

Championing First Nations education

BY JEFF BELL, TIMES COLONIST OCTOBER 15, 2011



Nella Nelson: "Our goal is to make aboriginal education more than beads to bannock, that's my mantra."

Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, timescolonist.com

Today we continue a new feature about people in Greater Victoria and on Vancouver Island who are pioneers in their field. Do you know someone who is an innovator in their field? Send their name and what new ground they've broken to localnews@timescolonist.com and we'll consider them for upcoming coverage.

Nella Nelson has a saying that sums up her approach to First Nations education, which she has championed in the Greater Victoria school district her entire career.

"Our goal is to make aboriginal education more than beads to bannock, that's my mantra," Nelson said from her office in the district's Boleskine Road headquarters.

To Nelson, a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, that means aboriginal education should be in all schools, whether there's a large First Nations population or not.

"It's like weaving the basket - aboriginal education needs to be woven right into the system. We believe everyone should learn and understand that we are an integral part of Canadian history."

A generation ago, that opportunity wasn't there.

"Even when I started teaching, it wasn't in the system," said Nelson, who has led the district's Aboriginal Nations Education Division for 20 years.

"Aboriginal content basically didn't exist."

She helped turn that around in her district and beyond, and was involved with the Ministry of Education in the mid-1990s in creating the documents that led to the establishment of the B.C. First Nations Studies 12 course. On top of that, she co-wrote the book *Framework for Developing First Nations Curriculums* with Karin Clark.

Nelson has always reached outside the school district in working for change.

"For me, I make sure that what I'm active in is not only K to 12, but also post-secondary. So I'm active at the college and university level, where I often do presentations in classes."

She also co-ordinates visiting speakers at district schools, and gives frequent talks herself.

"I'll go in and talk about racism, I'll do the Indian Act, I'll do traditional foods. My husband, Alex, will go in and do residential schools."

Along with courses like B.C. First Nations Studies 12 and First Nations English 12, Nelson said the district has some of its own offerings with aboriginal content.

"We have unique courses that deal with healing, locally developed courses that deal with that aspect."

One of those courses, *Introduction to the Healing Arts*, started in 2008 with a focus on techniques ranging from yoga and meditation to healing through the sound of hand drums and Tibetan bowls.

Another special effort in the district has been its leadership role in translating aboriginal course content into French.

Nelson said that classes with aboriginal content attract an array of students, not just those with a First Nations heritage, and are also designed to be taught by all teachers.

She said there is an emphasis on students being out in the community, and one way that is accomplished has been by developing an ongoing series of "traditional" tours of historically significant places around the region. Ethnobotany, or the uses of plants, is also examined.

Nelson said up to 1,800 staff and students have taken the tours annually.

About 1,450 of the Greater Victoria district's 20,000 students - around seven per cent - have a First

Nations background, with close to 90 per cent of the First Nations students living off-reserve. The district had its largest-ever group of First Nations highschool graduates this past June with 89, as well as its highest transition rate of students from Grade 11 to Grade 12.

Nelson, 57, has been with the school district since 1979. She praises her predecessors and colleagues who laid the foundation for what is being accomplished today.

Nelson took the first steps in her career path by attending public meetings to discuss native course content at local schools.

"I actually had just graduated with a degree in anthropology and sociology, not a teaching degree," said Nelson, who attended both Camosun College and the University of Victoria. She was recently honoured at Camosun for her service there, including two decades on the First Nations advisory council, and was given Camosun's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2009.

Nelson said the meetings she attended before working in the district came about the same time that she and husband, Alex, began taking in children from their home territories. They have cared for 28 such children in the years since.

After taking part in the meetings, Nelson was asked to teach in the district. She went on to return to school to get an education degree with a specialty in teaching secondary history, then taught for 11 years at S.J.

Willis, Central Middle School and Victoria High School.

Janice Simcoe, who chairs the Aboriginal Education and Community Connections program at Camosun, said Nelson has had a big impact in education throughout the community.

"She's played a huge role in the work with aboriginal education that's happened at Camosun."

Simcoe said she admires Nelson's grasp on what is important.

"She's aware that the values that come out of indigenous teachings are valuable to everybody, and that we shouldn't and can't just parcel off aboriginal education into a corner and expect it to be successful."

Nelson is also more involved in things than just about anyone else, Simcoe said.

"I don't know anybody who sits on more boards and councils than she does. She's an amazing woman."

Greater Victoria district superintendent John Gaipman said Nelson is a "tremendous educator" who can get her message across to virtually anyone.

"She connects with the audience, she engages the audience, regardless of whether it happens to be kindergarten students, high-school students or the community."

He said that comes from the type of person she is.

"She is a proud individual, very proud of who she is, who her family is, where she comes from and where she's going."

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