



Yetko Brooke Bearshirt-Robins, a Grade 7 student, and John (Wilkie) Louis, who teaches the Okanagan language, share their story at the launch of Together with the Children — The Elder Project.

STUDENTS PRESERVE LEGACY OF ELDERS

Photo Submitted

By [Katherine Mortimer - Vernon Morning Star](#)

Published: January 01, 2011 12:00 PM

Wendy Morton is known for committing random acts of poetry, so when the renowned Canadian poet was in Vernon earlier this year, she came across a brochure for the aboriginal education department that had been prepared by principal Sandra Lynxleg.

“I was charmed by the poetry of her name and I called her up,” she said.

Morton was working with aboriginal children and their elders in the Cowichan School District and wanted to do the same for the Vernon district.

In June, Morton and Lynxleg began to work on Together with the Children — The Elder Project, which paired aboriginal students in the Vernon School District with elders, who would tell their stories, and in turn the students would turn the stories into poems.

The result is a small, colourful, glossy, photo-filled book filled with poems written by aboriginal students based on their interviews with elders in the community.

Written in a style known as historic collage poetry, the poems are at times heartbreaking, heartwarming and intensely moving in their honesty.

Grade 8 student Kaiden Ross interviewed Sandra Millar, his hoop dancing teacher at W.L. Seaton Secondary.

“I didn’t know her story, but we sat down, I asked her questions and then wrote them down,” said Ross.

He learned that Millar was raised by the Scottish side of her family, and not permitted to acknowledge her Cree heritage.

“I didn’t go to residential school. I had my own residential school at home. I was locked in closets, put in the basement for hours, not allowed friends. I was abused physically, sexually, emotionally. I was kicked out of Grade 1 for writing with my left hand. For 10 years I was addicted to heroin.”

For 14 years, Millar has been a counsellor for others who have been sexually abused and dealing with addictions. She also learned to hoop dance.

“I am happiest when I see young people finding their culture, healing,” said Millar, in her poem.

Lynxleg said every elder was presented with the same set of questions: where were you born, where did you work, what school did you go to, tell me about your family, what does respect mean to you, what are your memories of school?

“Some of these kids had 10 pages of notes,” she said.

“Part of what happened with this was the healing and we didn’t expect that to happen, we just wanted the experience of the kids meeting with the elders and the kids were so willing to meet them.

“And if they said they had bad memories of residential school, we didn’t push the issue, but they just openly shared their memories.”

For Grade 12 student Kristyn Schoenknecht, learning about elder Michelle Petruk was something of an eye-opener.

“I was interested in their experience and to see how they’ve come through it,” she said.

“She has come a long way. I was shocked when I learned of some of the stuff that people had to go through, they went through such a hard time.

“I love writing poetry, and this was interesting because we did an interview and then we interpreted the answers.”

Petruk shared her story, explaining that her dad’s mom was Cree, but he denied being Métis.

“In residential school, my dad said he had to kneel and pray and ask for forgiveness.”

Lynxleg said six sessions were held in June throughout the district, with more than 55 students and elders/community members in attendance at workshops held at Alexis Park Elementary, Seaton and Charles Bloom Secondary schools and the Okanagan Indian Band Cultural School.

The project received a \$5,000 grant from TD Bank Financial Group to assist with publishing the book.

“We invited aboriginal students from Grades 4 to 12. We invited elders, families, anyone who wanted to become a published author,” said Lynxleg.

“We held four sessions and with each new session we grew in numbers. Students, elders and community members came not only to share their stories but to share a good cup of tea and warm, fresh bannock served with a side of poetry.”

For Schoenknecht, who teaches hoop dancing, elders are important and worthy of respect.

“They have gone through so much and are here to teach us,” she said. “I used to get teased for being native, my mom’s side is white and I was afraid to say I was native, but then when I came to Fulton I felt accepted because there was a room where aboriginal students could go and hang out, and then I was connected to the hoop dancing.”

Denise Dobsloff was interviewed by her son, Patrick Dobsloff, a Grade 8 student at Seaton.

“There is a saying that goes, ‘We are our parents’ children and our children’s elders,’” she said. “In this school district, there are more than 150 nations represented.”

In the poem written by her son, Dobsloff shares that she was “raised as a white kid...then started asking questions. Who am I? What am I? Where am I from? I’m still trying to learn.”

The book was launched Dec. 16 at a special event at Beirsto school attended by more than 200 people, with Lynxleg as emcee.

“Open this book – you will hear the desire, wishes, dreams, and love swelling within the words of many nations speaking, as written by the daughters, sons, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, neighbors and friends of their communities.”