



the rivers where we sing



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The Rivers Where We Sing
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INTRODUCTION

The Elder Project visited Ladysmith Secondary School in February of 2018. It was the second Elder Project we have hosted in our school district, and it was amazing! Students had the opportunity to sit, visit and interview Elders—to learn from their lived experience and hear about the old ways, to learn about their struggles and hear about their successes. The students had the opportunity to see what resiliency and strength looks like. The day was bittersweet for me and the students, an emotional day as I watched my s-ul’hween (Elders) share their stories.

Thanks to the Federation of BC Writers for supporting this project. Thanks to the BC Arts Council for their generous support, and to the team at LSS for their teamwork. Thank you to Ann Graham Walker and Rhonda Ganz, and a very big thank you to Wendy Morton for the guidance and energy she brings to this amazing project.

Michelle Sokoloski
Aboriginal Education Enhancement Coordinator, Nanaimo Ladysmith School District

ROSE RICE

I am Rose Marie Rice.
I am one of 24 children.
My childhood was hard times, traumatic.
My older sister was my mom, she raised me
with my grandma.

Because of the trauma of my early life,
I am helping others.
I find passion in my experience.
I am good at what I do.

Working hard is important in everything you do.
I was responsible, mature at a young age,
protective of my siblings
and was taught to honour who I am.

I was taught to respect and love everyone;
how sacred our nation is.

My experience and culture together
went full circle in my journey of healing.
My culture is my medicine.





VIOLET GEORGE

I was born in Qw'umiyiqun.
A midwife delivered me.

I grew up with my parents and sisters.
I was the baby of the family.

We made up our own games.
The river was my playground.

My parents taught me to behave, respect
and always help out.

I got married when I was 16, at St. Andrew's Church.
It was hard being married young.

We moved around a lot,
didn't have a place of our own.

I have been married for 70 years.
I have 12 children: seven girls and five boys.

BREANNA SEYMOUR AND KAYLA SEYMOUR

MICHAEL ALEXANDER BENNIE

Growing up in Williams Lake with a four year older sister, raised by my Métis mother and Scottish father, learning to live off and preserve the land, being guided by my grandfather's hand.

Now I'm 68, after many good years, working in the trades and playing hockey, staying positive throughout hard times and injuries, shop work keeping me in school with human inquiries.

Luckily, I didn't go to residential school. But I didn't escape prejudice. I didn't let it take me down, life is what you make it, full of ups and downs, it's on you how to take it.





THERESA RICE

I am 80 years old.

I was taught to be helpful, kind and nice.

I was taught how to cook and knit. We lived in an old house, three rooms. I learned to live off the land, the sea.

I had a great childhood. My grandparents raised me.

Everything I know to this day is from my family:

from bighouse, church, teachings,

to taking care of myself and my family.

I was told “to speak from the heart, not from a book.”

When I was five or six I was taken off the beach of my home to residential school on Penelakut.

I was scared of school after that.

Life’s lesson is to help each other, take care of each other.

JENNIFER ELLIOTT

WHAT IS LIFE WITHOUT LOVE? GERALDINE MANSON

At the age of six I was taken.
I was taken from my mother.
Left without a voice.

I was stripped of my clothes, my identity, of my humanity.
I discovered the day I was given the name “bed wetter”
that it was my birthday!

But what is birth without a family?
What is life without love?

But birth is in everything: in the sky and in the trees.
From the mountains to the rivers to the ocean,
back to the land to be embraced by the environment that awaits above.

BELLA GOURLEY





STELLA SAM

I was born in Duncan, but belong to the Penelakut Tribe.
I have nine siblings: five sisters and four brothers.
I enjoyed playing outside with them.

My house had two bedrooms
and a small living room.
My dad built a third bedroom.

My hopes and dreams are
that young people get an education
so the world will open up to them.

Jokes, laughter and my daughter
are what keep me
young and alive.

MELAINEE SAMPSON AND DARNELL ALECK

MANDY JONES

I was born in Snuneymuxw,
raised by the community.
I had lots of family, happiness and unity.

I was on the beach with my siblings:
one brother and three sisters.

I struggled through school,
moved on to a career,
teaching to share,
teaching to care.





BEVERLY (BUFFY) DAVID

I was born in Ladysmith,
along with my nine siblings.

My parents, Victor and Seraphine Seymour
taught me so much.

Snuw'uy'ulh.

We come from a hereditary Chief family.

I lived in Kulleet Bay for 59 years,
in a house on stilts with lots of windows,
beautiful wooden floors and a fireplace.

I remember my dad saying "even the cow knows
when to come home,"
if we were ever late.

We always played in the woods: we played ho'ho's
at Paddy Aleck's.

