The Words of the Elders
When a student and an Elder, previously unknown to each other, are seen sharing phone numbers in order to stay in contact with one another, it is clear that something magical has happened. Indeed, when Elders are willing to share their stories with such generosity, grace and dignity, it allows students to dig deep within themselves to put the words of the Elders to the page in the form of poetry that cannot fail to touch the hearts of readers. It is with gratitude that I acknowledge the contributions of the Elders through their stories. I am grateful also for the students’ capacity to listen respectfully and with compassion.

The words of the Elders have become evocative and meaningful poems. Magic indeed.

JUDITH REID, PRINCIPAL, S. J. WILLIS EDUCATION CENTRE
When I heard about the Elder Project, I knew instantly that I wanted to be a part of it. S. J. Willis is such an amazing place, a place of heart, and the students here have so much to teach the adults with whom they work. Of course, the opportunity to speak with Elders is always a privilege; in speaking with Elders, history comes alive. Elders offer us a window into an earlier time. They offer us a chance to listen, something we of a different generation often need to practice. Most importantly, they offer us a heart connection to their story and their spirit.

That heart connection is exactly what we saw forming through this project. There were some challenges, but there was mostly magic as our students asked questions of someone they did not know. Personally, I was intrigued by the details of each story, and so appreciative of the willingness and bravery of the Elders to share what were often painful memories.

The fact that our project concluded right before the Victoria Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings was particularly poignant. It underscored the need to record the truths of Aboriginal Elders; to bear witness. And this, our students did, with their clear images and beautiful turns of phrase. My only wish is that I could have personally sat and spoken with each and every person who came to share with us. But that, of course, is why we have this book. So that we might all follow the storylines between our hearts and the hearts of the Elders who took part.

Susan Salvati
Teacher, The Link, S. J. Willis Education Centre
Anna

I am 75.
I lived on the Tsartlip Reserve.
I had no running water, had to carry it
three miles to my house.
I had no plumbing. The house was cold in winter.
My childhood was beautiful.
I had six brothers, four sisters.
My father had a farm.
We had blackberries, strawberries, vegetables.
I played in the haystack with my brothers and sisters.
My grandfather spoke our language.
I never learned.

When the police came to pick me up
to go to residential school,
my father hid me in a cupboard.

I went to St. Ann’s Academy day school.
I wasn’t allowed to play outside,
got in trouble when I did.

I lost my sister in a house fire.
I lost my brother to cancer.

My spirit animals are bear and blue jay.
I was taught to remember who you are
and who your family is.

MARA BOULTON
for Anna Spahan
Two Days Through the Eyes of Elders

I have spent time buying the memory of others.

Pain and smiles.

Capturing their words, giving them life on the page.

A woman tells me a tale of hardship and strife. Pain and agony shadow her life.

An appreciation now, for the life that she’s lived.

“"I learned that love is the gift one need give” are her words.
Shaena, 17

My mom and my aunt raised me.
I remember the peacocks at Beacon Hill Park.
I remember the hummingbirds.
When I was five, I moved to Prince Rupert.
My mom was with a bad guy, she kicked him out.
Then married again. I started smoking weed. Other things.
I got sent to Prince George to detox.
I got kicked out.
I went to a group home and went AWOL for two months.
After that, the psych ward, where all I did was sleep and gain weight. I was there for a year and a half.

Then I went back to Prince George, couch surfed in a place where they sold crack.
I was with a violent guy.
I came back to Victoria.
Trained to be an esthetician.
I do home maintenance.
I want to get my Grade 12.
I have hope and red shoes.

WENDY MORTON
for Shaena Boulter

THE WORDS OF THE ELDERS | 7
Steven

I was born in Blind River, Ontario.
Three thousand people lived there.
I moved from my grandmother’s at age eleven, moved in with my mother.
She was drinking. We had no running water.
I had to go to the well to get it. No electricity.
We lit candles for light.
I was jumping from school to school,
Had it rough with the teachers.

I hung out with the wrong crowd.
Started selling drugs, stealing to eat.
I needed to get money for shoes on my feet.
I got caught, sent to jail for 25 years.
I was in and out.
Finally, I got out.
I’ve fixed up my life.
Don’t want to go back.

GURPAL SINGH AND TYREL BLACKMORE

for Steven Toulouse
Minnie

I was born in Saskatchewan.
My home town, Saskatoon.
Raised by my parents.
We had our freedom on the reserve, only 300 people.
I liked my sports. I got prizes.
Our home was so simple.
We had a piano for some reason.
We had a red truck. One horse.
We loved our Friday treat, cinnamon buns.
It was like a high-five for thugging out another week in the world.

