

Nipissing Mourns the Passing of Deputy Chief Muriel Sawyer into the Spirit World

As our Council, staff and community struggles to come to terms with the sudden and profound loss of our Deputy Chief Muriel Sawyer, we wish to say Chi-Miigwech and express our sincere appreciation for the immense heartfelt support for Muriel's family and our Nation as we mourn.

It is so hard to put into words the special connection Muriel had with each and every person whose life she touched, but if you knew her, you already know. Facebook is filled with beautiful tributes to Muriel from former students, teachers, colleagues and friends as we all come together to find comfort in sharing our many fond (and often funny) memories of her.

Muriel devoted over 40 years of her life to teaching – at all levels, including college and university – and was a driving force behind our community's preservation and revitalization of our first language, Nishnaabemwin. A strong voice and leader in First Nation Education, Muriel was instrumental in the development of our own high school, and dedicated to her life's work to improving education within Nipissing and other First Nations across the Anishinabek territory. She was extensively involved with various education boards and committees, and her vision and belief in passing the historical *Anishinabek Nation Education Agreement* in particular will continue to positively affect educational outcomes for Anishinabek students for generations to come.

The Anishinabek Nation recognized Muriel in 2004 with a Lifetime Achievement Award for her contributions to culture and language retention initiatives. She also received a Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in 2009 and was described then as a "custodian of language and culture, and an irreplaceable advocate for Aboriginal education."

Despite all of her accomplishments, Muriel was the most humble and self-deprecating person. She had an incredible sense of humour and an infectious laugh that could turn anyone's bad day around. Yet, this light side of Muriel was so well balanced with the serious work she did to advance our Nation and other First Nations, and she always did her work with the utmost commitment and respect towards the people she was working with and for.

As someone who worked very closely with Muriel on the Education portfolio for many years, our Director of Education Nancy Allaire describes Muriel as someone who really believed in our one Anishinaabe family and says that it showed in everything she did. She lived by respecting the past and embracing the present, while also being a visionary for the future. She brought history to the plate in decision-making while considering the present needs and future outcomes. She was always working to make things better for our community, and helped countless people along their own journeys.

As Chief McLeod said in his heartfelt video message announcing this difficult news, "although Muriel's passing will leave a huge hole in our community, she will also leave an everlasting handprint on the many great things our community has and will continue to accomplish."

We will forever cherish our memories of Muriel and remember her legacy as we carry forward on the trail she blazed for us. We extend our deepest condolences to her family and many friends. Baamaapii.

Celebration of Life:

The family will receive friends for visitation at the Théorêt-Bourgeois Funeral Home in Sturgeon Falls on Tuesday, February 9th, from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. A funeral service will be held Wednesday, February 10th at 11 a.m. at the Théorêt-Bourgeois Funeral Home.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, only 20 people are allowed in the funeral home and masks are mandatory. Due to these restrictions and their impact on all of the Baamaapii's, the service will be livestreamed (with the exception of traditional ceremonial elements). To join the service online, please visit: facebook.com/theoret.bourgeois.7. A proper ceremony to honour and celebrate her life will occur at a later date when it is safe to do so.

Chi-Miigwech once again for your support of her family and our community during this difficult time.