors, in Latin. The following verses illustrate his religious training and thankfulness to his benefactors.

God delegated you to be our patrons, and He endowed you with wisdom and intimate compassion, so that you might perform the work of bringing blessings to us pagans, who derive our life and origin from our forebears. We used to be naked in soul and body, alien from all humanity, lead around in the desert by all sorts of errors.

...And we will especially give thanks to God the most excellent and

highest, who has revealed the sacred scriptures to us, and who has shown to us the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the way of truth and life. Besides all this, another hope is left us through the depth of divine mercy: that we may become instruments to spread and propagate the gospel among our kin and neighbors, so that they also may know God, and Christ.

Joel Hiacoomes also wrote about his gratitude to his benefactors. Although Hochbruck and Dudensing-Reichel suggest that these writings may have been tampered with by the instructors, the authors are quick to conclude that the writings illustrate that the students have become Christians and seem to have forsaken their traditional beliefs.

From the perspective of those of their contemporaries who adhered to traditional beliefs and values, the Indian students had forsaken their cultural identities. The Indian who embraced Christianity was compelled in effect, to commit cultural suicide. He was required to renounce not only his own personal past, but that of his forefathers as well, forsaking – and despising – all traditional beliefs (Ronda in Jaskoski, p. 38).

In her discussion of identity Christine Quintasket, an Okanogan, described her own mixed blood. In her novel *Cogewea, the Half-blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range*, Christine Quintasket (1981) uses her pen name of Mourning Dove and is able to accept her mixed blood because her family shared in both the traditional Okanogan culture and mainstream society. She seems to have intertwined her personal experiences of an Okanogan mother and part white father. She writes a romantic novel about a woman who has two possible suitors, one is white and the other is mixed blood. Besides this, she adds stories from her personal knowledge of ranch life and Native American folklore. She skillfully combines the stories of mainstream life and Okanogan way of life.

Cogewea passes an afternoon reading a western romance. Reading marks her as a heroine. She has leisure time during which she indulges in an activity that is emblematic of middle-class heroines; her comfortable location on the “veranda” also attests to the leisure and spaciousness of her life. By contrast, Cogewea’s Salish grandmother,

having spent the morning weaving a basket, rests in her tipi, which lies in sight of the porch. Mourning Dove's juxtaposition implies that while Cogewea has adopted many aspects of the white world, the traditional ways of her Indian ancestry are still in view (p. 7).

Mourning Dove tried to have her manuscript published but was unable to achieve this goal. She decided to go to business school but she could not forget her writing. She had spoken to her friends that she could not forget her writing. Langdon (p. 211), a friend, wrote to Mourning Dove and asked her to contact Lucullus McWhorter. He provided editorial assistance and made it possible for her to publish her novel.

Like Mourning Dove, Maria Campbell's (1973) *Halfbreed* is the autobiography about her Metis identity which includes her struggles with poverty, discrimination, and destruction of her family. In personal discussions with me, Maria mentioned that her story was actually closer to one thousand pages because she used her text as a way to achieve personal healing. By the very title and focus of the autobiography *Halfbreed*, Maria chose to discuss her identity.

Further to this, Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) wrote *Thunder in My Soul*. This text is a collection of previously written and published articles that are now compiled into a new book form. In one of her articles, she discusses identity and the many terms that are used to describe the First Peoples of Canada. The terms used might be Aboriginal, Native, First Nations and Indian. She does not feel comfortable with all these terms and not being able to identify herself. She decides that she is more comfortable with the term Indian because she is familiar with the term, so this is what she calls herself.

### **Landscape narratives**

The next type of life story narrative is called landscape. The life story of Mary John

describes the geography of her homeland that greatly impacted on her identity. "The village of Stoney Creek was my world and I loved it. "I loved the log houses all set in rows and the little hillocks and the creek which ran through the village" (Moran p. 26). She described her residential school experience which was difficult but made bearable when she could think about the home landscape. Further, this landscape helped to heal the negative impacts of loneliness and sense of loss by being away from the family that she loved.

### **The role of gender**

In describing a few of the books that are written about life history, it is difficult to define what American Indian woman, Indigenous women and/or First Nations women would describe as their life stories. For many women, their life stories are relegated to less literary forms of writing such as personal diary. In writing their life stories, even women of stature focus on the reminiscences of their childhood, family life and personal growth. It is important to mention that American Indian Autobiography is not considered a literary form and does not fit the conception of autobiographical or life stories held by scholars and non-Indian readers. American Indian Autobiography is a combination of the oral and the written tradition and therefore does not fit into their literary form. It is possible that there needs to be a new term coined to describe this new literary form, maybe a term like "ora-itten," combination of being oral and written.

My gender is important to this discussion. The individuals who do autobiographies and biographies are usually male. Women's stories are usually placed into informal writings like diaries but not a biography. Contrary to mainstream ideas, the Indigenous views of Vine Deloria (1984) are that each individual has a special gift to offer to his/her community. This special gift is nurtured from the time of birth and respected by all the members of the community (p. 94).

Deloria (1984) writes that he “placed modesty above all other qualities that characterize Indian women.” Continuing, he refers to Indian women as being beacons of self respect and honor for their individual families and community and well-being of their tribes (p. 18). He is referring to Indian women as being strong members of their communities who are the mothers, grandmothers, teachers, mentors, role models, guardians and nourishers of their cultural identity. Since the other half of our world is balanced by the male, it is important to mention that both halves are important in the teaching and welfare to our Indigenous and/or First Nations children.

Mary Young (2003), a doctoral graduate and an Anishinabe woman, writes about her residential school experience in which the Roman Catholic nun refused to allow her to place her family pictures near her bed and did not allow her to unpack her personal belongings from the suitcase. She feels that at age forty-nine she still needs to go through this experience and unpack her suitcase. She has learned to look at her *Anishinabe* way. The suitcase came to symbolize her connection to home and represented her relationship to family and her community.

In referring to the suitcase, I had the feeling that this symbolizes the sorrows and sadness of our First Nations experience. We feel these injustices but somehow we are too young to challenge the authority or somehow we have fear of ridicule. In either way, our suitcase, much to our own personal experience, suffers the same fate and is placed into the storage room of life.... but now needs to come out (p. 4).

Maybe, if we all start to unpack our suitcases of all the negative experiences of hurt and sadness and the real life experiences of physical, sexual and psychological abuses, our communities will start to heal, and we will look at the positive and healthier approaches to life and healing for our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

### **Indigenous life stories**

In reviewing the idea of suitcases carrying all the pain and sorrow of our childhood, I was

struck with the idea that we all carry our negative experiences with us as part of our life stories. We need to find a way to unpack the suitcases but it is difficult because in the past five hundred years, our ceremonial ways have been forbidden, our languages forbidden, our status revoked and our family relationship removed and placed in residential school. With colonization the Christian churches worked with the federal government to civilize, christianize and assimilate the young First Nations children into mainstream Canadian society. In order to bring about a new beginning, elders need to be involved with First Nations youth to restoring and reestablishing our cultural ways. The youth need to unpack the hurt of the loss of culture, the suffering because of the loss of language, the shame because of the loss of identity, the sorrow for the loss of our relationships with family and the sadness because of the lack of academic achievement.

Before concluding this discussion of life histories, it is important to return to the manner in which Ruoff in *Early Native American Writings* (Jaskowski 1996) and Mourning Dove (Quintasket 1981) provoke different focuses in their discussions. Ruoff questions whether the students had the ability to learn European languages of Greek, Hebrew, Latin and English and further questions whether these students have the ability to become educated. "Such mastery was often used as a yardstick to measure whether Native Americans were capable of being educated" (Foreword, p. viii).

In reviewing this section it is important to note that there is not only the discussion of identity but the philosophical ideas about Indians (First Nations). In the stories about the first Harvard graduates it seems more important for Ruoff to question the authenticity and intellectual ability of the Harvard College students to become educated. The writer hints at the possible errors in the article but I think that the underlying and hidden agenda is to compare and contrast the stereotypes about being civilized and uncivilized, Christian and pagan and heathen students.

If one is able to learn the Greek, Latin, Hebrew and English, should they be considered educated?

In contrast, in Mourning Dove, Quintasket has knowledge of her era and is prepared to correct the stereotypes about the princess and the squaw. In the history of the United States there is the princess story of Pocahontas who saved John Smith from death. In Canada there is no story about the princess although the renowned Mohawk poet, novelist and recitalist Pauline Johnson is identified as an Indian princess.<sup>4</sup> She wanted to be an actress but would have been considered a woman of ill-repute or a prostitute. In order to fulfill her own dreams, she traveled Canada, United States and Europe doing poetry recitals. In the first half of her recital she wore the Indian Princess beaded hide dress and the second half, she was outfitted in Europe's highest fashion. On the other hand, the term "squaw" is a negative term that is used to describe a woman who may be used physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

The concept of "squaw" belittles the lives of Native men and women alike. The squaw is a drudge who is forced to endure hard work while her husband swaps hunting stories with his friends....[T]he Native woman appears to have no social input, no choice in spouses, and no respect. She is inferior to her husband and necessary only for her labor and her sexual and reproductive duties. Her sexual favors can be sold by her husband while, she meekly acquiesces. (Klein and Ackerman 1995, p. 5)

Mourning Dove is conscious of the negative and derogatory meaning of "squaw" but tries to transform and change the ideas from a biological to a literary and cultural construct. She worked as a leader for woman's issues and girls in trouble with the law. Through her leadership roles, she used her experiences with the non-Native commands to try to change the negative and derogatory ways in which Native women are viewed.

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<sup>4</sup> Speckley writes about Pocahontas as a person who was young and beautiful, and yet still untouched. An erotic virgin, Pocahontas invited and welcomed the white male adventurer, rejecting her own culture and heritage as inferior. Symbolically, the land represented surrendered itself to the redeeming touch of the white colonizer (Spark 1995, pp. 139-140).



Both Ruoff and Mourning Dove had their own interpretations of historical events. The first Harvard graduates were considered educated because they were able to learn Greek, Latin, Hebrew and English but some may think that the professors wrote the selections for them. I think that these authors tried to suggest that the first Harvard graduates were not intelligent enough to be able to learn the many European languages. Likewise Mourning Dove used her writings and her experiences to change the attitudes toward Native American women. She used her writings to try to correct the stereotypes against Native women being a *squaw* or a *princess*.

My research purpose for writing my Indigenous life history focused on my search for healing; correcting stereotypes of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal students; understanding the impact of major federal government policies upon Aboriginal people; and examining the role of Aboriginal parents in their children's education. I chose the Indigenous life story methodology because it allowed me to remember and be reflective on critical incidents of my life stages: childhood, adulthood, motherhood and educator. These Indigenous life stories exemplified the relationship between an Aboriginal family and the wider Canadian society regarding the impact of major federal laws and educational policies. The Indigenous life story methodology also challenged me to critically explore the following research topics/questions: ways of healing from deep emotional pain; overcoming stereotypes about Aboriginal women and Aboriginal learners; examining parental involvement; and facilitating Aboriginal student success.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DESCRIPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

Before I go into the stories about my childhood, it is important to give a historical background to Snuneymuxw First Nation, the place where I was born. Traditional elders, whether they be Cree, Dene, Sauteaux, Assiniboine, or Coast Salish, all have stories about how they came to occupy their traditional territory. On the Snuneymuxw First Nation Treaty Office website, creation stories are as follows:

We also have several original stories of how we came to live in Snuneymuxw territory. One such story describes how the first man and woman were dropped onto Mt. Benson and eventually made their way to Nanaimo Harbour. Their sons eventually established the winter village at Departure Bay and False Narrows.

Besides this origin story the Snuneymuxw First Nation share their trickster stories with mink and raven. Continuing on their website, the Snuneymuxw First Nation Treaty Office describes mink and raven stories as follows:

There are many stories about *Creator* and his wanderings about the land turning humans and animals into stone, the Snuneymuxw have several stories about mink and raven who acquire through trickery, or the help of other animals, fire, tools and other needed necessities of life. These stories contain our worldview and consciously express our identity, spiritual traditions and connections to the land.

#### **Mainstream historical background**

While the Snuneymuxw First Nation has stories of their origin, the mainstream history usually begins with the stories of explorers. In 1792 two Spanish explorers Alcala Galiano and

Cayetano Valdes anchored near Gabriola Island. Loraine Littlefield (2004), who has researched the history of the Snuneymuxw people, records this meeting as:

The arrival of the Spanish in 1792 was probably not the Snuneymuxw's first contact experience with Europeans as many maritime fur trade were annually visiting the Northwest coast at this time. ...Our eagerness to trade for Spanish goods indicated that we were not ignorant of them.

Sixty years after the Spanish explorers the Hudson Bay Company established Nanaimo in 1852. With the fur trade the Hudson Bay Company opened a post at Fort Langley in 1827 on the Frazer River and Fort Victoria in 1843 on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The important trade items were furs and dried herring for blankets, shells, iron and beads. Littlefield wrote about the Snuneymuxw trader who observed the use of coal in the blacksmith shop.

He informed the Hudson's Bay Company officials that coal deposits were plentiful in Snuneymuxw territory. This knowledge encouraged the company to establish a post and start a coal mining operation.

Once the Hudson Bay Company acquired the knowledge about the large deposits of coal it became important to gain title of the land. Governor James Douglas led the government to secure treaties with the First Nations and take over the coal fields. The Douglas treaties were signed between 1850 and 1854. Littlefield (1995) described how Douglas reported the treaty news to London as follows:

I observed the request of the Governor and Committee that I should take an early opportunity to extinguish the Indian claim in the coal district and I shall attend to their instruction as soon as I think it safe, and prudent to renew the question of Indian rights, which always gives rise to troublesome excitements, and has on every occasion been productive of serious disturbances.

After the Hudson Bay Company purchased the coal mine, it did not flourish under their management. The Hudson Bay Company coal operation was never successful and in 1862 the Hudson Bay Company sold the coal operation to the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land

Company. Once the coal mine was under new management the Snuneymuxw First Nations were under pressure to move off their land but the band resisted.

We want to keep our land here and up the river. Some white men tell us we shall soon have to remove again; but we don't want to lose these reserves. All our land is gone and we have been paid very little for it. God gave it to us a long time ago and now we are very poor, and do not know where our homes will be if we leave this. We want our land up the river to plant for food. Mr. Douglas said it should be ours, and our children's after we are gone. We hope you our new chief will say the same.

Governor James Douglas signed fourteen treaties, of which Nanaimo was the last one.

Joe Wyse, a son of Squqnistun, the first name on the treaty document, described the treaty events as follows:

I was at that meeting. I can remember all the people in that house, and lots outside, but I was only a small boy standing beside my father. Then the Hudson Bay men talked to the Indians. This coal is here, they said, it is no good for you, and we would like it, but we want to be friends, so if you will let us come and take as much of the black rock as we want, we will be good to you. They told my father, the good Queen, our great white chief, far over the water, will look after your people for all time, and they will be given much money so that they will never be poor ([Http://snuneymuxw.ca/](http://snuneymuxw.ca/)).

Gilbert Sproat, one of the reserve commissioners, had once worked for the coal company and was not interested in setting aside more land for the Snuneymuxw. Littlefield's email confirmed the amount of acres per family.

In 1876 the Snuneymuxw population was 223 and the number of male heads recorded by Blenkinsop census was 85. If ten acres per head that would have been 850 acres. As 85 divided into 637 acres equals seven and a half acres per family (email, August 3, 2004).

There were six reserves set out for the Snuneymuxw: one on the Nanaimo Harbour, three on Nanaimo River and two on Gabriola Island.

## **My first years**

I was born during World War Two. My father went on a commercial fishing trip, accompanied by my mother. I am not sure if my parents made it out to the high seas before I decided it was time to come. All I heard from family was that they had to rush to shore and I was born premature at Comox, British Columbia. One of my uncles always mentioned to me, "you were so small that I could fit you in my hand and use a head scarf for your diaper." My uncle was a commercial fisherman, over six feet tall and over two hundred and fifty pounds, I am not sure that I was that small. Since I was born a little premature, I was characterized as a person who was always in a hurry and who did not seem to have time to waste. I was nearly born on my father's troller, which was a family size fishing boat.

Comox (see Figure 3) "is situated below snowcapped mountains. The smell of ocean air, the stillness of a West Coast rainforest, beautiful islands, great fishing, mountains to ski, alpine meadows to hike and rivers to paddle, super scuba diving are all available at Comox Valley. In the tourist outlets and on the net, Comox translates as the "land of plenty"

(<http://www.tourismmall.victoria.bc.ca/aavanisle/comoxactive.html> on May 19, 2004). This name seems to be good description since this town is the home of 12,000 residents and a tourist center with marinas, golf course, beaches, hospital and Air Force base.



Figure 3. Map of Comox. Courtesy of Tourism Mall, Victoria, B.C.

In my family, I have an older brother, therefore I am not the first born but I am the oldest of four girls. My parents lived in a two bedroom bi-level style house that had an upstairs attic bedroom and a cement basement which was a storage area for the deep freeze and the furnace. The living room was open area with large picture windows and natural wood-stain side paneling. In the kitchen there was a large wooden table with six wooden chairs, clear wood stained cupboards, an icebox or a refrigerator and a kitchen stove. In between the kitchen and the master bedroom there was a large bathroom. The bathroom had two doors. The second door opened to the other bedroom on the main floor. Upstairs there was a visitor bedroom.

The outside of the house was covered with artificial red brick type paneling and a black roof. From the back door and to the left of the house there was a chicken house and pen. My mother always raised her own chickens. To the center area of the backyard, my mother always had a vegetable garden and a strawberry patch. The garden and the berries were planted for

immediate family needs rather than for selling the produce. To the extreme back yard there was a trail that led to the railway tracks, at the end of reserve lot. I think that the train passed by once a day in the evening. This train delivered coal, one of the main resources mined in Nanaimo.

My father was an extremely private, kind, caring and an independent person. He believed that he could take care of his family and he did not need the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. He built his own house, boathouse, and wharf for docking his troller. He was close to his brothers and sisters but it took a lot of time to become a successful commercial fisherman<sup>5</sup> and to be a loving husband and father.

My mother was not the youngest daughter because there were two younger than her. It has been a difficult task to characterize my parents because sometimes I think that I only want to portray the happy side of my parents. My mother was a stay-at-home mother but Littlefield (1995) mentions that most women were seasonal labourers working in the canneries, berry and hop fields and domestic duties during the early nineteen fifties. She was a loving and caring person who looked after the normal activities of the home. She did the cooking, cleaning and laundry as well as the shopping and our homecare. It is important to distinguish my mother from the rest of the women because she chose to be independent and to work at home with a large vegetable garden and smoking fish and other shellfish.

My mother looked after our daily needs but discussed our bad behavior with my father who was the disciplinarian. They seemed to discuss their parental roles or maybe there was an understanding that my father would be the disciplinarian but they discussed very little in front of us, their children. I never heard my parents argue or have heated discussions. My mother Sarah was a jovial person who loved to have company and entertain family but both my parents were

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<sup>5</sup> The commercial fishermen used gill nets. These were large nets made of a special type of mesh which caught the fish under its gill covers when it tried to extract its head. <http://www.eaglefeathergallery.com/fish.html>, May

together as a family but reserved to the outside world.

Besides my parents, my uncle Jimmy died in the fire with my younger brother and two sisters. He was my dad's youngest brother who was a commercial fisherman but he was still single. Because he was my dad's youngest brother, he was able to stay with the family. He was the only person who could come into our family and bring special treats for us children. We loved him for his special attention and all the special treats. My father did not believe that we needed to have candies and all of these special treats but did not take the joy away from our uncle who succeeded in bringing these special treats to us. My uncle Jimmy did not come very often but when he did, we always appreciated his company and his loving attention. In writing about my uncle Jimmy I remembered parts of the story of Mary John (Moran, 1988) who also had sections describing her father who refused to allow the children to have candy and sweets.

Later, in my childhood years, I remember going down to the wharf and waiting for my father to arrive after a long duration at sea. Since our family lived on the Nanaimo waterfront reserve number one, it was a short walk across the road to the wharf where one could view all the boats on the seas. It was a happy occasion when he returned. Now he had time for my mom Sarah and us children.

In those days, travel was a big adventure but because most people did not own cars, this adventure was almost non-existent. At Christmas time, my maternal grandfather and my two aunts Dorothy and Anna came to visit. These holidays were happy times where there was much conversation and teasing. He was always teasing my mother.

*[Once, not that long ago, I was visiting with my maternal aunt and I started to ask her about my childhood. Sometimes, I think that we have memories but we somehow only recollect good memories and sometimes glorify the existing ones to change sad and hurtful memories into*



*pleasant and joyful memories. I mentioned to her that my parents were always teasing each other and always laughing. I asked her, is this true or am I making this up? She confirmed that yes, this was true. During the writing of my life history, I will insert my own ideas that are relevant and sometimes give a little more detail to a moment or a thought. I will share my reflections in italics.]*

### **A childhood Christmas**

One Christmas there were no glad tidings. It was near Christmas and my father was away. I am not really sure, but I am guessing that he was out fishing. Now it is the holidays. This year we are alone. My maternal grandfather Christopher Paul and my aunts Dorothy Paul and Anna Spahan did not come to visit. It was Christmas Eve and we, the children, are awaiting Christmas. There is a knock on the door. My mother goes to answer the door and my father asked her, "who's there?" He decides to come and see. Because the persons who are at the door were Royal Canadian Mounted Police, RCMP, I am told to go to the other room. I hurried into the living room and hide behind one of the chesterfields.

The policeman is asking my father questions about where he has hidden the liquor. My father tells him that he does not have any liquor. He decides to push his way into the house and search. My father tries to stop him because this is private property. The policeman starts to fight with my father. I am behind the chair and can see everything that is happening. My father does not want to fight but I think that he decides that he needs to defend himself, after all, this is our home. The policeman knocks my father down and kicks him in the face. Now, there is blood streaming down his face and his eyes are nearly closed.

The two policemen work together to put the cuffs on my father and start to lead him away.

I remember my mother crying, and saying, "he didn't do anything wrong, why are you taking him away?" I am not sure what happened next, except that my father did not come home for that Christmas. When he returned, I heard my mother ask him what he is going to do about the police brutality. He said, "nothing." She kept questioning him and he said, "nothing." She questions him on who is the informant but again, he said. "nothing."

When all of this police fighting took place in our home, I think it was around 1950 and I was only seven or eight years old. I did not know what to think. I knew that my father is away but I do not think that any policeman was charged in the incident. I think that the private and reserved side of my father's personality wouldn't have allowed a lengthy trial. I think that he would have preferred to just let the incident be forgotten or maybe he knew the colonizing state of Indian Affairs. The Indian Agent controlled all the activities of the reserve such as needing permission to leave the reserve, to sell produce and it was forbidden to have liquor on the reserve. My father realized that he could not pursue police brutality charges because of the power and control of the Indian Agent and the police. If the police could enter his house, what control did he have to stop them? He probably felt like the colonization process worked into their favour and their control and therefore he felt helpless and did nothing.