My sis and I made ourselves fudge.
It was like our drug.
We fed off the pain, all the violence that went on.
I was taught to give and get; what comes, goes.
I wanted to be a doctor, go to university.
Told my folks my exact plan in Grade 8.
It didn’t happen.
I became a social worker,
wanted to help those with broken lives and homes.
Expect the best, get your best.

SHAENA BOULTER
for Minnie Clark
Lucy

I was born December 1943 in Alert Bay.
I had nine siblings, we could play all day,
running wild, running free.
That was how my life was supposed to be.

My father built our house.
When we used to gather, there was salmon,
herring eggs,
clam chowder.

Then I was put in day school.
Beatings. I was black and blue.
Told never to speak the language I once knew.

At home I was taught to show respect.
But these people did me harm.
I can’t take back the wrong that was done.

But I found love, and had children of my own,
who ran free.
The Words Of The Elders
Ruth

I was born in Port Alberni.
Growing up, my childhood was good.
I had fun every day.
I played with my brother and sisters.
My brother passed away at six.
My uncle had a big house filled with the whole family.
Life was good.
We made our toys out of paper mache.

At seven, I had to go to residential school.
That's when the fun ended.

I wasn't allowed to speak my language.
I didn't know English.
They kicked us out the day we turned 16,
even if it was midnight.

Sometimes I would go to the forest
where my brother and I played,
just to remember the happy times.

Life was hard.
My family would tell me to always treat people with love,
even the worst type of people.

__________________________

JUSTIN PLUNKETT

for Ruth Tom
I was born before TV, in 1945.
I was born in Appalachia, in the bluegrass mountains.
My father was Scots-Irish.
My mother was Cherokee.
We were more than poor.
I spent many summers with my grandparents.
I learned herbcraft from my grandfather,
   my Aunt Grace.
Medicine for the body, for the spirit.
My grandmother was a midwife, a herbalist.
There was a hardwood forest: oak, hickory, maple.
Now, so many old trees gone.

I loved that land,
felt at home there.
My grandparents raised white corn,
   beans, squash, potatoes.
My grandfather called the whippoorwills.
He could whistle them down from the oak trees.
I loved the sounds at night in the mountains:
the grasshoppers, the owl, the wolves howling.
The glow of the cities goes too far.
There is no silence,
   the sounds at night. Noise.

TYRELL BLACKMORE AND GURPAL SINGH
for Celu Amberstone
Mara

My mother raised me.
My grandparents too.
We were so poor.

My dad said my mother was possessed by a demon.
I was terrified of her.
I trusted no one, thought I was worthless.

I had a boyfriend who beat me.
I didn’t know who I was.

I was heavy into meth, heroin, crack.
I was drinking, a girl with no identity.

Then I met Curtis Patrick.
He is First Nations.
He’d say, “Why are you doing this?”

I got clean. He is a great friend to me.
My dream is to help children in third world countries.
What I Learned

I learned about life on the reservation.
I learned about being strong,
fighting through hardship.
I learned about standing up
against people who try to suppress you.

MARA BOULTON
Victor

I was born in Alert Bay. I left early.
Five boys and four girls in my family.
We lived in a cedar house.

After the war, my dad got a boat, no motor.
He towed it to the fishing grounds, he had to row.

We followed the fish.
Spent summers playing around the cannery.
We slept in a bunkhouse.

Our food came from the land.
We ate salmon, salted herring in kegs.
In winter we washed the salt from the herring.

SUSAN SALVATI
from an interview with Victor Newman
My mom cooked a lot. 
She baked huge loaves of bannock. 
She wove baskets. 
In summer, she would trade them for clothing 
for the kids. She would trade the baskets 
at the hop yards near Chilliwack.

I was almost seven 
when they took me to residential school. 
The schools were really bad. 
A terror. 
I have never spoken about it, 
not even to my kids.

I am Kwagiulth. 
My Indian name is He Maska. 
Masks, dances, regalia, designs belong to my family.

I am the fourth generation of carvers. 
I carve wood. 
I used to carve in metal. 
Now, I don’t see so well anymore.

My children are doing well. 
I made sure of that. 
My wife is a teacher. 
We taught our kids at home. 
My happiest memories are getting married, 
my three kids.

And retiring. 
I don’t answer the phone until ten.
Lessons Lived, Lessons Learned

I was born on a reservation in Duncan. Every day meant struggle. Water for washing meant many trips to the well. Laundry took an entire day. Light came from kerosene lamps. Power was not a luxury we were given. The road was a barrier to an easier life.

I was the eldest of two sisters. When my father left, we were separated.

