



Local poet gathers poems about elders' lives

By Pirjo Raits

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She is known as the “poet of the skies,” the instigator of random acts of poetry and the heart behind the Elder Project.

Wendy Morton, says she has gotten an education from First Nations people. As the catalyst for the Elder Project, she has listened to the stories shared between elders and the younger generation. Some are joyous, others are sad and all are a truth spoken in the form of poetry.

My Elder, Dan 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 play.
We had to eat at the table
because the Elders were talking, teaching us.
We swallowed their knowledge.
Kali Jack and Tyson Jack
From an interview with Danny Norris

It all began while Morton was on a flight and her seatmate Barb Stoochnoff, a teacher at Chemainus secondary school, began talking. Morton said she was a poet and wanted to turn students into poets.

That’s how it all began. She met Denise Augustine, the coordinator for Aboriginal education, who shared her vision of a book of poems created by the students from the stories told by their elders. Enter Kim Fenner at Coast Capital Savings and a corporate donation to the project.

Coast Capital Savings and the Toronto Dominion Bank were instrumental in making the ongoing project possible.

“It was really generous of them,” said Morton.

This project expanded to include First Nations students across the province, resulting in half a dozen booklets with First Nations art on the covers and in the pages, along with photos and of course, the poems.

“They are songs of hope,” said Morton. “Generally even the darkest ones are hopeful.”

Many of the poems are the result of stories which had not been told, perhaps because of the shame attached or the need to forget, said Morton.

“One of the things I can do as a poet is train these kids,” she said. “This whole thing is about engendering pride. Once they have that they can do just about anything.”

Some of the First Nations kids she works with are struggling to find themselves.

She said that if these kids can get out of the traps which keep them from being whole people, the world is open to them.

“They are accomplished, smart and capable, they have a resourcefulness I wish I had.”

The closeness and pride shared by the kids and the elders is evident, especially at the launch of each of the books. This makes Morton very proud and very humble.

“I have a skill set to pass on and it seems to me that it is going to be my path.”

Morton would love to produce a book for the First Nations kids in Sooke as well as in Port Renfrew. But it is dependent on a sponsor from a school and a corporate sponsor.

“I want to keep doing this as long as I can keep doing it, I have the energy and the capability.”

Morton is the recipient of a number of awards for her poetry, including the inaugural Spirit Bear Prize, Golden Beret Award and most recently the Colleen Thibaudeau Outstanding Contribution Award. She has written four books of poetry and one memoir.

Morton lives along the shore in Otter Point and nurtures beautiful gardens and poetry.