### **The big picture**

Before concluding this chapter it is important to reflect on the Indian ideas and policies in the history of Canada. In 1858 the leaders met at Charlottetown, Quebec and London. In the nine years that followed the government did not meet or consult with First Nations peoples about their intentions of establishing a new country or their new Indian policy. At Confederation in 1867 the first Prime Minister John A Macdonald passed the *British North America Act* that

established Canada as a country. This Act had the responsibility "for Indians and Indian Lands." In the British North American Act the First Prime Minister exercised an absolute power when he confirmed that First Nations should be assimilated into mainstream society. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, RCAP (Canada 1996), described this event.

The first Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, soon informed Parliament that it would be Canada's goal "to do away with the tribal systems and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion (Volume 1, p. 179).

After the government decided to assimilate the Indians, Alexander Morris, a treaty negotiator, confirmed and supported the Indian policies. Morris said:

Let us have Christianity and civilization among the Indian tribes...let us have a wise and paternal government...doing its utmost to help and elevate the Indian population, who have been cast upon our care...and Canada will be enabled to feel, that in a truly patriotic spirit, our country has done its duty to the redman (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 179).

Now Prime Minister J.A. Macdonald had pressed the political machine to move forward with assimilating policies with the *Indian Act*, in education with the establishment of residential schools, social policies, and economic development with the inability to sell produce produced on the reserves. Starting in 1857 with the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* the federal government established the goal of assimilation and set into motion the destruction of the traditional governments replacing them with a municipal type government that was controlled in Ottawa. The government continued its assimilation focus with the passing of the 1876 and 1880 *Indian Act* and the 1884 *Indian Advancement Act* to control every aspect of First Nations' life

The federal government took for itself the power to mould, unilaterally, every aspect of life on reserves and to create whatever infrastructure it deemed necessary to achieve the desired end - assimilation through enfranchisement and as a consequence, the eventual disappearance of Indians as distinct peoples (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p.180).

During this period the federal government regulations established a separation between

mainstream Canadians and the Aboriginal peoples. The First Nations are separated from Metis and the Inuit. In the *Indian Act*, 1869, the federal government established the clause that a First Nations woman who married a non-Native will lose First Nations status for herself and for her children. Besides losing status, the federal government in 1884 and 1885 continued their assault with the prohibition of religious practices on the coast with the Potlatch and on the prairies with Sundance.

The potlatch was portrayed as the most formidable of all obstacles in the way of the Indians becoming Christian or even civilized. Participation in the Potlatch was made a criminal offence, and it was also illegal to appear in traditional costume or dance at festivals (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 183).

Judge Alfred Scow discusses how the *Indian Act* impacted on the practice of our official ceremonies. He wrote:

The *Indian Act* did a very destructive thing in outlawing the ceremonials. This provision of the *Indian Act* was in place for close to 75 years and what that did was it prevented the passing down of our oral history. It prevented the passing down of our values. It meant an interruption of the respected forms of government that we used to have, and we did have forms of government be they oral and not in writing before any of the Europeans came to this country. We had a system that worked for us. We respected each other. We had ways of dealing with disputes. We did not have institutions like the courts that we are talking about now. We did not have the massive bureaucracies that are in place today that we have to go through in order to get some time of recognition and some kind of resolution (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 292).

Further controls were placed on the First Nations. The federal government established the pass system which made it impossible to sell produce and to leave the reserve. The First Nations had to seek permission to leave the reserve and the non-Native had to seek permission to go onto a reserve. There were strict regulations that controlled the movements of First Nations. Even if a First Nations had perfect economic proposals the banks were forbidden from giving loans to First Nations who were living on the reserves.

No one who had not obtained an agent's leave would be allowed, on an Indian reserve, to barter, directly or indirectly, with any Indian, or sell to him any goods or supplies, cattle or other animals, without the special license in writing (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 296).

In reviewing the controls that the federal government placed on First Nations, the central focus of assimilation was established through the schools. In 1849 the federal government and the Churches established boarding schools close to reserves but the results of assimilation are not achieved.

In 1879 Sir John A. Macdonald's government pressured by the Catholic and Methodist churches to fulfil the education clauses of the recently negotiated western treaties, had assigned Nicolas Flood Davin the task of reporting on the work of Industrial Schools... in the United States and on the advisability of establishing similar institutions in the North West Territories of the Dominion. ...Children he advised, should be removed from their homes, as the influence of the wigwam was stronger than that of [day] school and be kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions - the residential school (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 334).

Between 1879 and 1931 the Catholic and Christian churches established eighty residential schools across the country. The male students spent half their time in school and the other half working on the farms with the animals or with the crops. The girls spent half their time in the classroom and the other half learning domestic duties of cooking, sewing and maintaining the school grounds. Dion (1979) mentions that he attended Onion Lake residential school and went to school 364 days of a year (p. 119). The only day that they had a holiday was on July 1<sup>st</sup>, but other than that they spent their time at the residential school.

When the federal government noticed that the First Nations was not moving into the direction of assimilation the *Indian Act* placed more restrictions. "To the privilege of voluntary enfranchisement, officials added compulsory enfranchisement in 1876 for those who obtained higher education" (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 287). There were further restrictions on the use of liquor.

Legislation was passed in 1874 making it an offence punishable by one month in jail for an Indian to be intoxicated on or off reserve. Failure to name the seller of the alcohol in question could lead to an additional 14 days' imprisonment. These provisions became part of the 1876 *Indian Act* supplemented by the prohibition on simple possession of alcohol by an Indian on-reserve (p. 293).

In reviewing the voting rights there seems to be an inconsistency between eastern and western Canada. At the time of Confederation First Nations (Indians) did not have the right to vote. This voting policy changed for those First Nations who were willing to enfranchise. "In 1885, however, the right to vote in federal elections was extended to Indians in eastern Canada; eligibility included male Indians who met the qualifications of occupying real property worth at least \$50.00 (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 299). In Western Canada, the First Nations (Indians) were not allowed to vote. Don Mills, Minister of Indian Affairs, gave his opinion that they should be allowed to go "from a scalping party to the polls" (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 299). In 1898 the legislation that allowed the eastern First Nations to vote was repealed and the First Nations were not allowed to cast their ballot federally.

After the First World War, the First Nations veterans were allowed to vote because these men were automatically enfranchised. In 1960 the federal government changed the law and allowed First Nations to vote federally (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, p. 299). First Nations received the provincial vote at different times.

When the provinces dropped the property qualification and adopted universal male suffrage in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, many provinces passed legislation explicitly to exclude Indians. The provincial franchise was then re-extended to Indians at different times: British Columbia in 1949, Manitoba in 1952; Ontario in 1954; Saskatchewan in 1960; Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick in 1963; Alberta in 1965; and Quebec in 1969 (pp. 299-300).

Continuing with federal government assimilation policies, in the 1969 *White Paper* Jean Chretien, Minister of Indian Affairs, proposed a policy document that removed the special Treaty

status established with the British Crown. The *White Paper* policy was the catalyst that bound all the First Nations leaders together to demand the federal government retain their distinct status. This period was the beginning stage for the Indigenous peoples to politically organize and allow their voices to be heard. *Citizens Plus*, the Alberta First Nation position paper, became the basis for the national position paper.

In reviewing the federal policies the main focus of the federal government before Confederation through to the 1960s was based on assimilation into mainstream Canadian society. When the federal government felt that their policies were not achieving their end result, they focused on changing the law to make First Nations more dependent on the federal government. Through the *Indian Act* the traditional governments were replaced with elected band council systems with no power. At the reserves, the Indian agent and the Christian Churches worked together to control the movements of the Indians because they had to seek permission to leave the reserve. The Indians did not have the right to vote, to organize politically, to drink alcohol beverages on the reserve or to practice their own traditional religions.

With the power and control that the federal government exerted over the reserve communities I feel that it was important to include the details of their policies to show how there was a lack of freedom for making personal decisions. For my father, I feel that he did not think that he had the personal power to deal with the police brutality. He did not have a choice because if he used any force, then maybe the colonial system would have turned on the entire family and not just him. He chose to endure the physical pain himself, instead of having this exerted on his family.

Besides this, it was against the law for an individual or group to hire a lawyer or to organize politically. I think that my father realized that going outside this physical abuse to hire a lawyer would have had severe consequences on himself and his family and therefore it was easier

to just drop the topic and try to go on with life, like it never happened.

For me, I carried the fear of police brutality. I think that I carried this fear but somehow I will have to gather up all the ills that I carry and somehow by the end of the life history unpack these ills.

### **Experiences in elementary school**

Around the 1950's I started school. I somehow cannot recollect how and when I started school. *[I checked with the research department at the Snuneymuxw Treaty Office and I am told that all Snuneymuxw school children attended Princess Elizabeth Elementary School. I remember none of the details about that experience except that the teacher was not friendly. I cannot remember the other students or what the classroom looked like.]* What I remember is this woman - up there in front of us. She was not friendly to me, nor did she talk to me. I felt confused, and frustrated. What am I doing here? When I think back now, this is the environment of my first years at school. This woman who stands in front of all of us, children, was our schoolteacher.

After considering this experience it is difficult for me to remember any further details about this educational experience. I am not sure if there were any other First Nations children present in this classroom but this was the early 1950s when children became integrated into mainstream classrooms. I think that this was such a negative experience that I do not remember the description of the school, if there were other First Nations children attending school there or any other detail about this school. I am not sure why these details are blocked out.

I feel that this experience was beyond my understanding because I had a loving mother who always had time to teach me to cook, and demonstrated how to clean and filet salmon. I



watched as she cleaned and prepared fish to be smoked on an open fire in what the Snuneymuxw First Nations called a smoke house. Although my mother never allowed me to use a knife and filet salmon I learned the survival skill of cleaning and filleting salmon by watching her filet and prepare the fish for smoking. *[With further consideration to this topic I feel that it is important to mention that I never attended residential school and never suffered the physical, mental, psychological and sexual abuse that so many young people had to endure during this period and earlier.]*

The time frame was around 1950-1951. A Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons met to discuss possible changes to the *Indian Act*. Out of this special committee the *Indian Act* was eventually changed to allow Indian children to attend public school and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development negotiated the \$150 per child tuition agreements. Now the First Nation children were allowed to leave the residential schools. The children were bussed into the town schools and received their education alongside the non-Indian children. Archibald (1997) wrote that "provincial school integration for First Nations children meant that our children attended public school and learned from the same curriculum as everyone else and were treated the same as other children. This form of integration was really assimilation because the culture of the First Nations children was considered a barrier to the child's academic progress and had to be overcome" (p. 349).

This idea of integration was difficult because a lot of the parents who attended the residential schools suffered physically, emotionally, psychologically or sexually at the hands of the administrators of the residential schools. Even though the parents believed that their children needed to learn new skills to become responsible First Nations citizens, there was always the earlier sorrowful and painful memories of removal from their homes and hearts of the parents.

## Tragedy strikes

In this section I included the article from the *Nanaimo Free Press* (1952, November 17) about the raging fire that took the life of my parents Mack and Sarah Thomas, my uncle Jimmy Thomas, two sisters Elsie and Patricia and brother Mack Junior. The inquest searched the ruins but could not give a decisive reason for the fire. My brother Clifford had to tell the story about how he woke up and helped us out the bedroom window of our story and half structure.

Before telling this account, I wanted to make sure that the newspaper article ("Praise Indian Lad," 1952) from the *Nanaimo Free Press* validated my tragic story (See figure 4). On the death certificates both my parents were in their early thirties when they both passed away. My younger siblings were three, and a year and a half. I was not able to find a death certificate for my baby sister Patricia and for my uncle Jimmy.

Nanaimo Free Press

## Praise Indian Lad

## Jury Fails Find Cause Of Fire That Took Six Lives

Cause of a raging fire that engulfed the home of Mack Thomas and snuffed out six lives on Nanaimo Indian Reserve early on Friday morning has not been ascertained. Coroner's jury, sitting this morning, found that deaths of three adults and three children had been accidental, caused by suffocation and burning. Jurors praised "heroic" efforts of Clifford Thomas, 11, for saving his two sisters and attempting to arouse the rest of the family. They urged more adequate fire fighting equipment on the reserve.

Jurors recommended some sort of recognition for Clifford. He saved his two sisters, Masie, 9, and Marlene, 6, by dropping them through a window. He had made frantic efforts to arouse the other occupants of the building. Work of the Nanaimo Fire Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, drew commendation as well.

Jurors urged adequate fire protection on the reserve. They urged extra axes, extra hose, a hose reel, fire extinguishers and more fire hydrants.

"We feel strongly about the fact that existing hose and hydrants could not reach the burning building," said the jurors.

There are four hydrants on the reserve. They were installed during the last war as part of the ARP program in Nanslimo.

## The Victims

Victims in the early morning fire were: The father, Mack Thomas and his wife Sarah; James Thomas, brother of Mack and the three Thomas children, Elsie Sarah, Christopher and Patricia Kathleen.

At this morning's hearing, before Coroner H. W. Lewis, the Indian Department was not represented.

Bodies of the victims were identified by Edison White, chief of the Nanaimo Indian band. He said he was positive there were no more people in the house than

Continued on Page Four

See FIRE INQUEST

## Fire Inquest

(Continued from Page One)

those reported dead and saved. He said the fire was terrific and he was present while the house burned. He believed every effort had been made to save anyone in the flaming building.

"The fire gained such proportions it was impossible for anything more to be done by anybody," said Chief White.

### Embers Fly

RCMP Constable H. B. McMillan said he arrived at the fire at 2:40 a.m. and the home was a mass of flames. The fire was "terrific." It lit up the whole area and a tremendous wind was blowing embers as far away as two blocks. Nanaimo Fire Department, he said, was on the scene and doing everything possible to control the blaze.

Constable McMillan said the house was in a built-up area and there was great danger of other houses catching fire. The reserve was laid out in streets.

"About the time I arrived little Clifford Thomas was running down the road. He told us his father and mother and other members of the family and his uncle, with exception of Masie, aged 9, and Marlene, aged 6, were still in the burning house," said the police officer.

Everything was done that was possible to control the fire. Home was a story-and-a-half structure with cement basement that was high. Because of the block of flames it was impossible to tell location of doors and windows. When the flames subsided, location where the bodies were found, indicated they were all in the same room at time of death.

"Nanaimo fire department did a very good job under very great difficulties," he said.

### Engulfed in Flames

Albert Dunn, deputy fire chief, Nanaimo fire department, emphasized that the Indian Reserve was outside the city area but the department at all times tried to help Chief Edison and the people of the Reserve wherever possible.

"We could see the glare from Haliburton street and in my experience I have seldom seen a house so engulfed in flames from

partment at all times tried to help Chief Edison and the people of the Reserve wherever possible.

"We could see the glare from Haliburton street and in my experience I have seldom seen a house so engulfed in flames from end to end. A 40-mile gale was blowing embers to Haliburton, Needham and Nicol streets," he said.

Firemen, assisted by Indians, laid a hose but "it was such a terrific fire we couldn't stop it with the wind behind us," said the deputy. Firemen had concentrated their efforts on saving adjoining buildings. He said there had been every co-operation from the Indian band and from the RCMP officers.

He said it was difficult to state where the fire had started.

Deputy Dunn said the fire department had assisted the chief regarding hose and hydrants in the past. Department had been in touch with the Indian agent, also, regarding fire protection for the reserve.

"I'd like to see a more organized effort there in their fire fighting work. There should be someone in charge. I would recommend a fire prevention program at the reserve under good supervision," said the fire official. He said there was a definite need of more hydrants.

### Heroic Youngster

Clifford Thomas, 11, survivor of the fire, who saved two of his sisters was in tears through some of the hearing. The heroic orphaned lad told a straightforward story that won favorable comment from the coroner.

Clifford said there were eight living in the six-roomed house. In addition to the Thomas family of seven, his uncle, James Thomas, resided there.

"I was just rolling over in bed and I hit my head on a corner of the bed—by sister was coughing—I opened the window and got both of them out. The fire was too close so I jumped out of the window to get into the house to my parents but the smoke and flames threw me back," said the Indian lad.

He said he had talked to his father.

"He had yelled my nickname. I went to the back door and tried to get in. I rapped at a window and my Dad hollered at me. I went to Ed Brown's to phone for the firemen," said Clifford.

"This boy did everything that

the fire, who saved two of his sisters was in tears through some of the hearing. The heroic orphaned lad told a straightforward story that won favorable comment from the coroner.

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"He had yelled my nickname. I went to the back door and tried to get in. I rapped at a window and my Dad hollered at me. I went to Ed Brown's to phone for the firemen," said Clifford.

"This boy did everything that was humanly possible that morning. You can see that," said the coroner.

### Praises Clifford

"He didn't get into a panic, acted sensibly and didn't run in circles."

Clifford told the jury he had awakened earlier as he was cold. He had got up to see if any fire were on. They were out. There was a kitchen stove that stood close to the chimney. Home had a new furnace and there was a electric range in the kitchen. The fire, he said, when he awakened, was near the front of the house.

"Thanks, Clifford, for your story. You told it well," said the coroner.

Coroner asked if the Indian agent was present at the hearing. There was no response and D. Lewis regretted the fact that Dominion government representative was not at the hearing.

Jury members, including two Indians from Nanaimo Reserve were: James Findlay, foreman; Lionel Dunbar, of Wellington; Arthur J. Geisler, of Departure Bay; Edward Brown, Addiscombe; and Orville Akenhead.

RCMP Constable George Brunsard represented the Crown. Hearing was in D. J. Jenkins Ltd. parlors.

Figure 4. Fire Inquest Report.

Courtesy of Provincial Library, Victoria, British Columbia.

Now I will go through and describe the tragedy that changed my life forever. On November 15, 1952, my life changed forever. One day, I had my family with a mother, father, brothers, sisters and uncle. On November 15, 1952, a misty and frosty night, my brother Clifford woke me up and then my sister Maxine.

“Wake up, wake up, the house is on fire! Jump out the window!”

Turning to me, he yelled, “Go get help!”

I ran as fast as I could. It was only a short distance but it felt like a million miles.

Gasping, I knocked on my uncle’s door. “Our house is on fire!... our house is on fire!” Agitated and excited, I tried to return to my brother. “Clifford needs me! He told me to get help.”

Somehow, my aunt and uncle calmed me. Helplessly, I watched as the fire engulfed our entire house. My mother Sarah, my father Mack, my uncle Jimmy, my brother Mack junior and my baby sisters all perished.

I did not notice the passage of time. There was a lot of activity around me but somehow I was not involved. Hearing audible sounds of people talking and not understanding what was happening; it came time for the funeral and I insisted on going. My paternal aunt tried to stop me. She tried to reason with me. Even from a young age of nine, I was independent and stubborn; I was going to the funeral. My brother and sister did not go. I do not know why they made this decision but I knew I had to go to the funeral.

I went into this building. As I walked into this large room, I could see a big table a lot of candles burning. The men were in front of this large table reading from this book and a number of them were in the back of the room. I remember listening to them sing. They sang so many beautiful songs. I sat in this building with so many people, yet I felt so alone.

In the aisle, there were two plain grey coffins. My paternal aunt told me, your mother and

sisters are in one and your father and brother are in the other. Never being in a church before, this service seems so strange but I remember listening to the singing. I enjoyed listening to the singing. The service is now over and now everyone is leaving this building. I watched as my relatives formed a long line and each of the women waited. Now each of the women are given beautiful flowers. I am not sure what is happening but each of the women are now carrying flowers.

Watching this ritual, one of my paternal aunts came over and said, "Be tough kid and don't cry."

We walked. And walked and walked. Again it seemed like a million miles. Where are we going and why is there a long line of my relatives carrying flowers? Finally, we stopped at a place near the woods. There are two holes in the ground with belts over them. The grey coffins were placed on these belts. Again these men said some words and sang songs again.

"What is happening?" I was led away, so I never saw what happened.

Bewildered, and confused with the world around me, I sat alone. It took years to restore my spirit and find reason for existing amid all this confusion.

For years, I carried the images of the house engulfed in flames and the two plain coffins sitting on belts over the holes in the ground.

The shock of the loss of family, the shock of the fire, and the shock of being alone were the realities that permeated my entire being. Being only nine years old, I wondered why my family was taken from this world and I remained. This thought haunted my existence. Why? For years I traveled down this lonely road that was like a long, dark tunnel with no light in sight.

After the loss of family my brother and sister remained in Nanaimo with my paternal uncle. My brother lived with my paternal uncle and aunt until he got married but he never forgot our uncle's support. Even after he married, my brother continued to hunt and fish for my uncle's

table. Whatever kind of assistance my uncle needed, my brother was always there to help until he passed on. Because our aunt was sick, she was hospitalized but my brother and his family continued their visits until she passed on.

At this time I moved with my maternal aunt and grandfather, about one hundred miles away to the 475.75 acre South Saanich Reserve, Brentwood Bay. This reserve was originally surveyed in 1878 and allotted by the Joint reserve commission on March 31, 1887. This reserve does have a waterfront area but is very much smaller than Snuneymuxw reserve. It was a lonely time for me because I was not used to being alone. I always had my older brother there to help me get into mischief or to witness me being caught. The next time that I saw my sister was about seven years later. I did not see my brother for about ten years.

Then there was a different turn of events, something that I did not expect. One Sunday, I remember coming home from Church and finding some of my Nanaimo relatives at my maternal aunt's and maternal grandfather's place. They had come to see if I wanted to return to Nanaimo where my brother and sister were living. I do not know what made them come but I think, in retrospect, maybe they felt bad that I had moved so far away. They asked me if I wanted to move back to Nanaimo. I looked at my aunt. She told me to meet with them and the decision was mine to make. My relatives returned to Nanaimo but with the intention to return. I am not sure how long they waited but again, my existence was put into an upheaval. What was I going to do? My aunt and grandfather were really supportive to me. I really had no complaints. I tried to find a reason to leave but my final decision came easily when I realized that if they had come forward right away, I might not have left for Nanaimo. Since my Nanaimo relatives took so long to consider my leaving, I decided to stay with my aunt and grandfather.

## **My new family**

Now I would like to introduce you to my new family. My maternal aunt was now in her mid-twenties and involved in a serious relationship. When she mentioned that I was moving there and that she would be responsible for me, [*to her significant other*] he decided that she had to make a choice. It had to be either him or me, not both of us. Being an adult, I think that this must have been a heartbreaking moment. Here was the love of her life and now he was gone. My aunt was a very independent person who never let it show that she experienced this loss of a significant other person. She never resented me in any way. I think that tragedy has been in her background too, one learned to take life as it comes, even though it might be unpleasant.

My maternal grandfather accepted me into his home. He also had tragic moments in this life. Early in his married life, his mother died and he was left to care for his brothers and sisters. In 1942 his wife died of tuberculosis and he was left to care for his three youngest children, two daughters and a son. When my parents died, he opened his door to the third family and took the challenge to raise more children.

