

## THE ELDER PROJECT: A WAY TOWARD KNOWLEDGE

*By Wendy Morton*



I am a former secondary teacher, and a poet with seven books in the world. I like to say that poetry is the shortest distance between two hearts and in the past five years I have seen this happen many times. I have seen First Nations, Metis and Inuit youth sitting with their Elders, turning their Elders' stories into poems. Two hearts connecting.

There are now 12 Elder Projects. They can be viewed online at [www.theelderproject.com](http://www.theelderproject.com)

In 2008, I was commissioned by the Alberni Valley Museum to write poems from archival photographs and journals, in celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Province of B.C. The poems were combined with photographs and displayed in the museum. After I wrote the first 20 poems, I realized that a whole population was being ignored: the First Nations people: the Tseshaht, the Hupacasath, the Ahousaht, the Nuuchahnulth, who had been there thousands of years before the arrival of the white settlers. Jean McIntosh, the museum's director, agreed.

Two chairs were set up in the Museum and many First Nations people came with their stories; they became my teachers. It was from them I learned of the darkness of the residential school experience. As well, I learned about the rich life they had with their families. I wrote in one of my poems, how they were "raised with the sacred/ the seasons of the moon/ to honor the earth, the elders."

A year later, I met Barb Stoochnoff, a teacher at Chemainus Secondary School told her about the book I had written for the Alberni Museum project, *What Were Their Dreams*. She asked me to come to her class of First Nations students, and teach them to be poets. And so I arrived, magnetic poetry and photographs in hand and worked with them to find the words for their own stories. Denise Augustine, who is in charge of Aboriginal Education for the Cowichan Valley School District 79 was there, and said, after she saw the poems the students had written, and how readily they had written poetry, said "Let's do something."

That something was the first Elder Project book. Denise and I compiled a list of questions for the students to ask the Elders that would give the students an idea of the life the Elders had lived. I trained the students to write poetry. I distributed photographs, some of which had been given to me by the Elders I met in Port Alberni, and gave the students a pile of Magnetic Poetry words, and the students, sometimes working together, wrote small poems, getting an idea of how to write the short lines of a poem. Later, the Elders arrived, and the students turned their stories into poems, which were then published in *The Elder Project* in 2010.

On page 3, Denise wrote in the introduction, "This project connected our youth with their Elders. People hunger now more than ever for connection with one another. These stories connect us to our past, our family and our community. The confidence and creativity that has been developed has been magical to watch."

*Together With the Children*, was published in 2010, with students and Elders from Vernon School District 22 and the Cultural Immersion School at the Okanagan Indian Band. Sandra Lynxleg, District Principal for Aboriginal Education, organized the project in Vernon. I happened to be in Vernon, saw a brochure featuring the Aboriginal Education program and called her up. I took a copy of *The Elder Project* for her to see and she immediately said, "Yes!!"

Later, she wrote in the introduction on page 1: "Read these poems. You'll ride in a canoe. You'll see turpentine poured on a head. You'll eat hard tack cookies. Smell a box of crayons. As you turn each page you'll meet us and learn more about who we are."

In 2011, the third book, *The Elders Speak*, was published, again, in School District 79. This book involved students from Chemainus Elementary, Crofton Elementary and Penelakut Island Elementary. Students involved in the first book acted as assistants for these students. They helped the younger students write their magnetic poetry poems, sometimes sat in on the interview with the Elders, and provided valuable support. One poem, on page 4, written by Kali Jack and Tyson Jack for their Elder, Danny Norris, captures the spirit of the project's intent:

### **My Elder, Danny Norris**

I grew up around wood stoves and sawdust stoves.  
We had a small house, 18 people,  
no running water.

There were roses outside,  
a smokehouse for drying fish.  
We made sure our chores were done first,  
then we could go and play.

We had to eat at the table  
because the Elders were talking, teaching us.  
We swallowed their knowledge.

Another poem from *The Elders Speak*, on page 21, was written by Ann Marie Louie, who was 13. She wrote it for Laura Antoine, an Aboriginal support worker at Chemainis Elementary. Ann Marie knew Laura; she did not know her story until she sat down with her and asked her the questions.

I went to Westholm Indian Day School,  
Grades 1-6.  
Racism was bad.  
The janitor called us "dirty little Indians."  
He was a military person,  
shined the floors, didn't like us to use the bathrooms.

