

# FOCUS

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## Intersecting histories

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In teaching the history of this place and its people, Anne Tenning hopes to transform prejudice into understanding and the potential for healing.

On day one of the First Nations Studies 12 course that Anne Tenning teaches at Victoria High School, the first thing she does is draw a line all the way across the blackboard. Next, she divides it into ten segments. “First Nations people are estimated to have been here for 10,000 years,” she explains as we sit in her office amongst abundant bookshelves, a table bearing a large bowl of granola bars for the students she advises, and comfortable chairs meant for heart-to-heart talks.

Tenning relates that in the past, for most of that line across the board, teaching was not the formal activity it is now. In First Nations culture, no one was a teacher because everyone was a teacher. “Traditionally, children would be educated by their extended community,” says Tenning. “Everyone had a role and a responsibility to care for and pass on teachings to the children.”

With guest speakers and field trips, Tenning, a member of the Stz’uminus First Nation, mimics that process in her classroom. She has taken her students to Goldstream for hikes guided by local cultural experts in indigenous plant uses, and to the Royal BC Museum’s First People’s Gallery, where Leslie McGarry of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre “brings a dialogue that gives new life to the artefacts using her own firsthand knowledge and stories,” says Tenning. Nella Nelson, the coordinator for Aboriginal Education in Victoria, comes into class to discuss traditional foods and brings in eulachon grease, a highly valued delicacy, for students to see, taste, and understand its role in the culture.

The class, offered once a year and always full at 30 students, is generally comprised of a ratio of 1:3 Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal students. As they move along the 10,000-year timeline, one thing becomes clear. “Everyone here lives on Aboriginal land,” Tenning points out. “Whether they know it or not, whether they know the names of the local territories or the local peoples or not. We are all on Aboriginal land. The history here, in terms of colonialism and settlement, is very, very recent.” However, the length of that history is inversely proportional to its impact on First Nations people.

Tenning has taught students that for 12 years now. Yet though she “always loved school,” teaching was not her goal early on. She augmented degrees in English and biology begun at Camosun College with a teaching degree at UBC. After a short stint teaching in North Vancouver, she was at Stu<sup>ate</sup> Lelum Secondary School at her community in Ladysmith. She then made her way back to Victoria at the encouragement of her former teacher (and current mentor), the aforementioned Nella Nelson. After teaching for about five years here, at her old alma mater, she started a Master’s degree in Environmental and First Nations Education at UVic. “Through that, I really discovered my passion for learning about and teaching First Nations culture and history,” Tenning recalls.

In 2008, that passion, combined with her innovative methods, translated into a Governor General’s award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History. It was an unforgettable experience for Tenning, particularly so early in her career. “Getting to know some of the other recipients



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Anne Tenning

and some of the work they do...it was really an honour to be included with them,” she offers, describing the experience as “a little surreal.”

Even more so was how profoundly her personal and professional lives conflated at the time: the day after she returned home from the

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Ottawa ceremony, she was at her mother’s side in a courtroom, supporting her during her compensation hearing for abuse she suffered while a student at Kuper Island Residential School. “It was the most intense few days I have experienced up to this point in my life, a real high followed by something that was a real challenge to be a part of,” she shares.

And the irony wasn’t lost on Tenning. “It was quite the dichotomy,” she marvels. “Quite the interesting juxtaposition of two very different governmental [initiatives]. One being an honouring...to be recognized by a Governor General’s award for teaching, which is education based, then going to a hearing based on my mom’s educational experience, which was also at the hands of the government. I’ve been thinking a lot about the strange parallels of that, just over one generation—how different her experience has been and how different mine has been.”

In an article she wrote for the magazine *Teaching Canada’s History* in 2010, Tenning described the ordeal: “For six long hours, my mother recounted the abuse she suffered at the hands of the school employees. I listened silently, resisting the urge to scream, to cry, to vomit. The whole time I wished I could hold my mother and somehow protect her from her memories. Instead, I held her hand, wept often, and at the end of the hearing, felt so much admiration, love and respect for my mother. I understood who she is now more completely than ever.”

Tenning has likened the experience to weathering a storm in a violent open ocean, unprotected and with no assurance of survival. In a memoir, she writes of her mother, “I knew that she would hang on with everything in her. But what invisible, permanent marks would this storm leave behind on the depths of her soul? That is what worried me.” It concerns her on a larger scale as well. In her office, she reiterates, “The ripple effects that will come out of this process, I don’t think we will fully understand for years to come...whether or not it brought any closure, whether or not it just opened old wounds.”

Therein lies the importance of teaching the particulars of the shortest segment of that timeline. When Tenning and I met, her students were studying the residential school system in depth in preparation for a visit from Alex Nelson, a residential school survivor. “[Students] really appreciate how valuable it is, how remarkable it is that he is able to come in and share that very personal, very difficult story with us,” Tenning observes.

This is how she seeks to encourage healing and understanding that could, potentially, be more widespread and socially ingrained than what Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, official government apologies and financial compensation packages can provide. “I see my position in education as having an opportunity to go through the system and reclaim it; to bring awareness to some of these issues that a lot of the students don’t necessarily know about,” she reflects.

Her one desire is that this course, an elective, becomes foundational for all students in this region—and, in ways relevant to their location, to students all over the country. “Sometimes people look at symptoms of contemporary First Nations social issues, but without the historical context, there’s no real understanding of where the issues that are prevalent today come from. It’s really a difficult thing to address complex issues like stereotypes or racism without having that history,” she argues.

Besides the deeper understanding of this place and its original people it engenders, one of the greatest benefits Tenning has seen in First Nations Studies 12 is the critical thinking it fosters. It gets students to understand that there is more than one—or even two—sides to any story and any history.



Aaren Madden seconds Anne Tenning’s desire to have this course required, but would make it so for all residents, not just high school students.

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