Shortly after I moved, my grandfather told me that things would not be glamorous, but I would have all the necessities of life. I think that he meant that I would have a home, food, clothing but, again, they would not be fancy. He told me that they would not accept money from the federal government because, if he did, the federal government would be boss and they could do anything that they wanted. Thinking back, I think that he was referring to the residential schools. If a child became an orphan, they would most likely become candidates for the residential schools.

Living in the house with my aunt and grandfather who were very strong Roman Catholics, I became part of this religion. I had been baptized into the church at birth but I had never



practiced this religion. Thinking back, my father had to become a Roman Catholic before he was allowed him to marry my mother. In this period, the Roman Catholic Church was very strict about persons who wanted to marry. If a person converted, they had to make a solemn promise to raise the children in the Roman Catholic Church, meaning baptism, the sacraments and Sunday Mass.

As time went on, I became more comfortable with the Catholic faith. The Roman Catholic Church was located about one mile away from my aunt Dorothy's house, just about a quarter of a mile from the edge of the reserve. The church was decorated with a long off white drapes at the back wall with a huge life size crucifix, emphasizing the wounds inflicted on Jesus Christ. On each side of the front there was a small altar that carried the statutes of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The other statute was of Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. In the middle of the altar area was the modern type table with white lacy coverings. From the altar there were about ten benches on each side. On the upper chamber there was a place for the choir to sing. During Christmas and Easter celebrations the choir area was crowded with singers and praying Christians.

The new Indian Day school where I attended was operated by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Jesus, with their Mother Superior and Mother House in California. *[I have tried to find more information on this order but nothing seems to come forward. I know that the order changed from their long black habits to ordinary clothes in the 1960s but I am not sure what happened to the religious order.]* This Indian Day School was located in the center of the reserve on the main highway to the airport and the ferry terminals. This elementary school had grades one to six with their curriculum being mainly arithmetic, spelling, writing and religion.

This school experience was extremely different from the mainstream public school that I had attended. The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Jesus wore long black dresses with a white

headpiece and chest piece and a black veil. They wore a dark black belt with a long set of beads somehow connected to their belt, black shoes and nylons. On an average day, the Sisters were happy, friendly and helpful in the pursuit of their duties as teachers. The classes were fairly small with two grades in each room. When the Sisters finished teaching, the students had workbooks to practice their lessons. When the students completed their work, they assisted the other students who had difficulties.

When I was not in school, I went to Church and/or spent time near the ocean at a place called the Point. I would go down to the water and just sit. It was a calming and peaceful experience when I was close to the water and/or the mountains. It seems like the loneliness disappeared when I was sitting near the water, or looking at the mountains in a distance. I think that this experience is similar to Mary John, who disliked residential school but was able to experience peace and tranquility when she thought about her home landscape.

### **St. Ann's Academy**

After the Indian Day School, I attended St. Ann's Academy, a private Catholic school for girls operated by the Sisters of St. Ann, whose mother house was at Lachine, Quebec. This school has a long history in the province of British Columbia. It was established over a hundred years ago in a small one room schoolhouse. "St. Ann's Academy sits on a 6 1/4 acre piece of property, which once surrounded the log home that became the pioneer schoolhouse in 1858....St. Ann's Academy was constructed in three sections, between 1871 and 1913. The Sisters operated a school, Convent and a Novitiate within its wall"<sup>6</sup> and added to the size of the lot that housed the school, convent and novitiate. In 1973 St. Ann's Academy closed the school.

Today, these buildings are used by the British Columbia Department of Education and the tourism advertises these buildings as a place where teachers and students meet, couples chose to exchange their vows in the small chapel and visitors take a restful walk through the beautiful rose gardens.

I attended this school from grade seven to grade twelve. I once again moved and now I lived in residence at St. Anne's Academy. The students were allowed to go home once a month with a scheduled movie on one weekend a month. There was a television in the recreation room but time was so organized with wake up time, breakfast, community chores, classes, one half hour free time, study time, evening meal, one hour free time and study time for two hours and then preparation for evening retirement.

Some of the students had private rooms while others had alcoves which were smaller rooms with the curtain door. All the students had to learn how to make a hospital type folded corners on our beds with no wrinkles on the sheets, blankets and bedspread on our beds. All of our clothes were put away in our night table. The students did not have too much personal clothing since the students wore navy uniform tunics with white shirts and navy ties. During the year the students wore either black nylons or navy knee high socks. During extracurricular times or school excursions St. Anne's Academy students wore navy blazers with a navy hat.

The students in the junior high years were mainly from Victoria. I cannot remember any difficulty that I experienced from the shift from the Indian Day School to the private girls' school. I remember that I enjoyed learning and I don't remember any difficulty learning the information.

In grade nine to twelve, the students came from all around the world. In the 1960's there was an uprising in El Salvador, so the president sent his three daughters to Victoria. They went to school during the year and traveled around Canada and United States for the summer. Sandra,

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6 [http://collections .ic.gc./saintanns/places.html](http://collections.ic.gc./saintanns/places.html), May 19, 2004.

a Mexican student, came from Mexico City and spent four years at St. Ann's Academy, Victoria. Other students came from Campbell River, Ladysmith, Nanaimo, Duncan, Los Angelus, Port Angelus, Seattle, and many places in the North West Territories.

One of the Sisters of St. Anne teachers taught at the Kamloops Indian Residential School and had been moved to Victoria. Since she liked Indian [First Nations] students, she was not happy to leave Kamloops. Once she verbalized that she was lonesome for her First Nations students and as a way of dealing with her loneliness she decided to help me get through high school mathematics. I would do my assignments and then she would review my work and help me make the necessary corrections. This sister was a very good teacher and mentor because she was always saying that, "you probably missed something in your education and therefore all you need to do is to fill those gaps and you will do fine in my provincial mathematics examination" *[I am using her words because we spent so much time together. I am not sure that she is still alive but I appreciated her dedication to helping me get through high school mathematics.]* I followed her advice and, yes, I did pass my provincial mathematics examination.

During these years at the Academy, I made friends with many of the other boarders. One Saturday a month, we were given free time to spend the afternoon from one until four thirty to shop for our toiletries and/or clothing that we might need. We never took the time for social activities such as a movie because the school usually provided us with movie times on Saturday evening. I think that this was the first time that I started to make friends outside the family. I did not want to make friends before this time because I thought that they might be taken from me. I think that in the back of my mind, I was always thinking about the years that ended in twos. In 1942 my maternal grandmother died and in 1952 my mother died and I think that I spent considerable time thinking about what was going to happen in 1962. I think that during this year, I spent considerable time and energy thinking about what was going to happen, but happily this

was an exercise in futility because nothing happened. It was during this year that I completed my high school and really had to think about what I was going to do with my life.

To add to the fear of police brutality I added the fear of the loss of someone who was important to me. Was it going to be a member of my immediate family or was the 1962 date a time for myself? What else am I going to add to this suitcase that needs to be unpacked at the end of this life history?

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **AFTER HIGH SCHOOL**

After I left high school from 1962 to 1965, I worked at a number of minimum wage positions. Each job added to my understanding of myself as a First Nations woman and is part of my life history.

#### **Indian craft shop**

First of all, I worked in an Indian craft shop as a sales person. This tourist shop had a prime location, close to other tourist shops like the Tally-Ho, restaurants and the Legislative Buildings in Victoria.

I enjoyed working with the crafts but it turned out to be a bitter sweet experience. The First Nations persons would bring in their totem poles, masks, oil paintings, knitted sweaters, knitted hats and mats. These unique items like knitted thunderbird Cowichan complete floor mat or a special carved totem pole became personal, display items that were not for resale. The proprietor bought only one item like a knitted thunderbird floor mat or a specially carved totem pole and therefore the Indian handicraft continued to have high purchase value but the First Nations craftsperson received very little for their artwork.

When the tourists were shopping for special gifts, I noticed that they wanted to purchase inexpensive souvenirs rather than the authentic or traditional items. The tourists were interested

in inexpensive imported items rather than an authentic totem pole. I became disillusioned with the owner and with the customers because they seemed to be only interested in having something that had the name of the city where they visited rather than authentic Indian handicrafts.

### **Government clerk**

After leaving this position I got a summer position working for the provincial government as a clerk typist. I had to type out invoices for the provincial social services department. The government had only four large department stores like the Bay, Sears, Eaton or Zellers, where they purchased items for children on social assistance. These children were the ones who were apprehended from their First Nations families, for whatever reason. These children remained with their respective foster families until the First Nations families were able to prove that they were able to overcome whatever was the problem that enabled Social Services to take the children in the first place. During that one summer, I worked all day typing the invoices for these four department stores.

As I completed this position, I had a feeling that there had to be more to doing a job rather than all this boredom. Not understanding my feelings or not even asking, my maternal uncle seemed dismayed that I could not be satisfied with the fact that I was working. I remember him saying to me, "What's wrong with you, can you ever be satisfied with a job?" These words have remained with me, even though my maternal uncle is no longer here.

### **Butchart Gardens**

Following this summer position, I started to work for Butchart Gardens. This garden

started as a flower hobby farm because the owner liked gardening and he built this garden into a world-class tourist site where people paid a fee to visit this garden. Later, the owner decided to open a restaurant where his patrons could refresh their energies on the menu of cold plates of turkey and ham, fresh vegetables and potato salad, and desert of either fresh strawberries or raspberries shortcake. The restaurant had beverages of tea, coffee and soft drinks.

When I started to work there, I was one of twenty-five women in the kitchen. This kitchen help position became a contest of who had the most authority. One of the workers did not like her employment as the dishwasher operator and tried to get anyone and everyone to do her work. I worked a couple of days doing this position but the manager noticed me and told me that was not the position I was hired to do.

Shortly after this, I was asked to work the evening shift. I became the assistant cook. This very talented Dutch lady showed me how to decorate and make the cold plates. This kind and patient woman helped me to learn the art of making food look and taste great. The evening shift started at two o'clock in the afternoon and finished at ten o'clock in the evening. When we arrived we had to prepare our own fresh vegetables, berries and carve our turkey and ham. By evening, we were ready to make our dinner plates of turkey and ham and fresh fruit deserts.

These evening shifts went by fast because there were a large number of tourists and we were always busy. This woman was enjoyable to work with because we shared work rather than her ordering me to do certain tasks. By the end of the summer, I was unemployed again.

### **Back to school**

After working all of these labourer positions, I decided that I needed to do something to get into the job market with a position that was not so routine. Because I did not have a complete



university entrance I decided to go to Prince George College and do upgrading courses. Prince George College was a small college that was just starting in northern British Columbia. The center had built a large number of female and male single room residences with a meal kitchen about one mile away from the residences.

I had never been away from the Coast and I had never lived in northern British Columbia. This experience was very different. I was one of about fifteen students who was living in residence and doing upgrading. Because we were a small number, life was not competitive. We all went to class and tried to decide what we were all going to do next.

As I recall this academic year, it is the coldest winter in fifteen years. The temperature went down to minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit and stayed there for two and three weeks at a time. During this winter, the temperature dipped down at least three times. Coming from the coast, I had never experienced this extreme cold. I think that the weather would not have been so bad except that we had to walk about a mile for our meals.

### **Notre Dame University**

After this long winter, I now had my academic grade twelve and registered into Notre Dame University, Nelson, British Columbia. I worked very hard this year because I had to prove to myself that I was not going to spend my life doing these routine invoices and/or selling First Nations handicrafts. I took the B.C. Ferries to Vancouver and then took a bus to Nelson. Once I arrived there I took a taxi to the Notre Dame University residence and checked in for an academic year stay. I moved into the residence on campus and had my own private rooms with meals at the university lunch center.

At this university, I had two very exceptional professors. I took a course in history of

philosophy and logic from one expert philosophy professor. He lectured to his classes but he did not need notes. He only had an outline and he was so easy to follow because he knew the philosophical information and he was an approachable and knowledgeable person.

Besides this professor, I had a mathematical professor who was about four feet ten inches. She had little round glasses, very tight reddish brown hair and a really slim body frame. When some of the students started to interact with this professor, it seemed like they wanted to prove her wrong. She was small in stature but she had the voice of a megaphone. She came in with her mathematics book which she used for her questions and taught her classes. Many times during the semester, many of the students tried to challenge her knowledge but never succeeded in making her stumble. She knew mathematics and she could teach mathematics. I remember really enjoying my mathematics class, understanding my mathematics and learning my mathematics. I did well in this course. While I was taking this course, it was not a major subject but just a compulsory arts course. There were a large number of both male and female students in the class

Besides this class, I had to take a biological science class. I really had to pay attention to this class because I had attended the Indian Day School and had never studied science until grade seven. I remember taking the science book with me everywhere I went because I was determined that I was not going to have to take this class again. In the science laboratory I remember having the assignment to dissect a fetus pig. I remember sitting with my laboratory partner and not wanting to cut the pig. I did not even know where to start. My laboratory partner told me how to hold the knife and where to cut. I followed all the instructions and had my eyes opened to the wonderful world of science. I had to draw the lungs and the heart, had to measure the small intestines, and draw the sex of the fetus pig. I remember going to sleep with the science review and waking up to science review. I was determined that I was going to prove to myself that I belonged in this institution and I was going to pass this biology.

All in all, this year at Notre Dame University was a very successful one. I passed all of my classes and really enjoyed learning. I proved to myself, I belonged here and I could do this academic work.

### **Canadian Indian Workshop**

Toward the end of this term, I received a letter that invited me to attend a summer course at the University of Manitoba. The Canadian Indian Workshop was organized by young First Nations from across Canada and they invited First Nations university students. The First Nations organizing group wrote the proposal to the Department of Indian Affairs and received funding to sponsor the First Nations University Summer Workshop.

At this time there were only twenty-five university students from all across Canada who responded to the invitation. Maybe there were more registered First Nations students at universities, but this was the number of First Nations students who responded and attended this workshop. The First Nations university students who responded to this invitation were young, enthusiastic, energetic and eager to learn about First Nations culture and history. Because of residential schools there were some who suffered from the loss of language, some suffered the loss of knowledge about Native spirituality, some suffered from the loss of pride and identity but all were enthusiastically waiting to learn more about our identity, our culture and our history.

There were two main professors for this summer sessions, one came from the University of Chicago and the other one was a Cherokee Indian who was teaching classes at the University of Arizona. The most interesting classes were about Native identity and Native culture. We learned about how Indians in the United States and Indians in Canada identified themselves. We went to powwows and really enjoyed listening to the singers and watching the dancers. I can

remember sitting in the circular arbor and thinking about what I was seeing. There were so many dancers and yet each one was an individual and each had their bead color combination and design. Some dancers had two or three sets of clothing. Each day the dancers would change and wear a different color combination. Each of their bodies moved in total unison with the beat of the drum. How proud they look! How proud you felt watching them dance.

I really think that most of this group was like me, yearning to know more about our history, our culture, our ceremonies, our songs, our Native crafts and our languages. I remember thinking about the time that I asked my grandfather Chris Paul about the Coast Salish ceremonies. I wanted to know about the Big House, the spirit dancers and some of the secret societies. During this period the secret society members were talented in keeping their ceremonies secret. Because of the changes in the *Indian Act* and the outlawing of First Nations ceremonies like the Potlatch and the Sun Dance, the knowledge keepers protected the knowledge and ceremonies by holding them in private. My grandfather always mentioned that he heard that they had a secret society dance last night. The news of ceremonies became public knowledge once the ceremony was completed. Further, I wondered about the First Nations craft. My grandfather explained how some of the items like the Salish blankets, the cedar basket, totem poles, masks, and canoes were made but he was not one who could replicate any of these things.

During the late 1960's and early 1970's my grandfather was one of the first Tsartlip elders to work with graduate students to write down and tape the Saanich and Cowichan dialects. He began his work with Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy, University of Victoria professors. Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy started:

*The British Columbia Indian Language Project.* It had as its aim the preservation of all the native languages of British Columbia, but has concentrated on the Salish languages. The project is carried on by British Columbia Indians, assisted by linguist Randy Bouchard. Language teaching materials have been developed for the schools

(<http://.jare.asa.edu/v20/v2052bil.html>., July 22, 2004).

After these two professors my grandfather began to work with Barbara Efrat, a University of Victoria Master's student. She was a linguist who decided to do her Masters thesis on taping and writing down Saanich and Cowichan dialects. This Native language thesis laid the groundwork for the establishment of the First Nations language courses and prevented the languages from becoming extinct.

After becoming involved in working with these three linguists, the *Victoria Daily Times* newspaper wrote that he spoke and taught classes at the Institute of Adult Studies, St. Ann's Academy, Tsartlip Day School and the University of British Columbia.

Twice a week he teaches Cowichan to a class of Indian and non-Indian students at the Institute of Adult Studies in Victoria. He also teaches Cowichan to a class at St. Ann's Academy as part of the school's enrichment program. But the most important contribution to the preservation of an Indian language could well be at the University of Victoria where once a week Paul acts as a consultant for a group of five graduate linguistics students who are transcribing Saanich into a written language (*Victoria Daily Times*, August 1971).

During this period Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy also worked with a few British Columbia elders like James Charles King of the Kwakiutl tribe, Charlie Mac of the Lillooet Tribe, Ellen White of the Nanaimo Tribe and Chris Paul of the Saanich Tribe. They taped the languages and stories. The language project was to make sure that the British Columbia languages do not become extinct.

After learning about the Bouchard and Kennedy Language Project I contacted my Aunt Dorothy Paul (personal communication 2004) and asked her about my grandfather's work with the Saanich language. She mentioned the following professors from the University of Victoria with whom my grandfather worked:

Dr. Tom Hess, University of Victoria with Linguistics  
Mr. Douglas Hudson, anthropologist who worked on names of Saanich

Territory  
Dr. G.N. O'Grady, University of Victoria with Linguistics  
Mr. Michael Pigeon, Linguistics  
Mr. David Rosen, who worked on cultural descriptions such as hunting and  
fishing  
Dr. Nancy Turner, University of Victoria, who worked on the study of plants

### **Canadian Indian Workshop participants**

Out of this exceptional group of Canadian Indian Workshop participants were a number who became very influential members of our First Nations communities. Included in this group, there was an international lawyer, Director of School of Native Studies, Native Language sessional instructors, Dean of Education, Director of Education, President of the National First Nations organization, Lawyers, members of First Nations councils, and sessional lecturers for Native students. There were two members who passed on early after this point and two who moved to other countries. One went to university and now lives in the state of Hawaii but I do not know what she was doing there.

It could be said that this group was really unique because I think each and everyone who was there concentrated in finding a lifelong partner who was also First Nations ancestry.. Seventy percent of this group found their life-long partners and are still together today. It was during this period that I, too, found my husband.

During the next year I once again transferred to another university. I was now attending St. Patrick's College, a Roman Catholic institution which was part of Ottawa University and then later of Carleton University. When I transferred to this college I decided that I wanted to take up the social work program.

During the summer I returned to Alberta to visit family and spend the summer. I moved into a small apartment for the summer. While I was living in Edmonton I came in contact with a

social worker who was a misfortunate or maybe good fortune. *[I will explain this statement a little later on]*. I had someone visit me. This individual had surgery and was having serious difficulties so I figured that she needed immediate medical care. I sent this individual to hospital by ambulance.

A couple of days later, I had a visit from the social worker who was really angry with me because I had sent this individual to the hospital without first seeking permission from social services. She was in my home and she was just screaming at me and acting like it was her salary that was going to be used to pay for the ambulance ride. After this bout with the social worker, I considered this to be a blessing in disguise. Although I am sure that not all members of the social work profession were like this, I decided that I never wanted to be like this woman and started to look for somewhere else to complete my studies.

In the fall, I returned to St. Patrick's College which was now part of Carleton University. I enjoyed my classes but some of them were really difficult because these were mandatory core courses that every student had to take. I had to take history courses and I did not like the way that history was taught. There was a real concentration on the dates and somehow I found it difficult to put the historical event together with a place, date and event. I continued in university but I found it difficult with this didactic approach to learning.

### **A maturing crisis**

I was a university student who was trying to find my way but really had not dealt with the loss of my immediate family. I knew that they were gone but I never went back to the graveyard, nor did I visit the place where our home once stood. It kept coming back to me but I was afraid to deal with my loss. I had conversations about my loss but had done nothing about it.

I was told to go back to the graveyard and visit the graves. Now I had to move beyond talking about my family loss and move into action to dealing with my loss of family. I was not sure if I would find my parents' graves, so I called my paternal uncle, a retired logger and asked if he would meet me at the old schoolyard, near the entrance of the graveyard.

When I arrived at the old schoolyard, my uncle Chester Thomas was already there. I parked my car and walked over to greet my uncle. He was happy that I came to visit the graves. He told me to look at the real tall bronze monument at the top of the hill. This monument was the sign post that I was to use to find the graves stones. He helped me by pushing the tall willow trees, large wild rose bushes and maple trees to the side so that it was easier for me to walk. He seemed apologetic and mentioned that he used to clean the grave yard but it became too difficult a job for a retired person. After we managed to comb through the huge willow and wild rose bushes, we came to a clearing. We walked over to a large cement rectangle frame that contained many graves.

My uncle started a history lesson that I shall never forget. What I remember was the description of the persons who had passed on during the 1920's swine influenza epidemic. In the rectangle corner closest to him he mentioned that this grave was his mother Martha and next to her was his father. There was still more graves in the rectangle who were other family members.

All of these details seemed to be emphasized and remembered while I was reading Moran's (1988) story of Mary John. She mentioned that sometimes, "a large number of people died within two or three days of each other, and those who were left were too sick to lay out the corpses and make coffins. A large hole was dug in the cemetery, and seven bodies were carefully wrapped and buried side by side." (p. 25).

After informing me about my paternal grandparents, my uncle turned around and moved in the opposite direction, almost to the other end of the cemetery. This area was the gravesite of



my parents. My uncle helped to clean around the graves of my parents. He told me to look up the hill, that tall bronze monument was what I was to use to find my parents' graves. Now I would be able to come to the graveyard without his physical presence.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the difficulty of this experience, I returned for the next four years. Each summer I came to visit and to pray at my parents' grave. On the last year, I asked my maternal aunt to come with me because I was going to visit the graveyard but I was also going to walk the land where our home once stood. I was afraid but my aunt was more than happy to come with me. My aunt and I walked together where the house once stood. I know where the house was located because the cement basement was still there and in the center of the basement stood the remains of the old furnace. I then walked through the entire yard and then just stood back and just looked at the tall grass, trees, overgrown garden area and unpainted heap of lumber that once housed the chickens. I knew where everything once stood because I could remember back to the last time I walked the land. My parents were not coming back but they did not leave of their own accord. I was able to deal with the loss and remember thinking, how much I loved them and would always miss them.