They gave us rotten apples to eat.  
There were worms in them.  
They gave us dog biscuits to eat,  
Powdered milk that tasted like paint.  
Sometimes I threw up.

I was supposed to speak English.  
If I spoke my language, I would get hit on the head  
with a metal ruler.

I would go home, the blood dripping from my head.

The fourth book, *Words of the Elders*, involved students from the S.J. Willis Education Centre in Victoria, Victoria School District 61. It was published in 2012. This project was unusual. The Elders involved were from the Victoria Friendship Centre. They were unknown to the students. But not for long.

The fifth book, published in 2012, *Xe'Xe'*. Students participated from Quamichan Middle School and Alexander Elementary School, again in the Cowichan School District 79. Students from Chemainus Secondary School who were involved in previous Elder Projects acted as coaches to these students.

This book was followed by *With All Our Knowledge*, students from the First Peoples' Academy at Seaton Secondary in Vernon, School District 22. This poem, on page 29, written by Tristin Louis for Juliette Rivet captures her life in a unique way.

I sat at the valley and saw my people.  
I smelled the fish and dried meat.  
I saw an eagle fly on a church steeple.  
This is where my people meet.

My grandpa was a chief and shaman,  
he taught us our native ways.  
It was taken from me in a school  
and my life changed in every way.

The seventh book, *Wisdom of the Elders* involved students from Stelly's Secondary School in Saanich School District 63 in 2013. Students from the First Peoples English class, grades 10 through 12 were involved. One of the pictures I gave to the students is of Dolly Watts, age 11, on her way to Port Alberni Residential School in 1946. She is on a train, smiling. She does not know what awaits her. Ernie Bill wrote this poem on page 3:

### **Dolly**

She smiles a blooming smile on the outside  
inside it's a cruel world  
on the train of bitter moment

The eighth book, *Connecting with the Elders*, took place in 2013 in the Rocky Mountain School District 6, in three communities there: Kimberley, Golden and Invermere. Denise Porter, who was the Aboriginal Education Support Worker in Golden, wrote, "The real gift of the Elder Project was in the intergenerational connections that were made, and will live on, not only in a physical form, but also in the minds and souls of the participants."

The ninth book, *A Gift of Words*, took place in Torngat Mountains National Park in northern Labrador in August of 2013. I worked with the Inuit youth, and their Elders at Torngat Mountains Base Camp and Research Station. The kANGIDLUASUK Student Program is a learning and leadership field program for Nunavik and Nunatsiavut youth. It was an extraordinary experience.

The tenth book, *Their Working Hands, Their Golden Words*, took place again at Torngat Mountains National Park, the summer of 2014. I worked with different Inuit youth, many of whom are bi-lingual, fluent in Inuktitut and English. Simeonie Merkuratsuk, one of the youth wrote this on page 22:

### **Our Elders, Our Future**

I can see it in their eyes:  
what the Elders went through.  
It was hard.  
Hunger.  
Danger.  
Travelling.  
Relocation.  
Their hard working hands,  
their golden hearts.

The eleventh Elder Project, *Walking Through the Generations*, at Cowichan Secondary in Duncan, was again with School District 79 in 2015. The Elders arrived, the students listened and the poems arrived. In this book, many of the youth interviewed the Elders to whom they were related. As one student said, she learned to "pay attention because they move you to listen."

The twelveth Elder Project, *Through the Eyes of the Elders*, took place in 2015 at Clarence Fulton Secondary in Vernon SD22, in the BC First Nations Studies 12 class. A student from Thailand interviewed a Mohawk Elder; a German student interviewed a Metis Elder; an Alberta Plains Cree student interviewed an Okanagan Elder.

What was unique about this project was the remarkable closeness that was established between the Elders and the students. The Elders were with the youth all of the three days and on the last day, some brought bannock, jam, pies. And some of the Elders wrote poems for the youth.

We have received support for the production of some of these books from Coast Capital Credit Union, TD Bank, New Horizons for Seniors and Parks Canada.

All of the books have been designed and edited by Rhonda Ganz.

These Elder Projects have changed me and given me a new understanding of First Nations, Metis and Inuit people, and they have deepened my compassion. My greatest hope is that the books that are produced will find their way into classrooms where the students can learn to view First Nations, Metis and Inuit people as the gifted human beings they are.

The goal of an Elder Project is to have the students hear the stories of their Elders, to take the stories into themselves and write poems which will then go out into the world, with healing for everyone who reads them.