



The Brief

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Sheila Croteau, elder, friend, teacher and mentor, remembered

By SHARON MURPHY AND LYNAYA ASTEPHEN



Elder Sheila Croteau offered a smudging ceremony to open a gathering of Sisters of Charity in July 2018 at Villa Madonna Retreat House in Rothesay, NB. Photo from the Sisters of Charity.

A prayerful silence hovers over Saint John in April, as many mourn the tragic loss of a dearly loved elder, Sheila Croteau, who died in a house fire on April 5.

Heartfelt tributes for an unforgettable soul are flooding the mostly pandemic filled social media sites with joy for having known Sheila, mother of two and grandmother of six.

Sheila was a model world citizen. Participating in all forms of democracy from protest to politics, Shelia found common ground with friend and foe. Known for her witty optimism and insightful advice, all who ran into Sheila were left with a lasting impression.

Sheila was a High Plains Cree woman, born in Alberta on Nov. 14, 1953. Life was hard and painful for Sheila due to the loss of her language, family and culture after the Sixties Scoop program took her at age seven. She experienced hardship and abuse for the rest of her youth until as blessed fate would have it, Sheila ended up in Saint John as a single mother. She raised her daughter, Amanda, and more recently united with her son, Ross, in Saint John. Sheila also opened her home to many other youth over the years as a community safe space full of support, guidance and love.

Sheila led instinctively. The lucky ones who benefited from her leadership included the local Scouts Canada troupe. During her leadership, the youth experienced numerous camping trips where she taught them everything from building snow shelters to campfires. One of the children, Don Durant, now grown, remembered Sheila fondly: “Sheila taught me so many things: how to start a fire, how to make the perfect grilled cheese, how to carve a walking stick, how to drum and most importantly in the more than 25 years that Sheila was in my life she taught me how to be a good neighbour to not only those who live beside you but to your community.”

Shelia made and nurtured relationships like a gardener tends their seeds. As a mother, grandmother, friend, teacher and mentor, Sheila could often be found near the kitchen of the St. Andrew and St. David United Church in uptown Saint John during community lunches or evening gatherings. She adored her family and would speak of them often when not having heart-to-hearts with community members. Wayne Dryer, Pastor of Germain Street Baptist at the time, said of his more than 25 years of friendship with Sheila: “She was part of the fabric of the community and seemed to be connected to everyone in some way or another.”

Shelia lived in and with poverty all of her life but did not define herself as impoverished. She was always ready with a helping hand, a hug or a joke. People United in the Lower South End (P.U.L.S.E) paints her as “one to always help-out

and share a smile or a joke.” One important legacy Sheila will be remembered for will most certainly be to chip in, speak your truth and then laugh.

PRUDE Inc., in Saint John, considered Sheila a vibrant member of their community. Standing for Pride in Race, Unity, Dignity through Education may as well have been Sheila’s mantra. PRUDE’s Facebook tribute to Sheila states: “Her acts of community service, love and compassion were known by many and her generous spirit will be missed.”

Tributes to Sheila also include the Saint John Theatre Company’s Facebook testimonial to nearly 12 years of Sheila’s participation. “She was the person who kept the BMO studio theatre so beautifully maintained since the day we opened,” said Stephen Tobias, executive director of the theatre company.

Sheila was former Chief of the Local 10 New Brunswick Aboriginal People’s Council. In that capacity she reached out to Indigenous people from all over who have gathered in the Saint John area. She said that she knew people missed their home communities and traditions and helped fill that gap by providing Indigenous content, cultural education and traditional guidance whenever and wherever possible. Sheila was also a close friend of the Saint John Multicultural Association, participating and sharing cultural practices to the greater Saint John community.

Sheila will be remembered by many for her large sacred drum that has been the heart of so many ceremonies and celebrations in the Saint John area for decades. Sheila was a part of a drumming group, Spirit of the Four Winds, and helped the University of New Brunswick in Saint John develop Indigenous curriculum.

