

Yukon Indian People

Education as Empowerment

BY SHARON JACOBS (Council for Yukon Indians)

I grew up in the small Yukon community of Haines Junction, which is approximately 100 miles north-west of Whitehorse, Yukon's capital. The Indian people of that area belong to the Athapaskan language family and speak the Southern Tutchone dialect. In the early 1960s, the Department of Indian Affairs relocated the Indian people from their traditional areas of Champagne and Aishihik to the community of Haines Junction. This was done to accommodate Indian Affairs and the Yukon Territorial Government in their efforts to provide schooling for status Indian children.

In my early school days, I thought it was rather strange that I was the only Indian child in the classroom for the first six years.

It was not until the two Yukon residential schools closed down in the late 1960s that status Indian children were allowed into community day schools. I remember so clearly that summer my cousins and friends kept inquiring about their new school and the teachers. They also wanted to know what school supplies were needed.

Personally, I was quite conscious of being the only Indian student and thus worked hard to succeed academically. It was disheartening to see my efforts go unnoticed by my teachers. One teacher in particular was insensitive to Indian people and their cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of the school and my spirits changed with the addition of status Indian children from the village.

After the ninth grade, I left my home community to attend high school in Whitehorse, where I lived in a

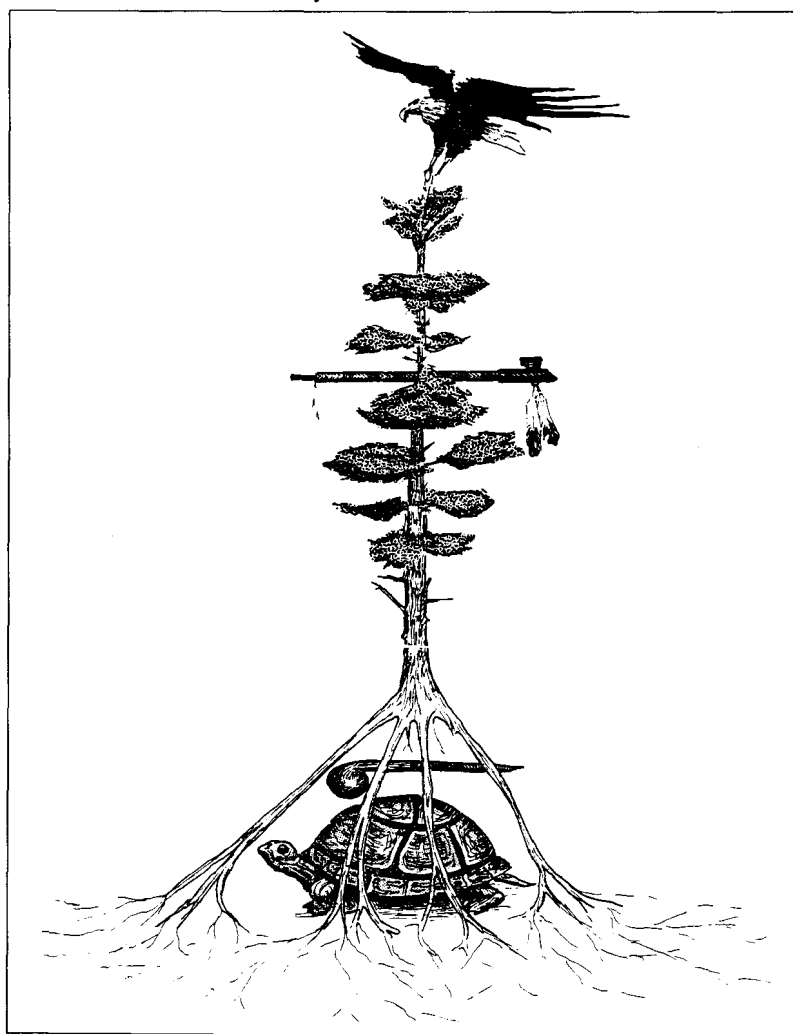
room and board situation. I can recall many conflicts with my boarders, as I considered myself an adult and thus assumed much responsibility over my life. However, they did not view it in this light, and thus I was subjected to strict house rules. I was raised by my grandmother since birth and have no siblings. I recall every Friday night looking for someone from Haines Junction, so I could get a ride out with them.

In spite of this, I completed my high schooling and returned to the Junction. Towards the end of the summer, a job advertisement caught my interest and it was for Remedial Tutors, to work under a classroom teacher in Yukon schools. I applied and was hired as the Remedial Tutor for the Carmacks School. This meant re-

locating from Haines Junction to Carmacks, a small community 175 km. north of Whitehorse. Preceding my appointment, I underwent a six-week training program in remedial tutoring. My year at Carmacks passed quickly, and the relationships that I developed with some of the children span the years, as many still take a few minutes to talk with me.

In the summer of 1974, I applied to Trent University for admission to the Native Studies Diploma Program and was so excited when my letter of acceptance arrived. It had always been a dream of mine to attend university since I can remember. Now that I was accepted, I had to secure student assistance from the Yukon Territorial Government, as opposed to the Department of Indian Affairs, because I did not have status.