ISABEL SMITH AND AMOS HARRIS

We played in the forest and played
down at the beach.

I went to St. Mary's, North Oyster
and then Ladysmith Secondary School.

I didn't enjoy school at all.

My mom always fixed my hair too tight.

I remember undoing my hair at the bus stop.

I remember eating traditional food
with my family: we ate clams, fish, oysters,
herring, herring eggs, dried salmon, octopus,
sea urchins, crabs, deer and fried bread.

I love drumming, I love to cook, sing
and speak hul'q'umi'num'.

PETE WILLIAMS

I was born in Somena, raised by both parents.

My mother is from Nanaimo, my father from Duncan.

I used to fish on the river with my dad, smoke the fish for the winter.

I lived in Duncan on the reserve with my three sisters and two brothers.

I didn't attend residential school, but a brother and sister did.

My favourite time at school was recess
and spearfishing in the river behind the school.

My happiest memory is getting married to my wife of 30 years.

I have eight children, 18 grandchildren.

My advice for today's youth: slow down in such a fast-paced world.





THE RIVERS WHERE WE SING: THE ELDERS

Because they learned to live off the land.

Because they fished in the rivers.

Because they watched the sky, the trees.

Because they lived in small houses, houses on stilts.

Because they played on the beach.

Because they were taken.

Because they returned to the rivers of their lives.

Because they sang.

WENDY MORTON

PHILOMENA WILLIAMS

My name is Philomena, I lived by a river
where berries would grow and snakes would slither.
If my knowledge were a present, I would be the gift giver.

I have learned to listen, and to apply my wit.
I have learned to be silent and to be respectful
to whom I speak with.
I have been given knowledge,
how I will enlist.

Philomena, Philomena, who now teaches to listen,
and came from a family where everyone is driven
and everyone helps everyone with the obstacles of living.





AGNES PADILLA

I am from Snueymuxw, raised by my dad's mom.
My dad married twice, survived residential school.
My grandmother taught me.

I went hunting and clam digging with my dad.
Every word out of my mouth was "why?"
My grandmother called me "why" in our language.
I had two brothers I never knew, and three I looked after.
My grandmother told me we're all equal to everybody.

I lived in Nanaimo, a small house and one big room.
Our life was hard, but it wasn't.
We ate from the ocean, the mountains:
oysters, clams, duck, deer, elk.
I never played games, I didn't have time.

BEATRIX TAYLOR

I went to school on the reserve.
We didn't learn fast enough for the teachers.
I only went to the third grade.

I got married when I was 19, had four boys.
I became a single mother.
I worked on a berry farm.

Then I put myself through school,
got a job in electronics, building computers.
I held down three jobs.

I watched all my sons grow up
and finish their education.

My head swells up when I talk about them.
Now, I teach my language.

CLAYTON WYSE

I am 68, born and raised in Nanaimo by my mom, my dad and four sisters. We were always close. When I was on the wrong path, my dad always told me: “Fly right on the straight path.”

I now live in the house where my dad was born. He taught me my work ethic. I didn’t like school, I’d rather work for a living.

My fondest memories are the times I spent with my father; he taught me everything I needed to know. My mother said, “here’s how to cook, here’s how to clean, here’s how you do your laundry.” Then I moved out at 19.

If I could do it all again, I would do it exactly the same and when opportunity knocks again, I hope it’s a little louder.

“Find something you like, do it to the best of your ability.”





PENNY SEWARD

She is strong.

Childhood memory: family gatherings, seafood.

Preschool and school were hard times,
xwunitum greeted warmly, but me—
the door slammed in my face.

But the good times: camping with mom, dad
and the family,
that was different.

Gramma to granddaughter, “I will always be there—
look, I’m there.”

ROSILEE TOM AND ALBA MENDEZ-ALECK



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Michelle Sokoloski's hard and persistent work turned this 19th Elder Project into a meaningful and often beautiful event. The staff at Ladysmith Secondary School were welcoming and enthusiastic. Mandy Jones sat at the head of the long table and answered the questions each student asked her—questions they would ask the Elders the next day. There was a kind of magic there that carried on into the second day of the project, which happened to be Valentine's Day.

Michelle had arranged for cedar boughs to be on all the tables, along with cedar hearts and cedar flowers made by the students. A beautiful lunch was presented by students training to be cooks. Then the conversations between Elders and young people took over the room. Shauna DeBodt and Hanna Copp took photographs and Brenda Kohlruss did a careful job to identify each participant.

I want to thank Anne Tenning for her great enthusiasm for this project. I would also like to thank the Federation of BC Writers and the BC Arts Council for their sponsorship of the Elder Project, and Rhonda Ganz for another lovely Elder Project book.

Mandy Morton



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