Sheila’s life was a beautiful example of a person living their faith which led her to years of service with members of KAIROS, a Canadian ecumenical faith-based human rights and ecological justice movement. Sisters of Charity, based in Saint John, were long associated with Sheila and recently honoured her passing. In their newsletter, they recalled, “In spring 2018, Sheila was part of a team facilitating the KAIROS Blanket Exercise among Sisters and Associates. Focusing on reconciliation, the exercise brings awareness of historical policies and practices harmful to Indigenous peoples. Sheila’s life was scarred by such policies. She went on to celebrate and share her rich cultural heritage with many.”

Sheila’s path led her into politics in the past two elections for the Green Party where she ran for Portland-Simonds riding in Saint John. Fellow Green Party candidate Sharon Murphy recalls Sheila’s participation in the Energy East Pipeline

How my disability led to a life of uncertainty in New Brunswick

By KAITLYN LAYDEN

For many, marriage is a happy time full of celebrations and new beginnings. Today, I am going to tell you a bit about my love story and why it has become such a challenge while living under New Brunswick’s household income policy for social assistance recipients.

I have known my fiancé Lucas for many years as we went to school together. We reconnected online years later and began dating on August 21, 2012.

Due to my cerebral palsy, our relationship got serious more quickly than others might. I had to go through some medical procedures and at the time Lucas quickly became my rock. Because I have general anxiety disorder as well as cerebral palsy, Lucas took public transportation with me and assisted me with my transportation because I was nervous to go through the city of Saint John alone.

During our relationship, I also discovered I have a condition known as Eosinophilic esophagitis (EoE), which became an emergency situation that led me to needing to get my throat dilated and have a biopsy.

Lucas has been with me through my hip realignment surgery and four foot reconstruction surgeries.

After four and a half years of dating, in February of 2017, Lucas and I went to a Brad Paisley concert, which was always on my bucket list, and it was on this night that he proposed. I have dreamt of getting married since I was a little girl. Normally, this is a very exciting milestone for a newly engaged couple. Unfortunately, due to our circumstances, we would soon realize that we will have more roadblocks than the typical couple in order to secure our future together.

Due to the current household income policy for social assistance in New Brunswick, we cannot financially afford to get married because I would lose my current social assistance and my rent subsidy.

The province’s household income policy states that any household in New Brunswick with two or more people must combine with incomes into one. Therefore, once we married, my husband’s income would count for both of us and stop me from receiving government support. As I am living with a disability, once I get married, my partner is legally forced to become financially responsible for me and all my additional needs.

This policy puts a lot of pressure on a partner. Lucas must take time off work to bring me to appointments and spend a lot of his earnings on my health, which isn’t what he should have to do. Lucas will have to make enough money to support both him and I. However, with my disability comes a lot of additional fees for equipment, medical bills, expensive medications, dietary requirements and accessible transportation that many people may not think about. The household income policy in New Brunswick means I lose my ability to help financially and, instead, I become a financial burden to my partner.

It’s not that I don’t want to work and help Lucas, but I am living with a chronic mobility disability since birth and have not been able to get ahead. I’ve had approximately 20 surgeries in my lifetime. I am now in the rehabilitation stages, recovering from a left foot reconstruction surgery. Recovery from this surgery will take over two years for my bones to heal



Kaitlyn Layden and her partner Lucas. Photo submitted.

Woodstock wood producer supports Wolastoqey loggers

By TRACY GLYNN



Hardwood trees at a log yard in Woodstock.
Photo submitted.

A lifelong Woodstock wood producer wants Indigenous loggers in New Brunswick to be able to earn a livelihood, but says the way Crown forest is managed in the province stops them.

For 50 years, Dick Poulin managed the Garant sawmill in the northwest New Brunswick town of Woodstock. The sawmill, specializing in value-added hardwood products, employs 30 local people.

Today, the semi-retired Poulin operates a log yard that buys, processes and sells hardwood logs.

Poulin is frustrated by the Crown lands licensing system that stops his business from purchasing timber from the Indigenous loggers. The government refuses to allow such transactions because of restrictions imposed by New Brunswick’s Crown Lands and Forests Act.