I had the courage to complete this task because I was not going through this experience alone. I had to deal with this pain and suffering in direct manner. I look back now, and was thankful that I had completed this task. While I was thankful for completing this task, I reflected on what my paternal aunt had told me at the funeral. She told me not to cry for my parents. I did not know what she was trying to tell me. She did not explain herself and I did not ask any questions. I think sometimes that when elders spoke, it was difficult to question what they were saying. If it was a serious discussion and, if you were like me, a nine year old child, then there

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<sup>7</sup> In 1999 My uncle passed away. In September 2003 my uncle's youngest sister passed. On my paternal side there are no living members of my father's side. On my mother's side I still have two maternal aunts.

was no room to be questioning what this all meant. Recently, I was reading an article for an English class. I realized that my aunt was trying to tell me that my parents would not go to the next world if I was showing extreme mourning and sadness. I appreciated her words but it took a long time for me to understand her commands.

After dealing with the loss of my family, I was told that I could live my life to the fullest now because nothing was blocking my path. I think that I started my life anew and I think that everyone who has suffered an extreme experience needs to face their grief and then one is able to live her life to the fullest and face the many day to day challenges.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LIFE AND TIMES WITH MY CHILDREN

In the late 1960's I got married and started a family. I had four boys who were nearly two years apart and two girls who were four years apart.

*[Although some may want more details about who I married, our personal life together, our hopes and dreams for each other, our children and grandchildren, I am afraid that I must disappoint your interest because, as I have mentioned earlier, the details of my personal life remain a closed issue. I regret the abrupt shift into life with my children but this is the way my life history must go.]*

I was very fortunate to be a stay-at-home mom and really appreciated the time that I had with my children. From my childhood experience I had learned to be alone. I wanted my children to experience family life, I had to work hard to try to define what this meant. I wanted my children to experience family and this meant that they would never stay anywhere except in their own home. I think that children like sleepovers at their friends' house; my children never had that experience. I wanted them to know their home. I think that they appreciated this idea now that they are no longer at home.

## **Learning from my mother-in-law**

My mother-in-law, Agnes Cardinal, was very close to me, and she used to come and stay with me a few times a year. She was a dedicated seamstress who worked hard on beaded hide jackets. She lived only a quarter of a mile off the major highway in the north. Because she lived so close to the main road many people came and asked her to bead a jacket for them. One day she was mentioning that she had made about 25 jackets for orders all over Canada, United States and Europe. I think her best customers were the religious nuns and priests from around the north. They wanted to send a personalized gift indigenous to northern Alberta.

Besides her own beading, my mother-in-law was a patient person who taught me how to bead and sew children's moccasins. I can remember looking at the moccasins that I made for my first son. She encouraged me to keep beading. I look at them now, I really had a long way to go to make beaded moccasins but her encouragement kept me beading. Now I look at the beading of one of my daughters. I think that one of the most interesting aspects of doing beading was that each individual makes choices of bead-colours to put together. I know that my mother-in-law always put cut-glass red beads together with pink and my daughter always used burgundy with light pink. When my daughter and I worked together, her bead-color selection was always different than mine and I guess that relates to individuality in crafts.

## **Motherhood**

I think that children know how to test, challenge authority and tolerance. One Sunday morning my sons were playing hockey in the basement. It was not a great day outside therefore they needed to expend some of their energies indoors. When the four boys played hockey they were not always gentle. Not wanting to be left out of the action, my two-year old daughter

followed her brothers to the basement. One of my sons high stuck her in the eye. All of them came rushing up the stairs. There was blood coming out from the eye area.

Not knowing what I was dealing with I had the boys go to the vehicle with their sister. We immediately went to the emergency at the university hospital. My daughter was checked into a room right away. We all had to wait to find out what they were going to do with her. After a long while, or maybe it just seemed like a long time, the doctor came and told me that they needed to operate and repair the damage.

At this time the doctor could not see or tell me whether there was damage to her eye. This was the reason that I say that my sons caused me to be frustrated, angry and emotional. I think that this incident was just part of activity for my children growing up together. I wanted to be angry but the boys and I were happy that there was no damage to the eye and she had a small cut between the eye and the eye brow. This scar was not visible to naked eye but I think that the boys and I were so happy that there was no major damage to her eye or to her vision. My thoughts always returned to my childhood where I remembered the wise words of mother who said: "Remember, I will not always be here with you." I think that she was trying to tell me that she would not always be there for me to visit, discuss, consult and unload my frustrations.

When I look at the personalities of my children I think that it is important to mention that each of them had their own personality and no two of my children are the same or similar. Some are wakeful and energetic, others regulated and even-tempered, quiet and reserved, noisy and outgoing, but they have close and thoughtful relationships. I think that it is important to allow the independent personalities to continue to grow to maturity.

## **Children at school**

When the two older children were ready to start school, they went to a private kindergarten, not far from my home. This school was part of the teacher's home. The kindergarten school teacher was a great instructor who took an interest in all of her students and seemed to know their every talent. My son was really interested in piano and sometimes she would take the time to give him a private lesson after school but somehow he did not take lessons. She was a very talented teacher who seemed to be able to draw out the best qualities in each of her students.

After this year, we moved to a house on an acreage because it allowed the children a little more freedom to run and play without bothering our neighbors. I enjoyed the freedom of this move because I could go outside and there was no one who could see me walking around, planting and harvesting my vegetable garden, cutting and watering the grass and just generally enjoying the outdoors and privacy of acreage living.

My children moved to a different elementary school. Every two or three months the children had parents and teacher interviews. I went to visit the school and to meet the teachers who were teaching my sons. The first year was uneventful and my children found success in their new schools.

## **The teacher of "dummies"**

In the second year, I now had three of my sons going to elementary school and one of them had a very difficult experience. He was going to school but seemed to be a little frustrated and quiet. I saw him change before my own eyes but I could not figure out what was happening and he was not about to discuss his difficulties. For parent and teacher interviews, I again visited

the school and was shocked to find my son's problem. My son had a teacher who was so proud of her class and how she had divided them up. In this class, this teacher had decided that five of her students were not very smart and she called these children her "dummies." No matter what these children did, their work was always wrong. In looking at his work, I found that there were holes in the paper because he had erased so many times. No matter whether the school work was right, the assignments were considered wrong.

After my meeting with this teacher, I immediately went to see the principal and told him about his grade three teacher. He was already aware of her program and tried to find a solution to the problem for these students. There was another class of grade three, but it was a split grade two and three. In this class, the principal had placed the above average grade three students who really need very little assistance. He could not switch these students into this class because they were classified as average students, not exceptional.

The principal attempted to work with this teacher to change her tactics and deal with these students in a different fashion. She was determined that she had chosen the right path for these students and continued with her row of dummies and I watched my son get more and more confused, angry and questioning his own self esteem. When he was asked anything, he always had the excuse, you can't expect anything different from me because I am a dummy. I met again and again with the principal but to no avail. He asked the parents of these children to keep a diary of events with our children and to write a letter including all the details of our children's difficulties.

I watched my son get more and more frustrated. I went over his homework with him and noticed that the teacher never found anything right. Even if my son had correct answers, she made him erase the answers on his paper over and over, until it was full of holes. After awhile, my son started to hide his school work at the door. He would come in and put his homework

underneath the rubber mat used for wet shoes and boots. Do you have homework? His response was always "no."

At the end of the year, each of the five parents brought their journals to the principal. These journals described what was happening with their children in this grade three classroom. The school principal brought our complaints to the teacher federation, informing them about the mistreatment of our children. It was summertime now and the school year was over. Now I felt my son had time to forget the treatment he had received but this was not the case. He was always nursing the wounds and when life became difficult, he always resorted to the same place, that he could not do this task because he was a "Dummie."

At the end of this summer, I received a letter from this principal. He had advanced our charges against this teacher and she lost her Alberta and Saskatchewan teacher license. Now she could never teach again. I was grateful to this principal for bringing our charges against this teacher to the Alberta Teacher's Federation but I still had to assist my son with his feelings of low self-esteem.

This lesson will always travel with me. I am a parent and I must be at all parent and teacher interviews to see who is teaching my children. In all the years that the rest of my children went to school, I never encountered such a teacher. I never missed a parent-teacher interview and was always ready and prepared to stand up for my children. It took me eight years to restore my son's confidence. Every time he had a problem, he was always ready to blame himself, "the Dummie."

I think that it was important to meet with all of the teachers that instruct our children and learn about the entire year's curriculum. I think that it was important to try to solve problems before any serious events arise. I think that parents need to make the schools have an open-door policy where you, the parents, are welcomed to come at any time. There should be a way to



discuss what is happening in the school.

### **More negative experiences**

My three other sons had negative experiences with the schools. In one of the other occasions I went to parent-teacher interviews and the high school English teacher told me that my son was only average and he would never do anything better than a 65%. He worked on his assignments for over a month and he achieved a 65%. He spent two weeks on his assignment and he achieved a 65%. He worked on his assignment the night before and he achieved a 65%. This teacher seemed to have the preconceived notion of what level the students were capable of achieving. At parent-teacher interviews, the teacher told me that my son was "only average and he was not capable of achieving any higher than a 65%." He told me that my son would not amount to anything.

By the very fact that this teacher was downgrading the capabilities of my son, I think that this made him work even harder. My son went to university and he received a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Law and a Masters of Law. For the last ten years, he has been teaching in universities across the country. Last year, they had a class reunion, and my son really wanted to go and show this teacher all of his degrees. Unfortunately, he was not able to attend because of a teaching assignment. I think that this former teacher would not have admitted that his personal criticism was wrong and I think that a personal challenge would have been in vain. This high school teacher still teaches high school English. I think that my son would have liked to challenge this teacher's credibility but he had set ideas that no one could change his mind or his attitude.

Another one of my sons was entering high school. He took a little time to grasp

information, therefore, I think the mainstream school might call him a slow learner. My son reviewed his subjects many times and once he learned the information, he remembered it forever. The high school guidance counselor approached him to take all non-academic courses because he would never get through the academic courses. He did not tell me this until much later but he told the counselor: "If I fail, you can put me into the non academic courses, but right now I am going into the university level courses." He went through high school with a great determination to succeed and then onto to university. He knew his strengths and his weaknesses and he worked very hard to be successful.

My son was conscious of his abilities and learned how to compensate to himself for what he was learning. For example, he developed a personal learning method for himself. Before he went to classes, he read the material, after the class was over he went over the material and before the final examination he reviewed the information. This method of reading articles and texts proved successful for him because he personalized his learning and as I mentioned previously, he compensated his abilities. He challenged himself to learn and succeed. Maybe in the back of his mind, he remembered the words of the counselor that told him, he would never complete university. My son received his bachelor degree and worked for the past eight years as a researcher for one of the First Nations organizations.

The fourth son that I had went to high school but he was different from the rest because he had taught himself to read before he had attended elementary school. I remember going to the elementary school and having the teacher tell me to her great surprise that my son already knew how to read. She wanted to know if I had taught him to read. I mentioned to her that he was always interested in books and had always looked through the books but I did not teach him to read.

When this son went to high school he never did assignments and he never took notes. He

was able to conceal the fact that he did not do assignments by becoming the class clown. When I would go for parent-teacher interviews I found that the teachers spent a lot of time telling me that he was always late or he was always the comic entertainer. I think that he developed this personality because he did not want to deal with his above average grades and he did not want to appear above his peers. In all of his classes he had honors but this average was lowered because of incomplete assignments.

When I went to the last parent-teacher interview for him, I met with the English teacher. He had asked what the students had aspired to become after they finished high school. This son always had big dreams. He told the teacher that he wanted to become the next Prime Minister of Canada. He was shocked! Even when I met with him, he still appeared shocked. He asked me if I knew what my son wanted to become? I left him reflecting whether my son could become the next prime minister. I knew what my son had aspired to become but I never tried to change his dream.

After high school my son went onto university and received a bachelor of Political Science and Native studies. He never had any difficulties learning at any level. After this, my son went to law school but ill health forced him to withdraw. He remained out of school for a couple of years but returned to university. He spent two years in the southern states and achieved a Masters degree in Indigenous Studies and is considering future studies.

### **The big picture**

During the years that my children were at home, I think that it was important to be very involved in their education. Sometimes I think that First Nations children are stereotyped as being inferior and therefore not able to compete with mainstream Canadian students. I have spent

a considerable amount of time writing about their personal experiences because I believe their personal stories are important. They can now be role models to their own children but it was not an easy road. Each of them had their own personal struggles to deal with like racist attitudes such as the son that was told he was only average, attitudes that because he was First Nations he did not have the capacity to learn at an academic level. The mainstream educational system does not recognize the abilities of the super-whiz kid nor do they try to accommodate the excelled learning abilities. All First Nation children have their own personal stories that need to be written about. Their struggles are our struggles because these are leaders of the future.

In writing my life history, it was important to focus on the personal stories of my sons. They all had stories of discrimination where the teachers felt that they were not capable of learning at the same level or the same capacity as non-Native students simply because they are Natives. In my suitcase I have had to add the fear of the educational system not being fair to Aboriginal students simply because they are Native.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RETURNING TO UNIVERSITY

In the early 1990's, I was able to begin thinking of continuing my own education. Because I had been out of university for a long period of time, I decided that, as a first step, I needed to take this refresher writing course.

#### **Athabasca University**

I decided to take an individualized, home-study English course through Athabasca University. Athabasca University had specialized in home study courses. In the 1970s by an order-in-council Athabasca University, Edmonton's fourth urban university, was established. Because of the large numbers of post secondary students this university was established. Soon after Athabasca University was established there was a drop in enrollment. The university had to decide what their next move would be in order to continue their existence. Athabasca University decided to move to distance learning and use "new teaching and learning strategies for post secondary students that would enable students to pursue their educational goals without leaving their homes, jobs or families." ([www.athabascau.ca/main/history.html](http://www.athabascau.ca/main/history.html), July 29, 2004).

Athabasca University's future was ensured in 1978 when a revision of the Alberta University granted the University permanent, self-governing status (*approval in principle given in 1975*) ([www.athabascau.ca/main/history.html](http://www.athabascau.ca/main/history.html), July 29, 2004).

Because of the university name there was a provincial decision to move this learning

center to the town that bears its name, Athabasca. "In 1984 Athabasca University moved to the town on of Athabasca, 145 kilometers north with satellites centers in Edmonton, Calgary and Fort McMurray ([www.athabascau.ca/main/history.html](http://www.athabascau.ca/main/history.html), July 29, 2004). According to Athabasca University website 150,000 Athabasca University post secondary students have benefited from studying at home, at their own pace with a university tutor.

This English course was a writing method home study course. I was not very organized and did not have a set time to work on this course. During the last part of this course, Athabasca University decided to change the course. This English course was an assignment based course with no formal, written final examination. Now Athabasca University has made an administrative change because there is a written final examination. My English tutor talked to me about the change in the course but he thought that I would not have any difficulty in writing the final examination. I did not complete the course in the allotted time and had to seek an extension.

I finally came to the end of the course and wrote the final examination. I failed the examination, by two per cent. I was angry at the tutor who said that I would not have any difficulty in writing the final. I think that I blamed him for my difficulties because he should have been able to foresee any or all of my inadequacies in writing. He should have been honest about my writing and been able to give a trustworthy appraisal of my writing skills.

Three months passed and I decided that I needed to take this course over again because I had planned to go to university and I felt that I really needed this refresher course in English. I reapplied to Athabasca University for the English writing skills course and I was reassigned the same English tutor. We discussed the fact that there seemed to be a miscalculation in my progress but I decided that it was all right to have this tutor again. This time, I took two hours every morning to work on my English. I now realized that if I was going to take a home-study course I had to be disciplined and work on this course, like a regular university course. I realized

that I had to take responsibility for success or failure of this course, not my tutor. I completed this course in the time allotted and went for the final examination. I passed this final examination and now was ready to return to university.

### **Teacher education at the University of Saskatchewan**

Now that I completed the English course, I was ready to apply to other universities. I applied to two universities and I had to make a choice of which university I wanted to attend. I applied to the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan. The University of Alberta decided that my previous three and half years, and seventy-five university courses, were only worth 9 credits. The courses that they accepted were like three half semester courses. I decided that I would have to spend too much time starting over, so I went to University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon where they accepted the majority of my previous university courses.

My experiences made me interested in studying Education. I had worked at St. Andrew's Catholic School previous to deciding to return to university. I had taught Native Art and Crafts and computers to preschool to grade nine. I worked with teachers who wanted me to teach Native art or wanted me to assist in their art classes.

Because the school had a large number of educational computer lessons and games I was asked to spend time reviewing their large selection. I went through the entire selection and found which programs were designed for what grade. I categorized each of the selections and then submitted the lists to the teachers. I had a group of five kindergarten children who were classed as slow students and were expected to take two years to complete kindergarten. I brought the five students to the computer room and started to teach them how to handle a computer. After I finished teaching them about how the computer worked, I put in a lesson on choosing which

items were the same and which one was different. Much to my surprise, the five slow students figured out that if they pressed the space bar, the correct answer would flash for them. These students had absolutely no problem with the information.

Near the end of the year, the school decided that they needed a permanent computer instructor. I was prepared to apply for the position but the principal mentioned that I would be considered but I did not need to hand in a resume. Two months before the school year was over the students received a new computer instructor. The principal asked me to show the instructor what I was teaching the students. I worked with the new instructor and about three weeks before the end of the year, I received a written letter that informed me that I was no longer employed. The school had decided that they no longer needed a Native Arts and Crafts instructor. Because it was so close to the end of the year, the students and their parents were thinking about their summer holidays and were not concerned about the future Native Arts and Crafts classes.

When I decided that I was returning to university I decided that I wanted to take Education classes because I enjoyed teaching. I took classes in Native Studies because I knew that I wanted to know about my First Nations history. I knew that I was hired in the school because I had some university courses, but I did not have a degree. I made a pack with myself, I would not be replaced in my employment position because of the lack of education or lack of specific skills. My children and I were lucky because we found a duplex on the east side of Saskatoon, not far from the University of Saskatchewan. This duplex had wall to wall carpeting except for the kitchen and a completely finished basement. My daughters and I were completely happy here for the length of my studies in Saskatoon. I worked really hard and completed a double degree in Education and Native Studies in two years.

These university courses were quite interesting. Because of the large Treaty/Metis/Native population, the province organized the curriculum where, if the Native students were the



majority, the core curriculum then reflected the Aboriginal population. *[In this section, I am referring to Treaty/Metis/Native and Aboriginal peoples as Nations who were indigenous to this province. With a majority population of over seventy five per cent, the teachers have the opportunity to have all their core subjects united under one Native theme.]*

In Saskatchewan the Catholic School Board had a curriculum developer employee, whose sole responsibility was to research, compile and to team-teach the units on Native/Aboriginal curriculum. Once this unit was piloted, the curriculum developer and the teacher decided if the unit needed any additions or deletions. If there were no changes this unit was forwarded to their library and a copy was given to the classroom teacher. I think that this curriculum developer idea was useful because all teachers had a hectic schedule and sometimes a large class not conducive to extra research and core units. In order to keep interesting and new approaches to core subjects it was important to have this curriculum developer as part of any educational department or school division.

Although the idea of having a large Native/Aboriginal content in the curriculum was a step forward, I think that the university had not kept up with these developments. The Native/Aboriginal curriculum was implemented into the educational system but the Education classes did not reflect this same understanding. The teacher education programs did not have any cross-cultural courses that were part of this core courses for the Bachelor of Education. Now the university has made it compulsory to have one three-credit cross cultural course as part of the core courses for an Education degree.

In order to explain the difficulties with the Native/Aboriginal content it is necessary to give an example. In one high school English class, the teacher is reading a story about a Native/Aboriginal medicine man. In some circles, this individual is called a Shaman. The teacher is not familiar with her subject and starts to look at this subject in a very negative and

stereotypical fashion and calls him an evil medicine person. One of students in this class reported this incident to the university. This student mentioned that she is aware of the traditional duties and functions of a medicine person. She is highly insulted when the teacher called this individual "evil." The university needs to have elder/scholar individuals who will compile and teach sensitivity training, protocols and other necessary and respectful information for the educational system.

The Indian Teacher Program had one cross-cultural course where the students learned to be respectful of other cultures ideals and ideas. I feel this course was an excellent beginning but there is so much more that is needed so that the Native/Aboriginal students are not alienated and frustrated by the lack of respect for their way of life and their cultural events.

Continuing with my studies, I was taking education classes with one of my sons and Native studies classes with another son. Because I was taking classes with my children, I asked them, does this bother you, that I am taking classes with you? Their response was that it did not bother them, but this experience challenged my children to try to see if they [*my children*] could achieve a better grade than me. Sometimes, I did actually beat them and other times, we were pretty close.

### **A confusing experience**

The education department had three separate education degree programs, the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) for the Treaty Indians, the Saskatchewan Urban Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) for Metis students, and the last one was for the mainstream education students. While I was completing my courses for my bachelor of education, I was required to take an educational administration course but this was not being offered within ITEP.

So I took this course through the mainstream education courses.

When I entered the classroom, there were around fifty to sixty students in the room and all eyes watched me as I came into the classroom and found a desk to sit. I think that the students were not used to having Treaty Indian or Metis students in their courses, this was why it was such an unusual event to have me join their class. After a week two Metis students joined this educational administration class.

The three education degree programs were taught in the same building but never had any connection with each other. The students did not have any kind of socializing event that would join the education students together. The education students went to the practicums at the same time but, most of the time, Treaty and Metis students went to areas where there was a large concentration of Aboriginal students while the mainstream students went to areas around the city of Saskatoon or Regina. Some of the mainstream education students approached the ITEP students and asked where they intended to take their teaching employment positions. There appeared to be competition between the teacher program instructing positions but it seemed to be an unspoken competition.

I feel that this was a confusing experience because there did not seem to be a respect for Treaty and Metis education students. If one stops to think about this situation this would be an embarrassment because each has a right to exist but there does not need to be separate teaching streams.

### **Teaching staff**

During my time at this university, one of my non-Native professors strongly supported First Nations students. She taught the course on how to teach reading to elementary students,

how to develop curriculum and how to evaluate our students. At the end of the second year, she mentioned to all the students that if anyone was thinking about applying to Graduate School to make an appointment to go see her. She mentioned that she would write reference letters supporting an application to enter graduate school. She believed that if First Nations students had dreams to go to graduate school, she would assist us by writing supportive reference letters.

Even though this professor was supportive by writing reference letters, many other university professors pressured the students to do their practicums and get their teaching license. Maybe this professor was the exception because she too was a doctoral candidate. During this year with the Indian Teacher Program, this professor received her doctorate in elementary education and, shortly after, this professor and her family moved to Calgary, Alberta.

### **Teacher practicum**

Once the students completed all of their classes it was necessary to do a semester teaching practicum. Although there was a problem with my first placement, I found myself in an alternate high school. This school was a very specialized center where students with any kind of disability were sent from anywhere in the province of Saskatchewan. If the students had a learning disability, physical disability like blindness or hearing deficiency, single parents, or troubles with the law, they were transferred to Sion High School.