I was raised by aunts. One aunt was jealous her husband showed me kindness. She showed me no kindness.

My favourite aunty was good to me. Loved me, cared for me. I felt safe.

Nothing is given, you have to work for it. Struggles made me strong, made me strong, and I can appreciate the life I have now.

Day school took away my spirit, my culture. Alcohol and drugs were a way to escape pain. Men wronged me, my children.
My children saved my life.
I stayed strong for them.

I wanted a better life for them.
I gave them the life I never had.
They tell me they’re proud.
My pride of them runs over.

I spent five months travelling the Long Houses.
Life honoured, gifts exchanged.
Four days of fasting.
The fifth day, a feast.
WARD FENTON, CATHY JIM AND SASCHA GERVAS-FARRELL
I am Lightning

I am a warrior. I am lightning.
I fight with all my will.

I fight to stay alive.
I fight to stay clean.

Even at times I fight to love,
not others, but myself.

I fight to forgive.
I fight to understand.

For I am a warrior.
And I will show you my strength in all I do.

ARIEL CAMPBELL
for Steven Toulouse
I am Lightning
I am a warrior. I am lightning.
I fight with all my will.
I fight to stay alive.
I fight to stay clean.
Even at times I fight to love,
not others, but myself.
I fight to forgive.
I fight to understand.
For I am a warrior.
And I will show you my strength in all I do.
Ariel Astra Gypsy

My mom is First Nations, Songhees Salish. I know I’m First Nations. There’s pride in it. I know how to make bannock, dreamcatchers.

In school, I got bullied a lot. I wasn’t like other kids. I shaved my hair. I bullied back. I was poor. I’d cut classes. I was a troublemaker.

Then, I was pretty. I was a friend with the nerdy kids. I’m not book smart. I’m life smart.

At S. J. Willis, people have been through bad stuff in their lives. They are real. They know pain.

WENDY MORTON
for Ariel Astra Gypsy
Far Away

I was born in Rivers Inlet, BC, to mother, a father and three brothers. I was five when they came for me. They said if I didn’t go with them my parents would go to jail. I wasn't happy to go but I had to. So I went far away, to Alert Bay, to St. Michael's Residential School.

It was their job to teach me how to forget: to forget my language, and my heritage to forget my freedoms, and my emotions. If I tried to resist, speak my language, or be myself, I got strapped.

By the end I was distant—distant from my brothers, who I couldn’t talk to in the boy’s section, distant from my mother, sick with the loss of her family, and the memory of my father, whose funeral I wasn’t to go to—distant from myself.

I got out of school when I was fifteen. I couldn’t go home since there was nothing there for me. But I had family near the school, so I stayed with them.
When I was sixteen, I met my husband Big Ed. He made me feel safe, like he could take care of me. We got married, had kids, but I still felt distant, even from my new family. I didn’t know how to mother my kids, since I was never mothered myself. Instead, I was strict and orderly like I was taught. But I knew something was missing, I knew it in my heart.

So I taught myself, took classes to help me open up. I’m still learning every day, even at 70, learning to remember my own heart. I still think about the school sometimes, think about the sadness of it all. I remember a boy in my class; the teacher was very mean to him. She was always yelling at him and strapping him. Then one day he was playing on a rope swing and he fell. It was a long way and he died. I hope she felt bad, bad for what she did to him, bad that that was the only life he knew. I hope they all felt bad.

I take care of some of them now. I used what I learned to open my heart to them.

SASCHA GERVAIS-FARRELL
from an interview with Freda Shaughnessy
Acknowledgments

The Words of the Elders is the fourth book in the Elder Project series. As with the other four books in this series, Coast Capital Savings has been generous in their financial support. When the Elders arrived from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre to meet with the students and tell their stories, a kind of magic happened. Suddenly, strangers became friends.

I’d like to thank all the Elders, who arrived by bus, or by car, or by walking; who took time out of their lives to give the students their words. Judith Reid, principal of S. J. Willis Education Centre, has been enthusiastic about this project from the beginning. I thank her for her unfailing support. A special thanks to Carey Newman, for letting us use his beautiful carving on the cover of this book and his other work throughout. Thanks also to his father, Victor Newman, for allowing us to use his work, and to David Gladstone for his feathered bird on the back cover. Thanks too, to Rhonda Ganz for her beautiful design of the book.

I have included three poems I wrote for the students. Their lives have not gone in a straight line, and they were honest when I sat down with them to hear their stories. These poems, although shot through with darkness, sing with hope.

This book exists because the Elders shared their words. The students listened.

Wendy Morton
The Words of the Elders