Right now, Indigenous loggers can only sell their wood to Crown license holders or sub-license holders. They can’t sell their wood to private mills.

According to Poulin, Indigenous people in New Brunswick are only allowed to cut a minuscule portion of Crown Land.

Crown land, like other land in New Brunswick, has never been surrendered by Indigenous peoples and is subject to the Peace and Friendship Treaties signed between the British Crown and the Indigenous peoples of the region in the 1700s.

Crown forest in the province of New Brunswick, about half of the province’s land mass, is divided up into six Crown licenses.

J.D. Irving, AV Cell, AV Nackawic, Twin Rivers and Fornebu Lumber hold five of the 25-year timber licenses, which allow them management responsibility and rights to cut a certain amount of wood every year. The government has been managing the sixth license since Weyerhaeuser abandoned the license and closed its mill in Miramichi in 2007.

Crown lands in New Brunswick being under the management of a handful of huge forestry companies is a recent development.

In 1982, the Richard Hatfield PC government consolidated 84 Crown licenses into ten licenses and tied those licenses to an operating mill. At the turn of the millennium, the Crown licenses were reduced again to six.

After years of intense lobbying, in 2014, the David Alward PC government gave three of the most powerful players in New Brunswick’s forestry industry its wish: a signed contract committing the province to guaranteeing three large forestry players, J.D. Irving, AV Nackawic and Twin Rivers, an increased annual allowable cut from Crown forest.

Critics of the forestry strategy, including conservation groups, First Nations, municipalities, woodlot owners, smaller mill owners, wildlife biologists and academics, voiced their opposition to granting the forestry companies an increased softwood fibre supply. They argued that the forestry contracts would mean cutting wood from lands set aside for conservation and would put the province’s already struggling woodlot owners at a further market disadvantage. The contracts also shut out others wanting to pilot community forestry and Indigenous loggers wanting to earn a livelihood.

In 2019, the province of New Brunswick used the Crown Lands and Forests Act to fine two Wolastoqey men with harvesting timber illegally. In response, six Wolastoqey Nations recently launched a court challenge to affirm the treaty right of their members to access resources to earn a moderate livelihood: a treaty right affirmed when Mi’kmaq fisherman Donald Marshall Jr. went to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1999.

According to Woodstock Chief Tim Paul, “We have a Treaty Right to harvest Crown timber for the purposes of sale as firewood in order to earn a ‘moderate livelihood,’ but the province continues to blatantly ignore our rights and our members continue to be harassed by the province. The province cannot continue to deny us our rights.”

In 1997, prior to the 1999 Marshall decision, a provincial court ruled that Wolastoq logger Reginald Paul and the Wolastoqey and Mi’kmaq peoples of New Brunswick have a treaty right to harvest timber from Crown land.

The Paul case was later overturned in an appeal court, but the court case did push the provincial government to provide limited harvesting rights to First Nations through First Nation Harvesting Agreements. However, First Nations do not get to decide the volume and the location of timber to be harvested as well as the price of timber and revenue to be generated from a timber harvest in such arrangements.

Stephen Wyatt, a professor at the Université de Moncton’s School of Forestry, and colleagues surveyed 13 of the 15 First Nations communities in New Brunswick in 2015. They found that the First Nations felt that forestry governance arrangements were not delivering on their priorities for environmental protection. They also thought the power in these arrangements resides with government and industry.

The most recent court case reveals that the system is continuing to not work for Indigenous loggers in New Brunswick. “We believe the Indigenous loggers need a chance. We should be allowed to purchase logs from them and create jobs in small communities across the province,” says Poulin.

Forest ecologist and woods craftsman Lawrence Wuest agrees with Poulin. Wuest has long called on the province of New Brunswick to support a value-added forestry industry.

According to Wuest, “One of the major ways that other jurisdictions outperform New Brunswick with respect to turning the forest resource into jobs is their ability to route timber to secondary processing within the jurisdiction, and in their ability to promote use of local timber domestically.”

“The province has a wooden ear when it comes to hearing these messages,” says Wuest.