This alternate school was different than any other school within the province. The principal was an unusual person because she focused on consensus decision making with all of her teachers. When there was any kind of problem within the school, she had meetings with all the teachers, instructors, sign language interpreters and teacher aids. When there was a difficult problem she asked the teacher to use a secret ballot in order for students to give his/her

ideas about the problem that he/she was dealing with. She met with students who were having problems but she also met with students who needed some support. In her role as principal she frequently took students to the movies and out for lunch. She was their principal, their friend, their confidant, their support but also their disciplinarian. She felt that it was important for them to experience her friendship, not just her discipline.

In each classroom there were two teachers. The teachers had to learn to team teach and work together. While one was teaching, the other one was dealing with problems or just helping the students grasp the material that was being covered. This system worked well especially when students were having personal difficulties. With a student population of over two hundred, the vice-principal had to be a disciplinarian everyday, all day. When a student was experiencing any kind of problem, one of the teachers had to bring the student to the office while the other teacher was instructing the class.

While I was doing my teacher practicum at this alternate high school, I had the chance to work with a teacher who was not afraid of an educational risk. He was a high school teacher who assisted many university students in their teaching experiences and also with students who really had a difficult time spending a semester in class. He had developed a proposal to have a course completed in 19 days, with fifty per cent of the grade dependent on attendance in class. He forwarded his proposal to Saskatchewan Education and had his proposal accepted. There were two teachers who were involved in this program, so every nineteen days there were two new high school courses being offered.

When I first arrived I observed this teacher while he was teaching. Early in the morning when the students arrived at the school, they began to read the newspaper. The teacher, my supervisor wanted them to learn about city and national news. Each day I formulated questions from the newspaper. The students had to read the newspaper and answer the questions. Besides

working on the newspaper assignment, the students read Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973). It was interesting because the students had not read any books by a Metis or Native author. Besides this, the teacher had the students doing grammar, learning about how to write, doing journals, writing a term paper, reading a novel and poetry.

In the nineteen-day section that I researched and prepared, the students had to learn about high school art. The students continued with the newspaper reading and answering questions but the rest of the class was art related. The class schedule was divided into doing newspaper research, the history of drawing, hide painting, silk screening, pottery, artist research with library fieldtrip and art gallery fieldtrip.

The main focus of this art class was to learn about art and experiment with a wide variety of art materials and textures like pencil, clay, dye and paint for the hide wall hangings. The students had many hands-on assignments and were encouraged to follow their own personal interests in art. As an educator, it was a known fact that students work harder on assignments when it focuses on their own personal areas of interest because they expend more energy on their own interests than on a teacher-made assignment.

When it came time to do the silk screening I had them look into magazines and then design their assignments from what they saw in the books. Some students had plans of their own and could design their own projects, and therefore these students did not need the magazines. Others needed a little outside inspiration. Because we are not all gifted with drawing and painting, I had the students trace pictures. I wanted the students to experience success. The students who managed to complete the nineteen-day class enjoyed their personal success. They were happy that they proved to themselves that they could achieve a certain level of art success.

In doing the hide painting the students had to fully plan what they wanted to put on their hide wall hanging. The student had to have a completed picture with all the colors that they

planned to use on their wall hangings. It was better for the students to have all decisions about what they were planning to do, before they put a mark on their hide wall hangings. Some of the students were very artistic and were able to draw buffalo heads, eagles, wolfs, and bears while some of the others decided to put sayings like "home sweet home," what is friendship? Or a poem. The students also made the decisions on how they wanted to write and decorate their hide paintings.

Before the students were able to put anything on the hide the students had to connect the hide to the metal ring. There was a circular hide in which the students had to punch holes about one inch apart and then connect the hide to the metal circle. It was important that each of the students not pull the lacing tight because this hide circle had to be centered on the metal circle. Once all of the holes had been connected, the students had to pull the lacing tight in order to center the hide on the metal circle. Once this assignment had been completed the students had to put lacing all around the metal circle. This lacing was a painstaking assignment because none of the metal could show and it had to be hot glued at completion.

After this the students had to trace their picture or words onto their hide wall hanging. The students really had to learn patience because this task was not one that could be completed in haste. Once the students traced the pictures onto their wall hangings the students had to show their completed pictures. They had to follow their plans of completed pictures.

If the students made a mistake on their painting, it was important for them to realize that they still had a chance to complete this assignment. All that they needed to do was to wait for the paint to dry. On the next day of classes, the students had the opportunity to paint over the mistakes that they made. Although this assignment was difficult and expensive, the students who completed the assignment achieved great success and were truly pleased with their end product.

In the pottery class, the students had to choose what they wanted to make. The school had

a large number of pottery molds. Once the students decided what they wanted to make, it was an easier project to complete because all of the pottery material was premixed. It was in a sealed container that had to be opened and poured into the pottery forms. After all the students had their choices and completed their molds my supervisor put all of them in the kiln. The students were able to paint their pottery projects.

Besides this, the class had two outside classes: one to the public library and the other to an art gallery. Before the students arrived at the public library the students had to have planned which artist that they wanted to research. Now that this decision was made, the students worked with the librarians to find their library books. Once all the students had enough sources to complete their term papers, the students, the supervisor teacher and I returned to the school to read the texts that they had found.

The last art assignment was to go to an art gallery and find something in the art gallery that caught their attention. It could be a picture, a carving, historical photograph, Inuit carving, a Coastal totem pole, and/or pottery. The object of the assignment was to find something that they liked from the gallery and to be able to describe the object. Others who read the description should have been able to visualize the object.

For example, the students might have liked an Inuit carving. This Inuit mythological creature had one body but had three heads. It can be further described that the heads appear like the head and neck of dinosaurs. One might be able to speculate about this creature but only the Inuit elders and spiritual people would probably be the only ones who could give the true description about this creature and what it means to Inuit culture and spirituality.

At the end of this course I met with the students to review their assignment file folders and discussed their personal success in this Art course. Their assignment file folders needed to have copies of their questions from the newspaper, their hide painting, their pottery, silk



screening, their description of art from an art gallery, and the artist research assignment.

The students were given fifty per cent on their class attendance and fifty per cent on their class assignments. In the private student conferences, the students had a really low self esteem and usually graded themselves just a little over fifty per cent. After the discussion about their course the students and the teacher came to an agreement about a grade for the art course. I think that this course was designed in this fashion because the students had to take the responsibility for their completion of the course.

If the students completed the course they had taken personal responsibility for their education, then they excelled in any of their future academic endeavors. If the students did not complete the course, they had to take the responsibility to make sure that they could succeed in any future courses but the responsibility remained with the student.

The students were given a certificate from the teacher if they had successfully completed this art course. Transcripts of all of the Art grades were forwarded to Saskatchewan Education.

In a lot of ways this practicum was a real challenge because one had to be aware of the challenges that faced educators in this extreme setting. While I was teaching in this school I had to deal with one of the students who had a really bad self esteem and refused to go into the art gallery. She believed that she was not good enough to enter into the art gallery. I had to sit down and discuss what this place symbolized. This gallery was a place where students and other individuals came to view and appreciate the drawings, paintings, carvings, pottery and totem poles of many Canadians and Aboriginal peoples. I had to enter the gallery with this student and spend some time with her while she went through the viewing of these art pieces. She was so nervous. After leaving the gallery this student mentioned that she had gone into a gallery before and someone had asked her to leave the premises. She felt inadequate and was quite nervous but managed to complete the assignment much to her own surprise.

Working with this teacher supervisor was a beneficial experience because he had years of classroom experience and seemed to have an answer for how to control or support the high school students. Because one student felt that his mother abandoned him and his family experiences seemed inadequate he was really angry. This disagreeable behavior spilled over into his relationships with another student. Somehow he had successfully carried a pocket knife to the school and tried to use it on another student. He was expelled from the school. He was an excellent artist and painter, probably one of the best in my art class. I felt really bad because I felt that something should have been done to try to keep him there because of his classroom success. I discussed this student with my supervisor. He mentioned that this student had to take responsibility for his inappropriate and violent actions toward another student. He had to deal with his anger in a positive way and not to injure someone else because of his angry feelings. I think that one of the greatest elements that I learned from the alternate school was the fact that no matter what the student experienced the student had to take responsibility for his/her actions and not to blame everyone else for their difficulties. Their success or failure was a personal choice that could only be praised or blamed upon themselves.

Besides taking responsibility for their actions, this teacher mentioned that there was a need to look into every situation and look for a positive, no matter whether the experience may appear to be negative. The students needed to be able to look beyond their own personal circumstance because one does not live alone on the top of a mountain. For example, during this year, there was a set of twins who attended this alternate school. One of the students was abducted and brought to an isolated place, raped and then murdered. The student body gathered together and supported each other as well as the other twin. I know as a teacher, one cannot be expected to be the savior for every situation.

## Reflections on the Indian Teacher Education Program

While describing some of my undergraduate experiences I felt that some areas were really inadequate but I feel that these experiences were beyond my control. I had hoped not to include negative experiences but somehow there seemed to be too many blank spaces.

In my overall experience with the Indian Teacher Program I had hoped there would have been more information on the history of education, the history of Cree peoples, history of languages, history of our First Nations institutions, and the laws that regulated our relationships with each other. They had an elder on staff but his only function was to speak to the September classes. This elder shared an office with one of the Indian Teacher Program Native Studies professor. I feel that if the institution really supported the idea of having an elder in residence, then the Indian Teacher Program would have had a private office for this individual. Whenever the students went looking for this elder, he was not in his office. It was a negative experience to have an elder on campus and not be able to access his wise council. He was an excellent speaker and maybe should have been included in more of the classes.

Another difficulty with the program was the fact that non-Native teachers were going against protocol. In one class the professor brought in a video that was about the Sundance. At the end of the Sundance there are some male only ceremonies performed by the male Sundance maker and his helpers. This video showed information about these male only ceremonies that is absolutely forbidden to be seen by the female members of the Sundance. Some of the more traditional female students were dismayed by the lack of sensitivity by the male professor. They (*the female students*) approached one of the male students (*who shall remain unnamed*) to object on behalf of the group. This professor did not take too kindly to the student bringing forth the ideas of the female students. As a result of his objection, this student nearly failed this class.

Besides this teacher, the Indian Teacher Program had a Professor who had attitudes similar to that of residential school teachers. She used to belittle some of the students in front of the entire class. One of the students had a Cree father but his mother came from another First Nation. The teacher used to call him "Whiteman." After she had finished the lesson, she used to come over to this student and say, "Come on, Whiteman, Speak." The class would laugh but this student was so humiliated that he picked up his books and left the class, never to return. She never apologized, just laughed as he left the class.

The Director of the Indian Teacher Program seemed frustrated when he mentioned that he should not have accepted the Alberta First Nations students. He had so many applicants that he must have been pressured to accept the Alberta First Nations students. The Alberta First Nations should have had their own teacher program. It was true that the Alberta First Nations needed to have their own Indian Teacher Program but it seemed to be in poor taste to mention this in front of out of province, Alberta First Nations Students.

I felt that the Indian Teacher Program had many negative experiences that impacted the First Nations students and created a fear of wrongful treatment. This fear of abusive treatment was placed in my suitcase. I think that the single most important contribution would be that the students should have a venue in which they can bring forth their concerns and ways to improve the program. In contemporary time, students should not have to go against their culture with topics that were inappropriate for classroom viewing. I sincerely believe that there should be some kind of advisory positions for Aboriginals so that professors can check ideas before they bring speakers, videos and/or topics that might be inappropriate for mixed classroom lectures. Besides this, I believe that First Nations post secondary students should not have to experience this type of treatment in their classes. There needs to be an element of respect for differences, not trying to paint all First Nations peoples as the same in ceremonies, languages, laws, education

and familial relationships.

### **Graduate school at the University of British Columbia**

After this year, I applied to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver for a Masters of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction. Before applying to the University of British Columbia I had heard about the great reputation of this university. The academic staff in the Education and Law programs was second to none. After I had applied and got formal acceptance to the Curriculum and Instruction Department I heard about the Ts'Kel graduate program for Aboriginal students. The Ts'Kel, a Halq'emeylem word meaning 'Golden Eagle', was a Native Graduate Program that was established in 1984, to meet the ever increasing needs for Aboriginal Education Masters and Doctorate graduates. After I got organized with my courses and place of residence I found my way to the First Nations House of Learning and other First Nations undergraduate and graduate students.

I left the University of Saskatchewan in 1994 and moved to Vancouver, Canada's third largest city. This residential move was extremely difficult because the city was very large and very expensive. In my mind and maybe my heart too, this city was only a place to visit, not a place to live.

We worked really hard to find a place which was really a challenge because there were not too many places to rent. It took two weeks of hard work but finally we found a place to stay. It was a huge old house that was right across the street from my youngest child's high school. Moving to this city, we were challenged to find rental accommodations that were few in number and very expensive. I was not sure what the vacancy rate percentage was but I was not sure that it was high. For every place that we went to see, I was sure that there are about twenty five

families looking at the same residence, so really it was a landlords' market. The owners and/or their administrators had a large choice of perspective tenants.

### **Learning from Lorna Williams**

During this school term there were two courses that really stand out in my memory. There was one course where the student had to choose a mentor to shadow for the period of six weeks. In order to fulfill the requirements for this course, it was necessary to keep a journal of all of the events that happened during the day.

I was very fortunate to approach and receive permission to shadow Lorna Williams, Director of Professional Development on First Nations Issues for the Vancouver School Board. She was a First Nations woman from Mt. Currie, British Columbia, a small reserve community 160 kilometres from Vancouver with a population of 1000 First Nations. Mt. Currie reserve approached the University of British Columbia to establish an Indian Teacher Program. With a negative response, Mt. Currie reserve went to Simon Fraser University and negotiated an Indian Teacher Program where the community had input into who and what was taught in these courses. Mt. Currie reserve leaders wanted more control over the individuals who would become their teachers for their home reserve. Lorna Williams (1987) was one of the first graduates of the Simon Fraser University and Mount Currie Lil'wat Indian Teacher Program. She had the responsibility for all First Nations students' (K-12) educational needs in the province of British Columbia.

Lorna Williams was an individual who never backed down from a disagreement about the mentoring of her First Nations students. She mentioned that the Vancouver School Board made decisions and then informed her about what they had decided. She felt that she needed to make

constructive decisions about the First Nations students with realistic solutions. She championed the rights of First Nations students and worked with Dr. Feurenstein's Instrumental Enrichment. Dr. Reuben Feurenstein, from Israel, was trying to analyze the process whereby society can teach the next generation of young people to become productive for themselves and for their communities. Dr. Feurenstein's program was conducted with all the teachers and support staff at the Vancouver School Board. In working with these children, it was necessary to transform passive learners into receptive and active learners who can generate new ideas. The students became passive with the external forces on them, and now there was a need to move them out of their passive state.

While I was shadowing Lorna Williams, I learned that there were many First Nations students who resided in the city of Vancouver. She mentioned that eighty per cent of the First Nations students who lived in this city came from other Canadian provinces. She mentioned that it was difficult to try to meet the needs of all of the students because they came from all over Canada. She was impressed with Medicine Wheel teaching and thought this might be a way to reach all the different First Nations groups.

Several other First Nations scholars have thought about this same challenge. Eber Hampton (1995) used the pipe six directions ceremony to show the importance of Native spirituality. Hampton (1995) wrote:

The first ceremony that I was taught was the pipe ceremony. In it, the pipe is offered to the six directions; first to the one above, then to the east, then to the south, then to the west, then to the north, and then to the earth. ...The six directions are away of thinking about existing in the universe. This pattern organizes and clarified thoughts. It directs us to think of Indian education as dynamic. There is movement (p. 16).

Sharilyn Calliou (1995) used the Medicine Wheel to illustrate interconnectedness and

simultaneousness of events and conditions. She explained the circle and the four directions.

A wheel drawing begins by making a circle. The circle symbolizes the continuity and connectedness of events with the added dynamism of movement. Superimposed on the circle are four equidistant points. These points symbolically identify the power/medicine of the four directions: east, south, west, north. Various cultural communities associate different aspects of their humanness, seasons, colours, animals, plants, minerals etc., with each of the four directions. The final drawing resembles a compass for human understanding. (p. 51)

Gregory Cajete (2000) discussed Native science and illustrated how Native science was connected to the circle. He connected the Prairie ceremony of the Sundance with circles and in depth understanding and appreciation of Native spirituality. Cajete (2000) wrote:

Native science also had models. Teaching revolves around high context models in which information is communicated at many levels, and which are highly representational and elicit higher order thinking and understanding. An example of such a ritual process model is the Plains Sun Dance, which may include symbols such as the circle numbers, geometric shapes, special objects, art forms, songs, dances, stories, proverbs, or metaphors, all of which unify experience with meaning and facilitate the mind's conscious process of connecting with the energies and animating power of nature. Native symbols go beyond simple archetypes when they represent the universe itself, as with a ceremonial such as a Navajo Hogan (pp. 68-69).

Francis Whiskeyjack (<http://www.ammsa.com/buffalospirit/June-2000/medicinewheel.html>), an elder from Saddle Lake, wrote about how he uses the Medicine Wheel as a "tool for teaching and learning." The Medicine Wheel teaching was an illustration of a circle where there were four directions, four seasons, four races of people, four types of creatures, and four elements of the earth. In the four different races he was talking about the oriental, the red man, the black man and the white man. There were four different types of creatures that breathe that were placed on this earth. They were the creatures that fly like the birds, the animals that walk on all fours like the buffalo, the creatures that walk on two legs like



humans and those that crawl like the many insects. There were four elements that were first made by the Creator and these were wind, fire, water and air. Whiskeyjack discussed the importance of the Medicine Wheel as a method of teaching about Native spirituality. He mentions that he lives in an area where all aspects of the Medicine Wheel are practiced. Many teachers try to adopt the use of the Medicine Wheel because this method teaches about Native spirituality.

Although I agree with the Medicine Wheel teaching, I think the different regions across Canada were given different ceremonies. Each and every territory has different periods for hunting, fishing and gathering and therefore it might be more important to concentrate on these local area's activities then to consider all Aboriginal people to be the same. Calliou (1995) also agreed that each territory had their understanding of the wheel: "I am not a medicine wheel expert, but more and more I appreciate its internal wisdom and its ability to explain relationships. Not all First Nations used this instructional device and there is no one absolute version of the wheel" (p. 51).

While I worked with Lorna Williams, I mentioned that one of my children was going to school in Richmond, British Columbia. They had First Nations/Native programs in which the students were taken from their classes and had to make up the contents of their classes that they missed, on their own time. It seemed that these programs always happened during French class. Instead of the high school teacher being supportive of this event, my child was severely disciplined.

When the teacher handed out assignments, she refused to repeat them for my child and then expected the assignments to be completed. My child had taken French from grade one and was an honor student. During this year, her grades dropped from exceptional to barely passing. I discussed this with Lorna and told her what they were doing at Richmond High Schools. She

said that the teachers had to schedule the First Nations/Native events on the calendar where they were not missing core subjects and where they would not be penalized for not being in class.

My child tried to stay in class instead of going to Special Aboriginal classes but the teacher told her that the coordinator was there to meet with First Nations/Native Students. This problem between the coordinator for Special Aboriginal Classes and the French teacher were never resolved; she continued to send my daughter to the special classes and then she neglected to forward her French assignments. My daughter was an honor student but left this class with barely a pass.

### **Studying with Grace Mirehouse**

Besides this mentoring class, I took a class that was a First Nations curriculum orientation class. Grace Mirehouse, the First Nations professor, was a graduate of the Ts'Kel Graduate Program and the instructor of this educational curriculum course. First Nations students had to deal with the important concept of change in First Nations curriculum. In the development of her major assignment. Mirehouse highlighted change and how changing concepts would impact First Nations history and education. She asked the students to present either a real or a fictitious place where one was asked or one decided to write a curriculum on their First Nations. The curriculum developer had to choose their important stakeholders and how the elders used to validate the important aspects in First Nations curriculum.

In the beginning of this course, Mirehouse started with the history of British Columbia's First Nations peoples. She discussed the organized First Nations societies that had great discipline that was taught by way of the ceremonies and puberty passage rites for the boys and girls to turn into young men and young women. The children learned their roles from their

elders. Mirehouse (1994) remembered words from the late Dave Elliott from Tsartlip who said "learning at a very young age through teachings, discipline, lectures, and modeling of the elders. Training is crucial at every stage of the child's life and became more rigorous with age." Children learned from the very strict passage rites at puberty for both boys and girls to become young men and young women. The increased influx of settlers ravaged the First Nations reserves with many different diseases, alcohol trade, and economic changes in the fur trade, farming, logging and mining; the children's learning environment was changed forever.

In 1850's William Duncan arrived at Fort Simpson during the winter ceremonies and dancing. "Duncan was appalled that First Nations people were enveloped by the dark mantle of superstition." After a year William Duncan established a school near Fort Simpson and began to civilize and christianize the First Nations children. In four short years, he became the expert in civilizing and christianizing First Nation children. His work became a blueprint for others to follow with missions started in the Okanagan, near Victoria, the Nass Valley and Aiyansh. Fisher (1977) wrote:

Because the Missionaries did not separate western Christianity and western civilization, they approached Indian culture as a whole and demanded a total transformation of the Indian proselyte (pp. 144-5).

I learned how, during the residential school era, many different Christian groups like the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodists, and the United Church worked with the federal government to develop residential schools. Residential schools were established at Alert Bay, Alberni, Christie, St Joseph's Mission at William's Lake, St. Mary's Mission at Mission, St. George's at Lytton, Kamloops, Kootenays, and Coqualeetza. These residential schools were a combination of Roman Catholic residential schools and other Christian churches. Fisher (1977) mentioned the Christian Church's focus for the residential school.

Their aim was the complete destruction of the integrated Indian

way of Life. The Missionaries demanded even more far-reaching transformation than the settlers and they pushed it more aggressively than any other group of whites (p. 145).

Mirehouse (1994) further discussed the changes that were brought with the introduction of the policy of integration through *Indian Control of Indian Education*. With this change students were educated in provincial public and private schools through the Master Tuition Agreements. Although it did not start immediately the Indian children were now able to be educated in provincial school system.

During this period there was also supposed to be revisions to the *Indian Act*. The federal government established a Joint committee to change the services for Treaty Indians.