I left in late August for



Toronto, not knowing where or how I was getting to Peterborough. After arriving in Toronto, I just located my luggage, when I heard my name being paged. It was Graham George, the Native Student's Counsellor who was waiting for me. During my first night in Peterborough, spent at Catherine Parr Traill College, I was suddenly struck with the fact that I had entered the unknown. First, the weather was very uncomfortable, and I remember distinctly the sound of the grasshoppers during the night.

Throughout the year, this group of Native students from all over Canada established lasting bonds of friendship. It was these friendships that provided the support to endure the loneliness of family separation. The educational experience at Trent was rewarding, as many of the Native Studies courses forced us to look at ourselves in terms of our identity as Native people and what that means in contemporary society.

It was at Trent, in my second year, that I met my husband Allan. When classes ended in the spring of 1976, I returned to the Yukon, while Allan began to hike across Canada. He arrived a week later. We married in August of 1976 and moved to Whitehorse for employment.

In the following years, I began working in the area of Indian education, first with the Yukon Native Brotherhood and later, the Council for Yukon Indians. During this time, the developments with both the Territorial and Federal governments were quite confrontational and occurred in the media, via radio and newspaper interviews.

The Territorial government of the day was not sensitive to the aspirations of Indian people or Indian parents. Alarming statistics pointed to a high drop-out rate among Native students, and the lack of culturally relevant learning materials throughout the school system from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The schools did not employ Native teachers or support staff, and thus no Native role models were present.

One issue that united and strengthened the Native organizations was the struggle to implement Native language instruction in the schools. In my home community, the school committee (composed entirely of non-Native people) opposed Native language instruction during school hours; they wanted it taught outside these hours.

The end result was that the Yukon Territorial Government developed a policy on Native language instruction for Yukon Schools.

During the late 1980s, the Department of Education slowly changed their policies to recognize a somewhat limited jurisdiction over Indian education by the Indian people. The Council for Yukon Indians-Social Programs Department and the Yukon's 13 First Nations are now consulted regularly in regards to the education of their children. The cultural enrichment kits developed by the Curriculum Development Program of the Council for Yukon Indians are considered prescribed curriculum for all Yukon schools. These kits are available at the Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 4 levels.

Meanwhile, I returned to university to complete my final two years for a B.A. in Native Studies. Allan and I both resigned from our jobs and prepared to leave the Yukon for Ontario. At the time, our son and daughter were ages four and nine, respectively. We arrived in Peterborough during the last week of August 1986 and began looking for suitable accommodation. I registered for classes for myself and the children. I was a little worried about the adjustments of Lisa and Darren, and felt better when they were both at the same school, and only a couple doors apart. In considering this move, we talked about some of the benefits for us as a family to be re-acquainted with Allan's family — his parents, brothers, sisters and the extended members. Our son only knew his relatives through photographs and so we hoped this would bridge a gap that had existed since his birth. In terms of our spiritual growth, being in Ontario we met a number of Elders and traditional people following the sweetgrass road, and we partook of this cultural knowledge at every opportunity. The two years we spent in Ontario were rewarding and, most importantly, provided the children with a glimpse of their Delaware heritage.

Upon our return to the Yukon, I continued my employment with the Council for Yukon Indians. The Yukon Territorial Government is anticipating the tabling of a 1989 Fall legislation for a new Education Act. The intent of the new Act is to develop an educational partnership between the public and government. This partnership remains to be seen.

Another important development for the Yukon's First Nations is the negotiations pertaining to Land Claims. After sixteen

years of negotiations, the Yukon Indian people have reached a Framework Agreement which encompasses things such as: self-government, financial compensation, land, overlapping claims, renewable and non-renewable resources, education, health and justice.

Yukon First Nations Final Band-by-Band Agreements are occurring with each band in its home community. In this manner, the agreements will be tailored to encompass their cultural, social and economic priorities.

Education is addressed in the band's self-government agreements, which may include but are not limited to: elementary and adult education, curriculum, teaching staff, counselling, etc. This agreement could possibly give the band the authority for the jurisdictional control of education, health and social services, tribal justice and employment programs.

In terms of local community development, the Champagne/Aishihik Band established, by means of a Band council resolution, the Local Indian Education Authority. The primary objective of the Champagne/Aishihik L.I.E.A. is to determine and ensure that any and all direction regarding Indian education coincides with the philosophies, goals and objectives as stated in the C/A Band constitution and/or Land claims agreements.

In summary, I feel that for the Yukon Indian people, full control and jurisdiction over their lives — politically, socially, and culturally — is imminent within two years. The underlying basis of a land claim agreement is to allow the Yukon Indian people a fair and equitable settlement predicated on aboriginal title.

For Yukon Indian women, and their role as care-givers, the responsibility will be returned to them and the grandmothers, to once again instill the values and traditions to their children and grandchildren. It is also vitally important that the Yukon Native languages replace English as a first language and become part of everyday conversation.

Not only will the settlement of the Claim process benefit Indian people, it will certainly benefit the non-Indian people as well, in terms of land transfers and the devolution of programs from Ottawa to the Yukon Territorial Government.

"We will be able to live together as neighbours... This settlement is for our children and our children's children, for many generations to come."
(CYI, 1973).