

## What happens when a First Nations kid asks an elder 10 questions and writes a poem? A lot.

By [Katie Hyslop](#), 9 Dec 2011, TheTyee.ca



Students Jarrett and Shale Miller from the Vernon School District interview their grandmother, Carol Niermann, an Ojibwe elder, for the second Elder Project book.

Poetry has great power. It communicates complex emotions, grandiose ideas, and a tumultuous world in a concise package. It brings people together, it tears them apart. It's cathartic, it's educational, it's healing.

It's precisely that catharsis, healing, and education that Wendy Morton has tapped into with her Elders Project: compilations of poetry written by B.C. students, inspired by interviews conducted with their elders -- mostly First Nations, both relatives and strangers -- in two different provincial school districts.

With three already published and more in the works, these anthologies have succeeded in teaching the newest generation about the mistakes of the residential school era, of the tenacity of the human spirit, and the value of knowledge from your ancestors.

### **'Gran, I didn't know that'**

The trajectory of Wendy Morton's life as a poet has always been about taking chances, [stumbling](#) onto new projects and ideas. She became the official poet for WestJet airlines by simply offering to write poems in exchange for flights. Her poetry has gotten her a car, hotel rooms, and an association with an Ontario wine.

It was a chance encounter like this that introduced her to Chemainus Secondary School in the Cowichan Valley school district, when she met teacher Barb Stoochnoff on a flight to Kelowna in 2008.

"She said, 'Oh, you're a poet! And I've got a lot of First Nations kids in my class, you should come and introduce them to poetry,' which I did and which was a wonderful experience," Morton recalls.

Denise Augustine, the district's Aboriginal education coordinator at the time, also came to the class and met the then 69-year-old poet. Earlier that year, Morton had completed a poetry book with students at Bayside Middle School and the Lau'Wel'New Tribal School in Saanich, and suggested to Augustine they work on something similar. Between the two the [Elder Project](#) was born.

The premise is simple: students are matched with an elder, they ask them 10 questions about their lives, and use the information to write poems about the elders' lives. Augustine, now the district's vice-principal of Aboriginal education, says it was a chance for students to connect with their elders, which wasn't happening nearly enough.

"I know the story of our community members, our elders, are not being heard and not being recorded," she told The Tyee. "We know that our youth are at risk because they're not connected to their past, [and] I know that when we have a good sense of who we are and where we come from, it helps us form a more solid direction for future."

The effect on the students was profound: excitement and pride for becoming writers mixed with emotional responses to the stories.

"Wendy and I talk about how many of them said, 'Gran, I didn't know that,' or, 'I've never heard that story before,'" Augustine says.

And the elders benefited, too. "One of the most poignant lines is one of the ladies said, 'I used to be afraid of teenagers, but I'm not afraid of these ones now,'" says Augustine. "The elders really felt like they were being heard, and that was obvious, too, that someone was really listening with their heart and their mind."

## **Suffering 'more palatable in poetry': Lynxleg**

The second Elder Project in the Vernon school district also came about by chance when Morton came across a pamphlet for the district's Aboriginal initiatives and was struck by the poetry in the name Sandra Lynxleg, the district's principal of Aboriginal education. For this fact alone Morton called Lynxleg up. They met, Morton proposed the idea of running an Elder Project in the district, and Lynxleg jumped on board.

"I'm a daughter of a residential school survivor and my mother hasn't told me her story," Lynxleg says, adding that even those who have told the courts haven't necessarily told their loved ones. "But these elders sat down and told their stories, and their families now know it. They're devastating stories that many people didn't know about.

"A lot of the stuff we hear is so sad and devastating, but it's more palatable in poetry."

Not all the stories are sad, however. Lenaya Sampson was in Grade 8 when she interviewed her mother, Vicky Raphael, for the second Elder Project in the Vernon School District, and although her mom's brothers went to residential school, her mother did not.

"She's the youngest of 12 kids, and she lived in a really, really small town. And she almost lived on a reserve in a little town called Litton. And it was a really close-knit community," says Sampson.

"But I learned more about what happened [to the elders] because my sister also did it with my uncle, and I learned a lot more about my uncle just by reading my sister's poem."

Mel Jack, education department manager for the Penelekut Tribe, who participated in the first Elder Project, also had positive childhood stories to tell; however, he doesn't think that makes sharing his story with his two grandsons who interviewed him any less important.

"It was good exposure for the kids to learn how to do that type of thing, and great stories about what our elders had gone through," he says.

## **The next chapter**

The process had a profound affect on Morton, too, who gained knowledge of the horrors of residential schools, and finds it difficult to deal with.

"What a terrifying time for the parents and the children: for the kids to lose their language, for them to be abused in various ways, to be treated like servants, to be diminished in a way that, in a sense, still affects the First Nations people in this country," Morton told The Tyee, tears audible in her voice.

"There are some really horrible things that happened to some perfectly lovely human beings. Some of those stories are really hard for me to hear, and for the kids, I think, it was important because I like to say they are the generation of hope, this generation."

A third Elder Project was published in Cowichan, with poets from the first book acting as poetry coaches for a new batch of students, and Morton already has plans for books four through six.

"I've got a lot of books, so I don't care about having a book anymore. All I want to do is do this," she says. "I want to use my skills as a poet to get these stories into the world, and to give these kids a sense of self and elders a sense of pride, I just want that more than anything."

### **And an elder poem**

#### GRANDMA JANET

Grandma Janet, they call her.  
And that's just what she is,  
treating everyone like they are her own grandchildren.  
She grew up taking care of fifteen siblings.  
She went from house to house, babysitting, cleaning and cooking.  
She opened her home for a daycare,  
volunteered, cared for elders.  
She kept her language.  
She passes it on to the young people at Malaspina.  
Her children now have families of their own.  
She taught them well.  
Her life is a treasure.  
"I wouldn't change anything about it," she says.