The joint committee reported in 1961, recommending, among other things, greater equality of opportunity and access to services for Indians, the transfer of education and social services to the provinces, the imposition of taxes on reserve, more social research more community planning and development studies, a formal federal-provincial conference to begin the transfer of social services to the provinces, the establishment of a claims commission, Indian advisory boards at all levels, and the striking of another parliamentary committee to investigate Indian conditions in seven years' time. (Canada, RCAP, volume 1, pp. 315-316)

In reviewing the 1960s it was difficult to present this history because there seemed to be a dichotomy of events. Cairns, a researcher of the 1966 Hawthorne Report, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, delivered a speech in which he stated:

The Hawthorne Report emerged out of a political milieu of the Civil Rights movement and Quebec Nationalism. Essentially, the report introduced the idea of "citizens Plus." This concept reinforces the commonality of all Canadian citizens, while recognizing the difference of Aboriginal peoples. Previously, it could be said that Aboriginal peoples were actually "citizens minus": the Hawthorne Report addressed the injustices that were committed. The report however, was ignored by the federal government who instead opted for the White Paper solution of 1969. The response to this by the Aboriginal population was entirely negative. The Indian chiefs of Alberta formally answered the *White Paper* with "*Citizens Plus*" or the Red Paper: this report was named after and encompasses one of the key concepts of the Hawthorne Report

(<http://www.trentu.ca/frostline/febcairns.html>, September 8, 2004).

In his doctoral dissertation at New York University, Rothman (1976) wrote:

The report was undertaken by the University of British Columbia, in conjunction with scholars in other universities, to study the social, educational and economic situation of the Indians of contemporary Canada. When completed, in 1966 the report dubbed *the Hawthorne Report* after the director of the study, was submitted to Parliament and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development....The first volume of the report deals with economic development among Indians and makes ninety-one specific recommendations for improving the Indians standard of living in economic terms. The second volume deals with the education and politics and makes sixty specific recommendations, forty-one for improving education and nineteen dealing with political issues (pp. 66-67).

During this period a Royal Commissions called for consultations on the *Indian Act*. The federal government seemed to be interested in consulting with First Nations leaders but much to their surprise shifted to equality which meant that that the federal government attempted to nullify the First Nations special Treaty relationship with the British Crown. In an Alberta Chiefs' Conference at Camp He Ho Ha, Cardinal (1970) spoke about the double talk with Chretien's 1969 *White Paper Policy*.

In Alberta, we have told the Minister of Indian Affairs that we do not wish to discuss his White Paper with him until we reach a position where we can bring forth viable alternatives because we know that his paper is wrong and it will harm our people. We refused to meet him on his *White Paper* because we have been stung and hung by his concept of consultation. In his *White Paper*, the Minister said, "This review was a response to things said by Indian people at the consultation meetings which began a year ago and culminated in a meeting in Ottawa in April."

During this time many activities happened almost all at the same time. The First Nations parents at Blue Quills Residential had a month long sit-in by three hundred people. In 1931, Blue Quills School, located 128 miles northeast of Edmonton was founded by the Oblate Fathers and Grey Nuns Order, which administered to Cree and Chipewyan speaking persons from seven

reserves in the surrounding area. In 1950 there was a change in policy whereby the Indian students were integrated and bussed into the St. Paul's schools. Bashford and Heinzerling (1987) wrote about the integration into schools at St. Paul and later developments that led to the sit-in:

In 1955, the federal government policy of integration of Indian students was introduced, and Blue Quills students in grade 9 to 12 were bussed to St. Paul to attend the local Catholic School...In 1969, the non-teaching staff and the principal became members of the federal public service when the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) took over operations of the school from the Catholic Church. That year, the federal government's *White Paper*, *Red Paper* issued by the Indian Association of Alberta, and a plan for Blue Quills to be closed and students integrated into other schools, led to a confrontation at Blue Quills in the summer of 1970 (p. 127).

After one of the residents, Alice Makokis, a Department of Indian Affairs employee, overheard that Blue Quills was going to be closed and sold for one dollar, she telephoned the Saddle Lake-Athabasca District Indian School committee and told them that Blue Quills School was to be sold. Makokis organized a meeting in which the acting Education Superintendent confirmed that the school was to be closed and used for a residence for white high school students. The school committee organized and asked for the support of the Indian Association of Alberta. Bashford and Heinzerling (1987) wrote:

Alarmed, committee members proposed that the school be turned over to the Indian management. With the Indian Association of Alberta, they began formulating plans for such a transfer. Meetings were held to inform the DIA that the school committee wished to take over the school. Proposals and plans were presented. At a workshop in June, the committee met with representatives from DIA, including the regional superintendent of school, and from the Alberta Department of Education. The committee met with department officials in Edmonton in early July and presented their demands, which included Indian control of Blue Quills (pp. 127-128).

The School committee invited Jean Chretien, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, to meet with them in Edmonton but he refused. He instead invited the School Committee Group to Ottawa. The School Committee parents wanted "an agreement confirming

right of parents to control the education of their children" (p. 128). In Ottawa Chretien met with the group but refused to sign an agreement allowing the parents to take control of the school. He cited lack of funds but the delegation refused to leave Ottawa without an agreement for First Nations control.

Jean Chretien, Minister of Indian Affairs, signed the agreement and gave the delegation six months to forward a detailed plan for the school. The School Committee was rewarded for their efforts because Blue Quills became the first school to be controlled by First Nations parents. Blue Quills School had a different function now. The school was to:

Provide an academic education equal to that available at any high school in the province, with Indian language and culture included in the curriculum. The preamble to the brief presented in Ottawa states: "Our Greatest desire is that our children progress in the white man's education, while continuing to retain their dignity and self respect as Indian people (p. 129).

In the 1960s the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs presented a report on education in the House of Commons. Kirkness (1985) presented a paper at the Western Social Sciences Association Conference at Fort Worth, Texas, and mentioned these findings:

- A drop-out rate four times the national average (96% of Indian children never finished high school);
- A related unemployment rate averaging 50% for adult males, going as high as 90% in some communities;
- Inaccuracies and omissions relating to the Indian contribution to Canadian history in texts used in federal and provincial schools;
- An age-grade retardation rooted in language conflict and early disadvantage, which accelerated as the child progressed through the primary and elementary grades;
- Less than 15% of the teachers had specialized training in cross-cultural education and less than 10% had any other knowledge of Indian language;

- The majority of Indian parents are uninformed about the implication of decisions made to transfer children from reserve schools, to provincial schools.

Kirkness (1985) continued:

This report revealed after many years that the missionaries and civil servants had failed to administer an effective educational program for Indians. This failure has been attributed to several factors, namely the absence of a clear philosophy of education with goals and objectives, failure to provide a meaningful program based on Indian reality, a lack of qualified teaching and inadequate facilities, and most significant, the absence of parental involvement in the education of their children (p. 2)

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood, the precursor to the Assembly of First Nations established a policy about the education of the young people. There were two major changes that the parents were advocating: the parents wanted local control and their responsibility for their children returned to them as parents. The policy recognized the need to improve educational opportunities for Indians. It stated:

Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity with confidence in their personal worth and ability. We believe in education.....as a preparation for total living....as a means of free choice of where to live and work....as a means of enabling us to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement (National Indian Brotherhood 1972, p. 1).

The Blue Quills sit-in and the National Indian Brotherhood brought forth a united political voice on Indian education. Emma LaRocque (1978) in her Master's thesis, *White Control of Indian Education*, astutely summarized the events as follows: "It was this combination of formal and physical protests which pushed Chretien to agree in principle with the National Indian Brotherhood policy paper on *Indian Control of Indian Education*. To the amazement of Indian people, Chretien verbally reversed the historical policy of white control of Indian education."

LaRocque (1978) continued:



I and the staff of my Department, consider the Brotherhood's paper as a significant milestone in the development of Indian education in Canada. I have given the National Indian Brotherhood my assurance that I and my Department are fully committed to realizing the educational goals for the Indian people which are set forth in the Brotherhood's proposal. In consultation and cooperation with Indian organizations, my Department will begin immediately to effect the educational changes for the Indian people that they have requested. (pp. 55-56)

Although this sounds like a cooperative approach to *Indian Control of Indian Education*, then and now, it is still a continued struggle for First Nations to be fully involved in post secondary education.

### **Research with the Lubicon Lake First Nation**

At the end of my Master's of Curriculum and Instruction I had to decide what I would write in my thesis. I was interested in traditional education and decided to approach Chief Bernard Ominiyak, Little Buffalo. This community is located two hundred and sixty miles northwest of Edmonton. I wrote a letter and mentioned that "I watched the political developments with your community and the federal government. I support your endeavors but feel helpless that I cannot assist in your plight. As a graduate in First Nations education I feel that I can contribute to your community by conceptualizing your ideas and values in education."

(Letter forwarded to Chief B. Ominiyak, September 22, 1995)

When I met with Chief Bernard Ominiyak and asked whether I would be allowed to enter their community, he mentioned that he had to discuss this matter with his council but he did not think that it would be a problem. Later, I telephoned Chief Bernard Ominiyak and he agreed with my proposal and agreed to assist me with the naming of ten members of his community. The interviewers were the chief himself, four elders, parents, young people and one Christian

volunteer education worker.

### **The concept of traditional education**

In approaching the question of traditional education at Little Buffalo I felt that the respondents were similarly describing traditional education but using different terms to explain their method of teaching their children. In order to make sure that the respondents and the researcher were defining traditional education by the same definition, I went to the education literature. Barman, Hébert and McCaskill (1986) described traditional education as "the informal process that provided the young with the specific skills, attitudes, and knowledge they needed to function in everyday life within the context of a spiritual world view" (p. 3). Kirkness (1992) related traditional education to economics and showed that through observation and practice First Nations children learn the art of survival.

Traditional education was inextricably linked with economics. Learning was for living – for survival. Boys and girls are taught at an early age to observe and to utilize, to cope with and respect, their environment. Independence and self-reliance were valued concepts within the culture. Through observation and practice, children learned the art of hunting, trapping, fishing, food gathering and preparation, child rearing, farming and building shelters. They learned whatever their particular environment offered, through experiential learning (p. 6).

Much of the knowledge, practices, attitudes and traditional methods of teaching were passed down orally and learned through observation and practice. Chief Bernard Ominiyak mentioned that the whole family unit travelled to the trapline and learned from watching and then later doing. In her doctoral dissertation, Dawn Hill (1995) wrote about life at Little Buffalo:

I was born in my parent's cabins at Little Buffalo...Life was like a cycle. In the fall, the men would hunting, trying to store as much food as possible for the winter. Then my dad would go up to his cabin at Bison Lake (70 miles north), trap for three or four months and come back with fur. My mother took the fur for drying, and my dad went out again. My mother,

my brother and I were home alone most of the time. If somebody shot a moose he'd call the others over, and they would split it up between them (p. 35).

In Chief Bernard Ominiyak's statement he described their economics, livelihood and family relationships. Chief Bernard Ominiyak described his own personal experience of learning from his father.

It was a situation where you had to learn things by keeping your ears and eyes open, always trying to watch what was taking place. It was learning on the job. I started getting to know the area, where to get certain animals and when. I would watch my dad, watch where he would put a trap and how he would set it up. Then one day he said, 'Okay, it's your turn, and I realized watching wasn't good enough, I had to really pay attention. I knew that I was going to have to learn in order to survive (Goddard, 1991, p. 54).

This community had a strong religious and traditional base in which the roles of men, women, and children were clearly defined. Lubicon society is patriarchal; with status and authority acquired through hunting ability. Women and children had the responsibility of preparing the moose meat for drying and for freezing the meat for winter but the women had no part in political or leadership roles in the community (Goddard, 1991, p. 57).

Besides leadership, Native spirituality was important. Being a traditional society the Lubicon Lake First Nations celebrated the tea dance every spring and fall. Goddard (1991) wrote:

Life is like a cycle. To celebrate it, the whole regional band came together at Lubicon Lake twice a year, in the spring and fall, for a tea dance – a combined, religious, political and social gathering. Men could cut poles to build a tea-dance house, structured like several teepees joined together and walled with canvases and moosehides...The ceremony began at sundown with four fires down the middle (p. 55).

Many of the Lubicon women prepared traditional foods like moose heart soup, moose meat soup, bannock, wild blueberries, saskatoons, high bush cranberries and tea.

## **Research protocols**

Before I was given permission to do research at Little Buffalo I tried to make sure that the chief understood what the university expected of me, the researcher. I mentioned to the chief that all perspective participants would be informed about their rights to privacy. Each potential interviewee would be provided with a letter of initial contact, outlining the conditions of participation in the research study.

All individuals would need to agree to become research participants and sign a consent form before starting the interview. Although I asked each participant if they would consent to having the interview taped-recorded, each interviewee had the opportunity to respond "off the record" and to check the interview transcript before being used by the researcher. Each interview was approximately one hour in length.

Before starting the interview process there seemed to be one troublesome area which was whether to use a pseudonym or their real names and the disclosure of the place. I discussed this at length with Chief Bernard Ominiyak. He would understand that the university would allow the use of what he called "code names" but why did he need to disclose real names to the university. I misunderstood what the University of British Columbia wanted in the initial ethical review stage. The ethics review form wanted me, the researcher, to have some method of guaranteeing the participants their right to privacy. The respondents had to read the transcripts and agree with the content and were free to add or delete the content of the transcript. I told Chief Bernard Ominiyak that I was new at this research and I had made a mistake. I was telling him that the community could use 'code names' and yet I was expecting the chief to give me a list of ten names. Once I corrected this with the Chief and forwarded the appropriate information to the Ethics Review committee.

## Respondents

With all of the ten interviewees I was given permission to use their real names and include their residence at Little Buffalo in northern Alberta. I started the interview with Chief Bernard Ominiyak at Little Buffalo band office on October 23, 1995. Chief Bernard Ominiyak, serving his sixth term as leader of his people, worked a grueling schedule. He was everything to everyone of his people. Dawn Hill (1993) wrote about Chief Bernard Ominiyak's schedule in her doctoral dissertation, *The spirit of resistance of the Lubicon Cree*.

In ten days we had driven to Edmonton and back three times, attended four meetings, held over seven sweat lodges ceremonies and never went to bed before 4 a.m. His days and nights included everything from meetings with Lubicon lawyers, attending a conference hosted by the Lutheran Church, fixing a furnace in a lady's home at 2 a.m., gathering rocks near Fish Lake for the Sweat, and picking and making medicine for a very sick little girl (pp. 60-61).

Besides this, the other roles of Chief Bernard Ominiyak were a hunter, doctor, policeman, fireman, social worker, spiritual advisor. Also being educated by his elders, he was taught skills that would assist him in his adult life. He was taught to make drums, snowshoes, wagons, and teepees. I questioned the chief as to what he considered this study might be able to accomplish. He felt that the educational system was not meeting the needs of his community. He felt that there needed to be change in their curriculum because the present one tried to change their First Nations identity. Their long range goal was Indian control of Indian education. Chief Bernard Ominiyak mentioned that they wanted:

Run the school, select the teachers, teach what we feel is important and then try to combine the two curriculum into one to enable us to bring out the important issues that they want us to deal with. Our language and our ways have to be a system somehow for our youth to be able to understand our ways and not condemn the native peoples. I feel the native kids should be proud of who they are, once they go through the school system that is not their response.

The Lubicon lived in an isolated area and made their living through hunting and trapping. This was their survival. "We used the furs and used the meat of many of the animals. It was a kind of system that kept us going, living off the land." Chief Bernard Ominiyak's personal commitment to land and to environment was strong since he survived from these.

I will work on until I die, to protect the land, the environment and the traditional heritage because I had survived off that and I lived through the type of destruction that was taking place within our traditional areas but at the same time I got to encourage my younger children to look for something – for example that had to do with the land but in doing that we were going to have vet's that going to deal with the sick animals and so on. When we look at education we will have to have an objective so that our people can try to tie these things together and move forward to try to get education for specific areas.

Another area of concern was that the students learn relevant information like "the Canadian Constitution, the treaties, and Aboriginal rights and what they mean." In this new technological age the students were better able if they knew and understood the government. Chief Bernard Ominiyak's concern was the First Nations people become educated, joined government and then completely disregarded the wishes of their own people. He narrated this with the following statement: "We had Native people within government that were totally against the wishes and the hopes of our people. What good does that do?"

This question referred to the fact that the Lubicon Lake First Nation had tried several times to negotiate with the federal and provincial governments for their reserves and treaty status but there had always been something that prevents this from becoming a reality. For example, in the beginning they were missed because of their remote geographical area and bad weather. Later, they were missed because of the Second World War and the list goes on.

Among the other respondents I spoke with four elders: Charlie Wapoose, Reinie Jobin and Joe and Alma Laboucan,. Charlie Waboose was an elder originally from Fort Vermillion and as a youngster attended residential school.

Reinie Jobin was educated at Big Prairie and spent a couple of years at High Prairie. He was an elder on the Lubicon Lake First Nation Band Council. He mentioned that he was raised about thirty miles from Little Buffalo, as the crow flies. From his mothers' side he was related to all the people at Little Buffalo.

Joe and Alma Laboucan were a couple who would really like to see their children graduate from school. Job Laboucan went to the Anglician Mission at Whitefish Lake, Alberta. I asked what he didn't like in the school today and his response was, "who's complaining?" His wife Alma was the oldest member of the Community Wellness Committee. Alma was one of the interviewees who attended the first mission school at Little Buffalo. I asked her what the school was like but her only recollection was 'good' and the fact that she didn't stay very long because her parents went to the trapline.

The other members I interviewed were Bryan Laboucan, Juliette Noskeye, Winnie Whitehead, and Maggie Auger. Bryan Laboucan was a young man who had been trained by his elders for about four years. He was learning the songs, learning to serve in the tea dance ceremony and attended sweat lodge. He was two courses short of his grade twelve but had worked as a labourer on slashing lines. He mentioned that the workers were expected to take one to four days courses to get "cards" and qualify for certain labourer's jobs. He was interested in taking a course as a Cree Instructor.

Juliette Noskeye was a young single parent who worked in the band office as the social worker. She was shy to discuss her experience but was very knowledgeable and efficient in her social work position for the Lubicon Lake Band members.

Winnie Whitehead was the youngest Lubicon Lake member I interviewed. She was an assistant to Juliette Noskeye and was very efficient on the computer. She mentioned that she had completed grade ten at Little Buffalo School. Although she was single, she was a very caring

person who was raising a little girl. She had been caring for this little girl since infancy. This was part of the philosophy of this community where they believe in helping each other. When a person cannot care for their children for whatever reason, other members of their family or their community raised the child. When the child was old enough it was their choice as to whether they returned to their family or stayed with their new family.

Maggie Auger received her early education from the local Mission Residential school in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "At that time my parents did not have a permanent home here, they lived further north at Bison Lake" One of the most amazing accounts of her residential school experience was the fact that they were only allowed to speak their own Cree language on Wednesday afternoons until bedtime.

Maggie Auger was the chairperson of the Wellness Committee at Little Buffalo. In the late 1980s there was a Women's Circle who believed that their story and struggle should be known. Maggie Auger was one of the members that was very politically active in the Circle. At the time of the interview, she was the Community Health Worker who completed her first year with *Necchi Drug and Alcohol Abuse* and was working on her second year. She worked in the community and planned to return to Edmonton for the final semester of her studies at *Necchi*.

The last interviewee was Elaine Bishop who was not a First Nations person but a volunteer from the Mennonite Central Committee. She came to the community in July, 1992 and was to complete her four years in July, 1996. Through her ministry she visited and tried to respond to the needs of the different people. As a volunteer service worker, she "tried to live at the same level as the people of the community which I know was impossible in some ways because I get as much good money as I need to buy food so in that way I have more than some people in the community." One of the main reasons that she came to Little Buffalo was to help to take control of their school. A short time later, she drafted a proposal to have her and two other



members of Lubicon Lake visit the communities who had successfully take over their education. This proposal for funding was presented to Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development but was returned because there were no funds until their land rights had to be settled.

Chief Bernard Ominiyak advised Elaine to get a teaching job at the Little Buffalo school. She succeeded but resigned in four days because "I felt uncomfortable with the hidden agenda of what I was being asked to teach. It seemed to me that whether I was teaching language arts or math or anything else, basically I was teaching colonialism and I could not do that."

### **Lessons from Lubicon Lake**

*The Lubicon Lake First Nation Concept of Education* (Cardinal 1996) was a true example of a community case study of *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Chief Bernard Ominiyak wanted their community to take control their school, to hire their teachers and to teach a curriculum that validated their Cree identity. They all wanted their Cree language and Cree way of life included in their curriculum. The participants believed that elders/spiritual people should be employed to teach some of the traditional ways of life. Another elder wanted the young people to be taught how to hunt and how to trap. He seemed to believe that if young people were given a chance to hunt and trap that they would decide to become involved in these survival skills and way of life.

In reviewing the comments of the respondents there were many negative comments about Indian education. Some mentioned that the teachers were not always good and did not always treat all the students fairly. There was mention that the students were required to assimilate to mainstream standards. The elder mentioned that they were "pushing us how to act, how to work

and how to study in school. ...If you did something wrong, the student was placed in the corner, facing the wall."

Others mentioned that they were ridiculed and laughed at because they were Indians, because they had feathers and because they believed in false gods. Still another elder mentioned that his son was discriminated against. He was asked to go into a non-academic standing in school because he was Native.

In concluding this section one of the elders mentioned that the Lubicon Lake First Nations should be treated as "human beings." This reference was more a political reference rather than an educational element. In the isolated communities like Peerless Lake, Trout Lake, Loon Lake and Woodland Cree the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development seemed to be using 'Divide and Conquer' methods when settling their land claims. Some of the other isolated communities like Loon Lake and Woodland Cree received their land claims which included their surveyed lands, new houses, roads, community infrastructures and reserve schools. Because of the close proximity of these communities there were close family members in some of the other isolated community land claims. Lubicon Lake First Nations seemed to be feeling the political pressure to settle their sixty year old land claim but actually they have been waiting since 1899.

In my Native Studies classes I learned about Treaty 8. After learning the details about how some of the isolated communities were missed out in treaty making because of poor weather I was interested in learning more about the details of this Treaty 8 community. Before World War 11 the community was promised a reserve but the war broke out and there was a shortage of money. Later, there was oil discovered in their traditional territory, and they tried to stop the provincial government from drilling for oil. The more powerful provincial government changed the law that forbade the Lubicons from having jurisdiction over their traditional territory. The Lubicon Lake First Nation went from a high percentage of self sufficiency to a high percentage of

social assistance dependence because of the oil discovery. Because they were not highly educated the Lubicon Lake First Nations did not benefit from the oil discoveries.

Since this community was close to settling their land claim, I felt that it was important to try to establish ideas for their proposed school. I requested permission to enter their community to do research regarding their school. Chief Bernard Ominiyak said that he had to check with his council but he did not think that my request would be a problem.

After receiving permission to enter this community for the purpose of doing research I interviewed the Chief and an elder/council member from their community. I found that this community had very specific roles for men and women. The leadership roles were held by men while women took care of the office, the health department and all cooking for their traditional ceremonies. When I was interviewing the respondents the male interviewees did not face me, nor did they look at me. After a short time in the community I realized that a married couple faced each other, while all others look more from the side. For example, if I was facing north to the south, the interviewee would be facing east to west, not to the south where one might expect to find them.

During the time that I was doing the interviews I noticed that Chief Bernard Ominiyak gave me two names every time that I entered the community and he started with the elders of the community first. It was very fortunate that the elders all shared their experiences in English rather than Cree. I had only one Cree Elder couple where the grandmother spoke in Cree and refused to allow me to tape her conversation. Her husband was there and he translated her words while I wrote the conversations. This interview was not verbatim but just the thoughts that she expressed.

When I interviewed the other female members of the community I could not help but really feel empathy for their community because it was difficult for them to get beyond the

settlement of their claim. Some members of the community felt that the settlement of their claim was the beginning of a new life while others could not understand why other isolated communities were receiving their reserve land and infrastructures.

I really found it difficult to complete the interviews. When I entered the community I went to the band office and usually only received the names of two interviewees. It took months for me to complete the ten interviewees. The winter weather also increased the difficulties in completing the interview assignments. The temperature went down to minus 40 and minus 50. My expensive tape recorder froze, never to work again. I was fortunate that the only non-Native interviewee loaned me her electric tape recorder.

In conclusion, I feel that this experience assisted me in gaining an understanding of the difficulties of living in an isolated community. There was no running water, no paved roads, no television unless you purchased a satellite dish and shopping for groceries was almost two hours away.

Lubicon Lake First Nation will need to find a method of expressing their unique identity and leadership. With a new settlement there will be chances to develop a complex multi-disciplinary approach where there will be elders, teachers, educators, social workers, spiritual leaders, ceremony holders, trappers, hunters, lawyers and other members of the community network to develop a joint fresh new approach to their education and community healing.

### **Harvard Graduate School of Education**

After I completed my Master's of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction degree, I applied to Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts. After I had made my application, a good friend, Ethel Gardner called me to tell that the individual who applied for the

Fulbright International Scholarship was disallowed. What this meant was that the individual was disqualified and therefore not able to receive the fellowship. She mentioned that I should prepare a proposal for the Fulbright International Fellowship. I asked her what I needed to get my proposal approved and accepted by the Fulbright International Foundation. I had to write a proposal about my area of research interest and include how this area of expertise, might improve my First Nation community. Since a large number of the First Nations will not consider a move to the city, I decided to do my studies on distance education. I went to the Education Library at UBC because I needed a current and up-to-date bibliography on distance education.

All my time and effort paid off because I received the Fulbright International Fellowship. I forwarded all my information and in return I received a welcoming package. Shortly after this, I received a note telling me that the information was outdated and I would be contacted by Fulbright International Office once I arrived. The Fulbright International office was located in New York. I waited for the office to contact me but this did not happen until the end of September.

I went looking for Harvard Graduate School of Education general office and found that the Fulbright International Scholars had already met at the beginning of September. I tried to find out when they would meet again but there was not another meeting. I think that the only regret that I have now is that I never met any other Fulbright recipients. By the time I started to look for other Fellowship recipients, the other graduate students were into shopping week at the university. This university was probably the only center where the students had two weeks in which they had a chance to go to as many classes as possible and check out the professors and the class syllabi. After the two weeks were over the graduate students choose the courses that they would like to take. It was mandatory that each of the Education graduate level students enrolled and completed four courses per semester. If a student was part time then their requirement was to

take two classes per semester.

Another interesting facet of Harvard Graduate School of Education was the fact that the students can chose to have their grade Pass/Fail. I was so surprised with this part of their education. Some of the students mentioned that they had no plans for more graduate education and therefore chose to have their classes graded with a Pass/Fail. Since I was there under fellowship, I felt that I needed to have grades because I had to send a copy of my grades to Fulbright International Fellowship, plus a report of my activities.

### **Harvard Education graduate classes**

During the excitement of the move to Cambridge, researching to find a residence or moving to a residence, graduate students do not have time to consider their movements. There was the excitement of a new place to live, study, new friends, new professors and new country. Once the dust had settled, so to speak, the Harvard University graduate school students really felt intimidated by the structure of this institution. One started to ask themselves questions like how do I stack up next to all of these scholars? Am I going to succeed? Is everyone here published?

In retrospect, I think that young people really need to know how to maneuver around the teaching assistant positions, scholarships and how to get accepted into the doctoral levels of whatever school. When one arrived at the Graduate School of Education, one learns that there were around 500 Masters students and Certificates of Advanced Standings [*which is an equivalent Masters degree*] enrolled each year. There were only a few doctoral students, maybe twelve, accepted in each of the departments at Harvard, no matter to what department one wished to apply. The perspective doctoral students needed to make sure that they met all the influential professors who had the responsibility for accepting new doctoral students and dispersing the

limited financial fellowships. Each of the doctoral students, no matter what department, had to organize a workshop in which all the guest speakers had their flights and accommodation paid for. The doctoral students must know how to make submissions to the university and whoever else might have money that might donate to your workshop.

This residence hunting was a difficult chore. Harvard University was very well organized with a pamphlet that listed all the Hotels, Motels and even the on campus residences where prospective students can stay until they find a more permanent residence. Besides this, the university had a housing department where the people list their rooms, apartments and houses for rent in Cambridge, Boston and all the surrounding areas. With the help of a Native American Center employee, we found our residence but it still took two weeks.

### **Shopping week**

For the first two weeks at Harvard, the students had what they call "*shopping week*." The students introduced themselves in all classes offered on campus in any department. There was a chance for interdisciplinary classes, a law course or a Native American history course. After two weeks, the students were expected to choose their four classes. All full-time students who attended Harvard Graduate School of Education must take four classes per semester.

The Master's degree was a one year degree that was course-based. The students were expected to take four classes per semester but there was no graduate paper or thesis for the education degree. Besides this, Harvard Graduate School of Education had a Certificate of Advanced Standing, this was like a double Masters. Graduate Students who already had their Masters degree would take this Certificate of Advanced Standing. This was just like the Masters degree, with four courses per semester but there was no thesis or graduate paper. This Harvard

Graduate School of Education had a large part time section too. If the Harvard employees take part in getting a degree, they must take two classes per semester and must be finished in two years.

Being a Harvard Graduate School student takes some adjustment. Around the Boston and the Cambridge area there were around seventy colleges and universities. Massachusetts Institute of Technology was not far from the Harvard University's Colleges of Education, Law and the Kennedy School of Government to name a few. Each of these universities had their seminars, conferences and guest speakers that were kept on the websites and newspapers in the areas.

Paulo Freire, a distinguished Brazilian educationalist, had visited the Cambridge area but only the networked, energetic and youthful scholars had the chance to meet with him. Young scholars were mentioning that they had a chance to meet with him on the weekend and that the university was making arrangements to have him teach at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Paulo Freire had agreed to teach at Harvard Graduate School of Education. I was not sure of the details but, soon after, I heard that he had passed away.

Because there was so much going on, it was important to have a college buddy who would keep themselves and you informed of all the distinguished guest speakers and conferences that were happening within the area. Besides all the events, it was important to mention that a graduate student can become intimidated with all of the international scholars, authors and scholarly professors and graduate students from around the world. All of the professors had lengthy lists of all of their publications and the conferences that they were organizing.

Many times I asked myself, what am I doing here? The lengthy application process, with full medicals, financial support, health insurance, passport pictures, student visas, made me feel unsettled, but then there were social events where I found that other individuals were feeling the same way. I think that there were some students who were more prepared than others.



I remember going to one of my classes in technology that had a Master's student who was the president of an educational company for five years. His company was called *Bread Basket*. This educational organization was located on the five Eastern seaboard states like Vermont and looked after the on-line news, chats and discussions lines for high school students. The president had travelled all over the United States and had the financial backing of many companies through their advertisements that they had listed on line. What was important about this company was that they gave away incentives to the schools for the students to become involved in purchasing their products, free in the beginning and then there was a charge. In our class discussion Harvard Graduate students felt that the high school students should not have been encouraged to become consumers of products before they were of legal age to purchase the items themselves. Although, he did not feel that this was totally unethical, some other students believed that the students should not be able to use a product until they reached the legal age where they could purchase the item themselves.

### **Organization of information**

When a student arrived at Harvard Graduate School of Education, it was an overwhelming experience. It was a humbling experience and difficult experience to say to oneself, "ah, yes," I belong here. I remember sitting in classes and hearing students mention that they had dreamt of coming here since he/she was six years old. At six years old, I did not even know the name of Harvard University.

Because this area contained many universities and colleges, the Harvard Graduate Schools had published booklets for housing, booklet on all the departments and their instructors, booklet on medical clinics, book stores, and travel agencies. For Native Americans, a term used to denote

Indigenous peoples or people of color, there was a Native American Center. There was a staff of five people who were the councilors, professors and the director of the center who worked with councilors to plan social events where the Native Americans met, socialized and had assistance on many of their questions about where was the bookstore? Medical clinic? Or whatever?

At the Native American Center the student councilor assisted the students with lists of places to stay, organized potlucks, brought in films, organized a one day Harvard pow-wow and honoured the first Harvard Native American graduates. During my time at Harvard there was a decision made to hang a plaque to honour of the first Harvard Native American graduates.

### **Class on educational and political change**

This Educational and Political Change class was really different from any lecture at Harvard Graduate School of Education. The class concentrated on the political movements around the world. Many of the students came from war torn countries. I remember sitting in class with the discussion on war and one of the students discussed being in a war zone at age 10 or 12. I think the window of war moved in front of our immediate vision. Most of us were not that close to war.

Next this class discussed the topic of colonization of Native Americans. This class started with the normal stereotypes that Native Americans were savage, heathen and uncivilized. Then the professor showed a video that had all the Native Americans up in arms. This video failed to view Native Americans as human beings. After the class lecture and video the class was divided into smaller discussions groups. Some of the students planned a trip to see the professor. The students were completely annoyed with the topics of the day.

I listened to the discussions and was completely surprised with what was happening to

me. I was angry but could not find the words to discuss my feelings. This class silenced me. I remember sitting in this class but found that it was difficult to have any kind of words to discuss the topic of the day. What was happening to me? I knew that I did not have anything to say. Why? After this class I retreated and spent sometime thinking about this class. I started to reread the material and realized that my problems started with the topics of the class. I had always had problems with videos, books and articles that discussed First Nations or Native Americans as being heathen, pagan, uncivilized and not human. I always had problems with non-Native writers who take the attitude that First Nations cannot possibly be on the same level as themselves. The writers note a difference in the manner in which the First Nations lived, and because it was not similar to their farming or agricultural way of life, it was considered less than human.

### **Vivid remembrances of Harvard Graduate School of Education**

When the Harvard Graduate School of Education accepted individuals into one of their programs, the school did not allow one to fail. While I was down there I got seriously ill and had to have surgery. I went to the office and told them of my dilemma. I gave the office all the necessary information as to how long I would be away. During this period all of my classes were taped and collected for me. Before I returned to class the tapes are brought to me. Before returning to class, I listened to all of the classes that I missed. There was no room for failure.

Further, there was another example of a Harvard Graduate School of Education student who was given great assistance. One of the Harvard University Master's students had an extremely ill father. About two weeks before graduation this student's father died. The student wrote all of her final examinations the day before graduation and graduated with her class. It was a difficult year but she did not fail. I think that this was an important model for our First Nations

programs where the educators needed to construct ways to create programs that do not allow their students to fail.

### **Return to the University of British Columbia**

After I completed my Certificate of Advanced Standing at Harvard Graduate School of Education, I reapplied to the University of British Columbia to do a doctorate in Educational Studies. This decision to return to the University of British Columbia came because I decided that I wanted to complete my education before I started working. I had decided that I needed a doctorate to consider that I had finished my education.

I was enrolled in the doctoral seminar which was a full year course. The doctoral students had to take their turns in presenting small sections of the course material. I remember doing research to do my section on the presentation. I really found this difficult because I was not sure that I was covering all the necessary elements of the course subject. Sometimes, there was information that we as doctoral students needed more time to study. Even with the research time, I really did not feel that I had competently covered the information. I think sometime that lecture classes combined with class presentations was a better doctoral format. The doctoral students really felt that same way I did but would not admit their lack of understanding in their course material.

I had another course on cross cultural identities. There were many students from around the world that were enrolled in this course. Because of the large number of students there were not enough books ordered for all the students enrolled in this course. I was one of the students who had to wait six weeks for the reorder of this book. I think that there were around five of us who did not have the text for the class.

The professor had the students make a class presentation on a book related to the class cross cultural syllabi. Each of us went through the class presentations. Included in this class, there was a student who had been everywhere, had been involved in cross cultural events around the world and had a comment about everything that the professor discussed in the class. She monopolized the professor's discussions and did not seem to allow other members of the class to get involved. Close to the end of the year, this student was not present and she did not write the final paper.

After the course was over, I met with the professor for this class. She asked me about what I felt about this class. I mentioned that I would have enjoyed the class more if all the members of the class were involved in the class discussions. I told her that I would have liked the circle method where everyone around the circle was given a chance to make a comment. She mentioned that she would keep this in mind for future classes.

In completing my doctorate, I came against almost insurmountable odds but I was determined to finish. I tried for a year and a half to get my committee organized but somehow this continued to be a challenge. Finally about two weeks before I returned to Alberta I was informed that it was time for me to select my committee. I went to certain individuals and asked them to work with me on my doctoral dissertation. I was so happy that I have had truly supportive committee members in Dr. Jo-ann Archibald and Dr. Jean Barman. They had worked with me to try to accommodate my interests and assist me in choosing and completing my dissertation.

Because of personal illness I returned to Alberta. Sometime after I started my doctoral studies the Sucker Creek First Nations, which had supported me, decided that they would not sponsor or assist any member seeking their doctorate. I was not told of this decision but after I returned to Alberta I did not receive any more living expense monies but they continued to pay

for my tuition or any other expenses related to doctoral studies.

I am not sure of the rationale behind the decision not to allow Sucker Creek First Nations members to engage in band-funded doctoral study. Maybe the band members felt that seeking a doctorate was a big expense that brought very little benefit to our reserve community. Maybe the reserve community felt that this type of education was not needed in our community. Maybe the reserve community felt that spending all this time in university was a waste of time. Because I am not sure of the reasons for discontinuing band-funded doctoral study, I really cannot comment on their reasons for the decision.

I feel very fortunate being able to continue to the doctoral level in education and have the support of many professors. I believe that once I start an important academic venture, I have the responsibility to finish what I started. Because I completed this level of education I feel that I am a role model for my children and other First Nations young people and adults. When young people think about education, they acknowledge the successful post-secondary graduates and realize that graduate education is not an impossible dream. If others have gone to post-secondary education and succeeded then, they can succeed too.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **TEACHING AND RESEARCH**

The lack of band support has meant that, in order to complete my doctorate, I have had to take a number of short term teaching and research positions. All of these have been related to First Nations and education.

When I completed my doctoral residency, I returned to Alberta where I had started to teach at the University of Alberta and at Machwachees Cultural College, the satellite center in Edmonton. After this there were a large number of short research projects that I will describe later on. I have organized the information chronologically with the most recent first.

#### **University of Alberta Transitional Year**

For three years, I taught English 101 for the transitional year at the University of Alberta. This first year English course focused on Canadian Native literature, looking at literature from the special brown lenses and validating Indigenous experience. I feel that by using this focus the Native students can be empowered to dream their own dreams and celebrate their own Treaty, Metis or Inuit identity. If the student was able to accept his/her identity then this individual can rise to meet any challenge presented in the university setting. From the English 101 syllabus, the students read literature from First Nations, Metis and Inuit writers.

The students have been different in each year. In the first year I taught, the student population was mainly from the four western provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia. One was from Nunavut. In the second year the student population was mainly

from Alberta with some from the Northwest Territories.

The large majority of the students had never taken an English class which had one hundred percent Native content. Some of the students really appreciated the Native content and really worked hard to learn while others objected to the Native content. I tried to make the assignments more open-ended in which the students could pick a topic that was of interest to themselves personally.

In working with the Cardinal and Hilderbrand's *Treaty Elders* text (2000) I noticed that I was really impressed by the elders' dedication to changing the negative stereotypes about the First Nations as being lazy, heathen, and pagan. The elders wanted their children, grandchildren and the children yet unborn to be proud of their Native heritage because they knew about the existence of the Creator, knew how to teach their children, knew how to pray to the Creator, they knew how to relate to themselves and they knew how to respect their environment. The elders realized that the suffering they had experienced through residential school or through the periods where they were unable to leave the reserve had negatively impacted on them. As a result they wanted the youth to be proud of their heritage and to work effortlessly toward positive goals for the future generations.

I think that the students really enjoyed learning about their own literature and their own history. Some students actually went in search of their family background. One of the students went to his family and asked where did their family originate? During reading week, this student took the opportunity to go visit his family in Saskatchewan. Some of the students were really uncomfortable with being recognized as Native. Unfortunately, these students dealt with this in a negative manner by not attending the class.

I think that the weakness to this class was the fact that the program was set up in such a way that the students were not held accountable for their attendance and participation. When



students were having a difficulty with the fact that this class was one hundred percent Native content, there should have been open communication lines where the students could take ownership for their learning and had themselves transferred to one of the other sections. Some of the students mentioned that they would really have appreciated studying Shakespearean plays.

I was not sure how the students were distributed into each of the four transitional year classes but somehow I think it would be better if the professors had a chance to move the students into the different classes but it seemed that there was a closed door policy where others were not suppose to know what was happening. I spent the last four years teaching in the transitional year English and I was still not sure what was happening in the other sections.

In my first two years I had the students doing personal journals for the first ten minutes of each class. The journals were intended to allow the students to respond quickly to any question being asked or to write down their feelings about Native literature. Sometimes I asked questions about the selections that the class was reading like *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan* (Cardinal & Hilderbrand 2000), *Funny, You Don't Look Like One* (Taylor 2002), *Slash* (Armstrong 1990) or *Back to the Rez* (Maracle 1997).

Sometimes, I asked the students what they believed was the most important aspect of this English class. Some of the students liked the Aboriginal content, and some liked the talking circles in which each one was equal and had an opinion. The students appreciated the experiences of other members of the class. While some of the ideas were positive, there were others who disliked the total Aboriginal content but this was difficult to deal with because the students objected but they never attended the class to voice to the positive or negative aspects of the course.

In the third year the transitional year had some administrative changes. There was a change in the coordinator and the administrative staff. Before this year, the students were

individualistic and seemed quite comfortable in competing with each other in their grades. This year the students reacted differently. The students responded to questions, assignments, and classroom dynamics as a group. The students had discussions with each other and did not seem interested in individual answers. I had never taught a class where the classroom dynamics work toward each other rather than individually. The students were comfortable with anyone in their class rather than only the person that they normally sat beside in the lecture.

Because of the very different classroom dynamics I handed out their term grades three times. I wanted the students to consider their grade level because in the transitional year the students were accepted into the University of Alberta as open ended classification. At different times closer to the end of the year the students had to apply for acceptance to their department of choice. The students needed to have a certain grade point average to get into their departments.

The transitional year had the responsibility for assisting the students get into their departments therefore I am not sure how many succeeded. At the end of the year I had two students, one from the morning class and one from the noon class, who completed the class with a 97% in their final examination. When the students excel at this level, it illustrated to me that, yes, they had attended class and had studied hard for the end of the year.

In May 2004 the English Department introduced four new introductory English courses. Now all the students have a choice. They can select from Medieval, Romantic, Contemporary or Native literature.

## **Machwachees Cultural College**

A couple of weeks before Christmas 2002, I was asked if I was interested in teaching a Native Education class at Machwachees Cultural College. This social work class was completing their two-year certificate in social work. The class had twenty-six students with a large majority of them being Treaty/Metis students. The students wanted to have all their classes completed before they worked on their practicum. During this period the students had two-all day, six week classes, one on Tuesday and one on Thursday.

In order to accommodate the students who wanted to complete their classes before their practicum I met with Edmonton coordinator, Dr. Lauri Gilchrist. She suggested that I be very specific in my class outlines as to due dates for assignments, presentations and take-home examination. She suggested that I schedule the marking throughout the course, so as not to overload myself at the end of the class when all the marks are due.

In approaching this class, I wanted the students to validate their own background experience, and identity. I wanted them to realize that history started long before Christopher Columbus landed on shores of what we now call North America. The students read an introduction to a descriptive ecological book and Jeannette Armstrong's *Traditional Indigenous Education: A Natural Process* (1987). I tried to make them focus on their background.

The non-Native students in this class were not involved in this identity-frame. Two other students in the class were members of another ethnic minority. There was a Canadian born East-Indian and a girl from the Philippines. She was a landed immigrant who easily identified with a colonial experience. In her journal writings she described the struggles to come to Canada and her experiences in being different. She had to work harder than the other students because English was not her first language and identity.

Because this was an all-day six week course, the format was a lecture, class discussion, video and then a guest speaker. Throughout the course, the students had young First Nations guest speakers. It was important to have young role models who the students could emulate and realize that their goals were achievable.

Although this class had some contemporary educational history, the main focus was the residential school era. The students watched a contemporary video called *Healing that Hurts*. This video showed how residential school survivors internalized their pain. The moderator tried to make the residential school survivors come forward and describe their pain. It seemed like some of the survivors had spoken to the moderator before the seminar because he called them by name. Some of the survivors collapsed and the moderator had to embrace them to explain their experiences. Besides this, the survivors described their pain and frustration on paper and then later they burned these papers in the ceremonial fire.

Besides this video, the students were placed into groups of five. Each group was assigned a book on residential schools. The students were directed to work as a group to organize and role-play and present the contents of their books. In one of the groups, the students had to deal with residential school abuses. One of the members gave a First Nations student a pouch of tobacco to be the elder of their group. When she accepted the tobacco she explained that she needed to see her elder on her reserve to get permission to use a talking stick in the classroom presentation. The elder gave all the directions of what was to happen. The students invited the class to the smudge room. This group sat in a circle on the floor while the rest of us sat in-circle on the chairs, surrounding them. The group started their presentation but there was no prayer because this was done at sunrise. The students presented the descriptions of physical and sexual abuse described in the book. One of the students is a residential school survivor who described her own residential school sexual abuse and asked that the rising of the smudge to heal the pain

that she feels in her body. The members of this group understood the protocols connected to First Nations spirituality by giving the tobacco to act as the elder, visiting the elder to seek permission to use the talking stick, saying prayers at sunrise and smudging the members of the group before they started their talking stick ceremony.

With the role-play presentation I was not expecting the students to present their own sexual abuse stories but I felt confident that if there were any emotional problems with the students, the Machwachees Cultural College administrators would have their spiritual elders, cultural ceremonies or other counselors provide for their healing. This college has a strong First Nations cultural administration that believes in native spirituality and healing circles.

In dealing with this class, I feel that it was an extraordinary group because they had been together for the last two years and now they were completing their two year course. The non-Native members of the class benefited from being with the Native students. Although they had no experience with the residential schools, they could read about residential schools, watch the video and hear from a residential school survivor guest speaker who described the physical beatings and feelings about being lost and unloved. At birth, he was given up for adoption and at age three he was taken to the residential school. He talked about his experiences of being frequently beaten and wondering what he did wrong. He went through the personal analysis as to why his mother gave him away, wanting to know his mother, wanting to know his immediate family and wanting to be welcomed into his First Nations community.

In completing this Native education class the students had a greater understanding of their Native identity and federal government education policies. There was only one weakness in this class. I mentioned that some of the elders got angry at me because I did not understand the Cree language. Some very vocal members of this class could not accept the fact that the elders got angry. They had the stereotypical belief that elders are gentle, kind, understanding, soft spoken

and not quick to angry. I tried to mention that elders were proud individuals who want young people to care enough about their heritage that they learn their language but I was not able to bring this idea forward. I was not able to mention that I was not Cree and therefore learning this language was difficult.

I had never had to deal with a class that was as energetic as this one. They read all the articles, the text and prepared all the questions dealing with the class topic. Their hands go in the air, ready with their questions. After a while, I just continued my lecture until I was finished and then answered class questions. Out of this class of twenty six, seventeen successfully completed their first two years of the social work program and moved on to the four year bachelor program through the University of Calgary.

### **Assembly of First Nations Post Secondary Literature Review**

The Assembly of First Nations contracted each province to do a post-secondary literature review of post-secondary funding and the shortfalls within the province of Alberta. The treaty areas had to choose their own researchers and writer. I was the writer for the post-secondary literature review contracted to the First Nations Higher Education Consortium, Calgary, Alberta. I worked with two researchers from the Treaty 7 region.

The shortfall for this project was the shortage of time. If a researcher could go to the library and find all the federal government reports, it would have been easier to have more complete information about the post-secondary shortfalls. Some of the reports had to be ordered from the government departments. If the reports were outdated then it made it more difficult to receive copies of this information. Some federal governments departments were too busy conducting their daily business and therefore the reports were not accessible.

One might ask, what were the advantages to this research? The First Nations Higher Education Consortium required the writer and the researchers to make copies of all the reports, articles, and books that contained First Nations education information. The second advantage of this research was that they had begun a post-secondary education library. A disadvantage was the fact that this information was being collected but there was no long range plan to implement any changes to the post-secondary funding or expansion to the existing funds.

With the passing of Bill C-31, a Bill that re-instates women who lost their status through marriage to a non-status man, the post-secondary departments at the band level did not have adequate funds to sponsor all First Nations who wanted to return to school. There were long waiting lists that existed with First Nations bands. I checked with my band. The education director mentioned that the waiting list was two to three years long. This First Nations Education Director had an established method to expend their education dollars. The returning students were the first ones who received funding because the band wanted them to finish their degrees, certificates or diplomas. The next category was the grade twelve students who were planning to take technical, vocational or university entrance courses. After this, the students who planned to return to university or technical school needed to have their acceptance letters in order to be sponsored or put on the wait-list.

### **Assembly of First Nations Post-Secondary Review**

In July 1998 the Annual General Assembly of Chiefs passed a resolution authorizing a study of First Nations post-secondary education. To begin this study the Assembly of First Nations Education secretariat commissioned a literature review of post secondary policies and programs. The main focus of this study and the later student questionnaires was "the

effectiveness of these [post-secondary] policies and programs through the quality of programming, accessibility, equity, portability, transferability, and accountability for the distribution of resources.”<sup>8</sup>

The Alberta review was divided into three treaty areas: Treaty 7, Treaty 6 and Treaty 8. Each of the treaty areas had their own researchers and one writer who worked to analyze the information with all the treaty area representatives. The Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 researchers worked with the post secondary institutions within their respective areas. Because of the shortage of research dollars, I contacted the five treaty tribal offices and forwarded the student questionnaires to be sent out to the students registered in the post-secondary institutions.

The First Nations Adult Higher Education Consortium (FNAHEC) administered out of the Confederacy of Treaty 7 office in Calgary received the Assembly of First Nations contract. Because of the shortage of time, the researchers went to Calgary and later Edmonton to work on the analysis of the student questionnaires.

In working on this project, I felt that Treaty 8 region had more difficulties than the other two treaty areas. In both regions the post secondary areas were only within one hour to their university or college. In the Treaty 8 region the distances were greater: all of the distances were listed in hours for one way travel from my home reserve. Edmonton was 4 hours one way, Grand Prairie was 2 and a half hours, Fort McMurray was 7 hours and Calgary was 8 hours away. The First Nations Adult Higher Education Consortium writer was upset that I did not travel to all these areas but there was only four hundred dollars for travel and these distances were too great. If I had tried to visit Little Red River or Fort Chipewyan, I would have had to fly into these two communities and it would have cost me probably eight hundred to a thousand dollars one way. If

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8 The introductory paragraph was taken from the Post Secondary Needs Assessment report. This report contains a short summary of all the AFN Post Secondary Education Reports.



I had traveled to Fort Vermillion or Assumption, the distances were about seven hours from my home reserve and probably about 12 hours from Edmonton. The distance between Dene Th' First Nations and Edmonton was around 2000 kilometers.

Later, the writer mentioned that other provinces did not commit their research teams to the field because they considered the time limit too short and the funds inadequate to cover the travel and the research that needed to be completed. Therefore, the weakness of this research project was the shortage of time and money. Some of the student questionnaires came in after their indefinite deadlines and were not included in the studies. I feel that the student questionnaires should have included a date when the forms needed to be returned, otherwise they should have been included.

If one wanted to find a positive outcome of this research, it was the fact that the Treaty 7 and Treaty 6 areas had some concrete educational data that they can use to access more educational dollars for their First Nations Colleges. Unlike the other treaty areas, the Treaty 8 First Nations do not have a Treaty 8 university. The Treaty 8 First Nations post-secondary students had to consider seriously where they wished to go to university. Sometimes, the students were young, enthusiastic and energetic but still could not tolerate the great distances away from their family and their community. For Treaty 8 First Nations who do not have their own university today, there are greater numbers of post secondary students who were completing their university degrees and graduate studies.

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I really believe that Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 were fortunate to have their own college and universities. The members of the Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 have formed an organization called the First Nations Adult Higher Education consortium, FNAHEC. This organization worked hard to validate their First Nations departments like social work and First Nations education programs. Further, this group established a strong network that has the ability to spring into action for any adverse programs from the Department of Indian Affairs. If the federal government has any educational program, the consortium was also there to take advantage of educational research or further establish their own First Nations curriculum. What was important about this opportunity was to watch this network work. When many centers from central and southern Alberta worked together, there was a greater chance for success because of the strong bonds between all of the centers.

Although the north does not have a Treaty 8 university I feel that there is an opportunity to build a center of excellence that characterizes and fulfills the needs of the northern areas. It is important to have a center that validates all the different nations of Cree, Dene, or Chipewyan in the north. It is important for the control to come from within our nations to build the Indigenous side of law, First Nations education, social work, First Nations languages and coordinate efforts with many centers within Alberta or anywhere else. A good example of fulfilling different needs is Athabasca University which collaborates with a large number of institutions in Canada and around the world. The Treaty Center needs to establish a set of guidelines that allows for innovative success for the students entering the center. Some of the institutions have established programs where the program is one week in a center of

excellence and three weeks of practicum where they learn how to explore the policies and develop ideas on how to adapt this policy to meet the needs of a Treaty 8 reserve. For example, in a previous section, I mentioned how an alternate high school had developed a nineteen day school program where the students worked on one subject for nineteen days. These students had difficulties staying in school and therefore the program was established where the students received 50% credit for being in class and the other 50% came from their class assignments. In conclusion, I feel that it was important to assess every situation and adapt the program to meet the needs of a Treaty 8 reserve. The next chapter will include further reflections about my various educational and reserach work experiences.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A FIRST NATIONS EDUCATOR

In this chapter I will share some of my reflections about my experiences as a First Nations educator and offer concluding thoughts about my understandings gained from Indigenous life story methodology. In this educator role I reviewed the history of Canada and the history of First Nations education. The history books celebrate the discovery of North America in 1492. In the United States Columbus Day is a national holiday. In Canada, there is no celebration of Columbus Day but there was recognition that history began with the explorers, Columbus being the first explorer named.

In all of my classes I tried to emphasize that our history began before the coming of the explorers. The First Nations were here long before the coming of the non-Aboriginal peoples. The elders taught us that the First Nations inhabited North American since time immemorial.

Olive Dickason, a Metis historian (1996), writes that Indigenous peoples have inhabited North America about 40,000 years ago.

By about 11,000 [years ago] humans were inhabiting the length and breadth of the Americas, with the greatest concentration of population being along the Pacific coast of the two continents... About 5,000-8,000 years ago, when climate, sea levels and land stabilized into configurations that approximate those of today, human crossed a population and cultural threshold, if one is to judge by the increase in numbers and complexity of archaeological sites (RCAP, volume 1, p. 11).

After discussing the length of time that Indigenous peoples have populated this continent,

students review the ideas of traditional education. Our teachings were handed down orally and First Nations children learn by observation and practice. In each of our First Nations societies there were certain times to teach the young people. At the time of puberty the young boys learn from the elders and spiritual people and the girls learn from elder women and spiritual people about their responsibilities to themselves, their families, their communities and to their future mate and unborn children. Cardinal (1969, 1999) writes:

In the old days the Indian peoples had their own system of education. Although the system was entirely informal and varied from tribe to tribe or location to location, it had one great factor going for it -- it worked. The Indian method, entirely pragmatic, was designed to prepare the child for whatever way of life he was to lead ----hunter, fisherman, warriors, chief, medicine man or wife and mother (p. 44).

The First Nations people lived in traditional organized societies and were given all the ceremonies and laws that they needed to survive physically and spiritually. First Nations people were children of the Creator. If the First Nations lived in organized societies with teachers, law-makers, strict roles and they believed in a special relationship with the Creator, then the negative stereotypes about being heathen, pagan and uncivilized were untrue.

Aboriginal students were silenced in their attempts to find identity in an academic institution when the literature continually stressed these negative ideals. Sometimes, the academic articles, books, and e-journals categorized Aboriginal peoples as not being human. Sometimes the students had just left their First Nations reserves or Metis colonies and were therefore a little timid to object to what they were hearing. Why was it so important to get an education when all the academic professors were lecturing on inhumanness and negative stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples. Education needed to be transformed so that the students realized even though the literature might say that First Nations were all of these negative stereotypes, this does not make this true.

## **Evaluations of First Nations students**

Educators need to evaluate the education that our Aboriginal students have received. It is a known fact that the academic education some of the First Nations students have received was not necessarily the same as their mainstream counterparts. Barman (1996) mentions that "far too many Aboriginal pupils lag behind their non-aboriginal counterparts" (p. 272).

In transitional type programs the administrators need to be aware of the academic inadequacies of some of our students. This problem does not mean that First Nations students cannot learn. No, all these academic inadequacies mean is that the students have missed some information and need remedial assistance for some areas in their education. For example, some First Nations students speak their Native language first and therefore it was difficult to write English because they always seemed to be translating rather than letting their ideas flow from English.

As a transitional English instructor I used journal writing so that students were able to practice the art of expressing their ideas or experiences on paper. I think that it was important for the students to be able to focus and get their ideas on paper. In working with journals it was important to have the cooperation of the students. When I used journal writing, I always had this exercise at the first ten minutes of each class and students needed to cooperate by attending class on time and by sharing their ideas.

Besides this, there were centers on the university campus where the students could attend workshops that concentrated on academic writings. The students wrote paragraphs which were assessed to conclude at what levels of achievement the student had achieved and what was required to make this person a successful student. This writing program started at the beginning

of September and usually continued for a month to six weeks.

Further to the writing, the students might have experienced difficulties keeping up with the pace of the academic courses. Their problem might have been that they could not read fast enough and soon they lagged far behind the readings and discussions in their classes. During my years at the University of Alberta I suggested that the Transitional Year Office establish a relationship with a reading and comprehension skills programs. This Reading and Comprehension course was a short three week course where the students worked independently on short readings and then took short examinations on their speed and understanding of the articles. One of my friend's son had the experience with this reading and comprehensive course. The institution pretested all the students and profiled what was their academic level and speed of the reading. If a student was nearing high school graduation then the student should be reading about 500 words a minute with about 99% comprehension. Some of the transitional year students required this little refresher type course.

Another method in assisting the students was to evaluate their first assignments in a strict and rigid method. Even if the student had been a journalist, their writing skills were different than first year English. It has been my experience that most of the students believed that they entered into university with a gifted pen in their hand and therefore really did not need much assistance. At the other end of the spectrum, I had students who were able to hide their inadequacies in writing. I was not sure how they managed to disguise themselves but they were really able to do this.

I usually gave out my assignments on a Friday and at the end of class with the message that I would be in my office or you can reach me by email. It seemed that the students who really needed assistance did not manage the time to visit the office, library, email or telephone call. Somehow, there was a failure in communication where the students felt that they really did not

need to discuss their difficulties but these problems would magically disappear because it was considered non-existent.

In working with the students I really tried to make the students more conscientious about their skill level in their writings. I remember, in my first year, I had a northern student who really felt that her writings were excellent. She looked at her grade, glanced at me and bolted out of the classroom. She went rushing to the transitional year office and had an appointment to see the coordinator. Thinking that I was unreasonable in my marking, she asked the coordinator to read her first paper. After reading the paper, the coordinator agreed with my markings and told the student that she needed to work harder on her writings. After this, the student started earlier on her writings, forwarded all assignments to a writing buddy and completed the first year English course with a perfect nine. What I tried to do was to make the students work toward perfection in their writings. In my first year teaching English I had only one perfect nine score but after this year, I now always have a small number of students who had perfect scores.

In organizing assignments it was important to have more open ended topics that the students were really interested in researching because this contained the best measure for success in research coursework. When a student was enthusiastic about what they were researching there was always a greater degree of success. Sometimes, the topics do not allow for this freedom of ideas but there can still be this openness in the writings. Not long ago, I had one of the students that I had in English approach me and discuss her program. She mentioned that she became so interested in Aboriginal topics that she continued with her Native literature but not all students were as enthusiastic as this one.

It seemed that some students experience difficulties in writing because English was a second language, some experienced difficulties because their reading and comprehension was below university levels of achievement and others needed more motivation to do better. In



attempting to fill the future employment gaps with well qualified employees, it was important to look for more innovative methods to assist First Nations students.

### **Innovative methods for First Nations students**

In reviewing the methods for assisting First Nations students, I think that it was important to keep an open mind and try something different. In my Education practicum I worked with a teacher who used his experience to develop a method where more students can succeed. Since the students were aware that they had difficulties in being in class for long periods of time, it was important for their success to have the all-day nineteen day study of a high school course. While I worked with this supervisor, there was a seventy five per cent success rate.

I think that one of the most important factors that contributed to this class success was the fact that the students met every nineteen days with the teacher and had to deal with their success or failure in their courses and therefore take ownership or responsibility for their education. This nineteen day course had been also established at the Joe Duquette Survival High School in Saskatoon. This survival school had one difference from Sion High School and that was the students were able to take provincial examinations. At this survival school all the First Nations students did not attend this nineteen day course but there was a possibility to attend this type of class.

Besides this, I think that the all-day course Native Education class at Machwachees Cultural College was an innovative way to complete a two-year social work program. The students decided that they did not want to do their practicums and attend class too. The class decided that they wanted to finish this class in a six week period. In a meeting of other transitional year professors, I mentioned that the instructor might change the format of this first

year English class. The students should take this course over a shorter period of time. He became really adamant that this was not a method that he would approve or be willing to teach. He was more interested in larger English classes where if students have to be absent then there were still a large number of students present for his English class.

In working with First Nations students at the first year university level I feel that it was extremely important to find methods where the students were able to complete their courses but at levels where they were able to compete with mainstream students. Students needed to take ownership of their education in order to attain their many dreams.

### **Reflecting back**

As a student I had many dreams. In my first years at elementary school in Nanaimo the classroom teachers seemed not to be interested in engaging me into the class discussion. This was difficult for me to understand because my mother was always trying to teach me how to cook, how to clean and smoke fish, how to set the table, telling me that she would not always be around to teach me. After the loss of my parents I went to Indian Day School at Tsartlip First Nations reserve. This experience was different because the teachers taught reading, writing, spelling, and mathematics. The religious sisters were supportive and had students who finished their assignments ahead of time help other students. I was always finished ahead. After this experience I went to St. Ann's Academy, a private Roman Catholic Girls school in Victoria. I was a resident student with girls from all over western Canada, United States, North West Territories and El Salvador. During my middle years, I enjoyed my classes and did not have a problem with my classes, even though I had never taken science or social studies in my earlier grades.

When I entered high school I really enjoyed my classes but found some courses where I really lacked the background. The course that I had the most difficulty was Home Economics 10. I had never done any sewing and was not very wise in my choice of a pattern. I chose a dress pattern that had pleats, was a plaid, had a collar and sleeves. I found that one of the other students had been sewing for years and she helped me through this difficult project. I had sewed over the fabric so many times that, when I finished the dress, I did not even want to wear the dress. From this experience I learned patience, so much patience because I just did not have the skills to know how to make a dress or anything.

From my high school experience I remember attending my English class and listening to the Roman Catholic Sister read paragraph after paragraph from one of the students who wrote so well. I wondered how she learned to write so well but somehow being shy and quiet never asked for help.

After high school I worked in labor type employment. Soon I made the decision to return to post secondary education. I needed to take a history course therefore I applied and got accepted at Prince George College. This college was a small Roman Catholic college where there were a small number of young people who were like me, upgrading my high school courses.

After this year I applied to Notre Dame University, Nelson. I started my first year with courses in English, History of Philosophy, Logic, Biology, and Mathematics. I stayed in residence and everywhere that I went I carried my science text. During all my years in school I had only three years of science. I really had to prove to myself that I could achieve a degree and I belonged at university. I can not really remember being involved in much of the activities related to the university but I worked really hard. I think that the best experience was when I received a letter from the Canadian Indian Youth Council inviting me to attend a six week workshop at the University of Manitoba.

The Canadian Indian Youth Council invited all the university students from across Canada to a six week workshop at the University of Manitoba. There were twenty five of us, maybe there were more, but twenty five of us who accepted the invitation. Professor Bob Reid from the University of Chicago and Cherokee Robert Thomas from the University of Arizona were the main professors for this workshop. Their central focus was on First Nations identity and culture. Because this topic had been forbidden for so long, the post secondary students listened very tentatively. I can only speak for myself, but it seemed that all were so involved in their own personal learning.

Earlier, I had questioned my grandfather but for whatever his reasons, maybe the cruel physical treatment that his oldest son received, he refused to teach Hul'q'um'num language and Coast Salish culture to me. I felt a real excitement in my learning and think that this really fuelled my further interests and studies in First Nations history and culture.

In all the years of my studies I think that most of the teachers and professors were very supportive to me. I did not receive the comments that I was only average like one of my sons. I did not receive the comment that because I was First Nations I had to take the non-academic courses like one of my other sons. I was not told to stay in this role because I was a "Dummie," again like another one of my sons. I did not receive a shocked reaction when I decided to do graduate studies like my son received when he dreamed about becoming the prime minister of Canada. I was never neglected in my courses for studying First Nation history and culture like my daughter received in a high school in British Columbia. I never heard a teacher call a medicine person "evil" like my other daughter did.

During my children's education I made sure that I attended each and every one of their parent teacher interviews and tried to discuss with the teacher how my children could do better in their courses. Some of the teachers were very supportive while others seemed to believe that

First Nations were only average. In dealing with my children's education I tried to make sure that they were treated fairly when they were younger, but later on I tried to help them to look at all of the alternatives in order to make good decisions. If they wanted to discuss their education I always wanted them to look at all of the options. My children and I looked at all the pro's and con's of any discussion, so later on, they developed their decision making abilities. One does not jump to a decision; it was a planned step by step process.

### **Learning from the past**

In the teaching of classes I found that it was important to focus on Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's federal government and his assimilative policies. At the time of Confederation the Prime Minister did not consult with the First Nations about forming a country, but established a country with the intention to civilize and Christianize the Indians [First Nations]. His intention was to move the First Nations on reserves and away from their traditional governments. With the passing of the *Indian Act* the federal government moved the Indians from a traditional type government to a more restrictive municipal type government where the First Nations needed to ask permission to leave the reserve and to sell their produce. The First Nations were not allowed to practice their own religion, to speak their own language, to organize politically, to hire a lawyer, to vote in elections and to attend the mainstream schools.

The federal government ordered the First Nations children away their traditional parents into residential school where it was their great hope to assimilate First Nations children into Canadian society. Over a century ago the federal government failed to achieve their assimilation goal but succeeded in causing irreparable damage to First Nations communities.

In dealing with the Federal policies the students find reasons for their shame or pride in

their identity. When the students find that there was no control over their loss of language and loss of familial relationships then they were able to move forward in their own personal educational journeys.

In writing my life history, I have collected many fears in my suitcase. Over the years, there was a collection of fears of loss of family, fear of the police, fear of first teacher and fear of the way that some First Nations students were treated in the name of education. I have written about these fears as a way of unpacking these unpleasant experiences and as a way of seeking spiritual and emotional healing. I consider myself quite fortunate that I had the good fortune to meet elders who cared about my personal journeys and gave advice as to how I might move forward with my life. I think that the most difficult advice was to walk that land where our house once stood and where my family lived. I was afraid to go through this experience but I had a brave auntie Anna Spahan, who walked the land with me. Now I feel the healing power because I faced this tragic reality directly. I also faced the stereotypes about Aboriginal women and Aboriginal learners by becoming an educator and developing culturally relevant curriculum to negate these stereotypes. In my various teaching roles I worked diligently to develop culturally sensitive pedagogy to facilitate the success of Aboriginal students. Besides the healing, I shared how I, as a parent supported my children in their educational endeavors and how caring professors supported my graduate studies. I came to appreciate the power and value of the Indigenous life story methodology as being a healing, educational, and scholarly endeavour. Following the Indigenous life story methodology, I encourage you, the reader, to draw additional lessons from my life history and stories that are appropriate to your situation.

For me, the principal importance of my thesis is leaving this written monument to honour and remember my mother, my father, my uncle, two sisters and one brother and adding my experience to the accumulation of human knowledge through research. My written monument

honours the memory of my father Mack who died at age 36, my mother Sarah who died at the age of 30, my sister Elsie who died at age 3 and my brother Mack junior who died at age 1. I also want to remember my baby sister Patricia and my uncle Jimmy, both who did not have their deaths recorded.

By writing about the loss of family this is a timeless monument that will remain a strong memorial to honour the memory of my family. By writing about the loss of my family, I show how I have dealt with the separation from immediate family, not forgetting my loss but always cherishing the memories that live in my heart. In conclusion, by writing this monument I illustrate to my family that I am proud to remember my mother, father, brother, sisters and my uncle. My father used to say to me: "When I die, I will go to the Happy Hunting Ground." They are all there now.

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