Tracy Glynn is a doctoral researcher with RAVEN and was the forest campaigner with the Conservation Council of New Brunswick from 2006 to 2018.

Public sector kitchens could rescue New Brunswick’s farmers

By SIMON OUELLETTE

Despite being a major exporter of agricultural goods, New Brunswick is one of the most import-dependent provinces in Canada when it comes to food. Over 97% of what is eaten in New Brunswick is produced outside our province. Why? Because the province’s farmers have largely been cast aside by policy makers who prefer the agribusiness models of the McCain, Oxford Frozen Foods and Cavendish Farms of this world.

Now, the pandemic has revealed our vulnerability and dependence on a few corporate suppliers, wholesalers and chains of distribution. This is as true for safe respiratory masks as it is for food.

Now is the time for a real strategy to help small farmers and cooperatives rather than export-driven agribusiness giants. Small and medium farms are our “insurance policy” against food shortages and logistical chain failures, and they need our help.

COVID-19 will likely increase the overall demand for food in the healthcare sector. Meanwhile, closures and restrictions of local markets and shops are decimating small farms in the province. With little collateral and meager savings, many farmers could be forced to sell to the big players or go bankrupt. The monopolization of retail, production and distribution through aggressive acquisitions was already a problem in our province.

COVID-19 is about to make matters much worse, with its “war economy” narratives already favouring major producers and retail businesses.

Happy May Day! The NB Media Co-op extends a heartfelt Happy May Day to all workers. The COVID-19 crisis has shown us how much we depend on workers who provide us with health care, food, shelter, mail and other goods and services. Let’s not only celebrate our workers with gestures of gratitude. Let’s join them in the fight for hazard pay, pay equity, safe working conditions, the right to strike, a living wage and high-quality public services.

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Sheila Croteau, remembered

hearings in 2016: “Sheila brought her grandson and spoke on his behalf. She told the story of the seventh and eighth fire and of the importance of water for life. It was very powerful and there was total silence when she finished and left the room.”

Sheila’s family welcomes financial aid to help with Sheila’s memorial and accompanying family expenses. Email Jennifer with donations for this need at Jenniferl.mitton@gmail.com

A legacy fund honouring Sheila, to be known as Sheila’s Fund, will be administered by the Saint John Community Foundation. This yearly gift will give a helping hand to youth in Saint John in Sheila’s memory.

Sharon Murphy is a long time Saint John eco/social activist, business woman, natural health and birthing expert who sometimes plays politics. Lynaya Astephen is an environmental and social justice activist in Red Head. Both were friends of Sheila Croteau.

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A life of uncertainty

and I am now completing bi-weekly physiotherapy. Costs of all post-operative supplies are also incurred by me. Because of my disability, I have not been able to work enough hours through my life to qualify for the Canadian Disability Pension Plan (CPP).

Life with a disability is a lot more complex than one may think. Simple tasks such as using the bathroom or taking the bus become daunting and complex. Cerebral palsy affects body movement, muscle control and coordination, muscle tone, reflex, posture and balance. It can also impact fine motor skills, gross motor skills and oral motor functioning. As a result, I use a wheelchair for mobility.

Once I get married, my partner will be left to pay the bills. All of them. The ones we could hardly afford when we were both making an income. Due to this unrealistic standard, I have remained engaged for over three years.

I have spent the past three years trying to find a way we can get married, live together and stay financially stable while both maintaining our health and well-being.

However, the only obvious answer is to re-evaluate the province’s household income policy for social assistance recipients. Those living with a mobility disability and cannot work should not have to be forced to pick between love and financial stability. The current system makes it difficult for someone to try to become financially independent and maintain a well-balanced quality of life.

Just because I am differently-abled does not mean I don’t have the courage to stand up for what is right. Like my friends and family, I deserve to follow my dreams to their fullest potential. Getting married is something I’ve always dreamt of and my disability shouldn’t cause my marriage to lead me into a life of poverty and financial uncertainty. No one chooses the cards they are dealt. We just need to live and learn together and stand by one another. With determination and a positive attitude, anything is possible, and giving up is not an option for me.

Kaitlyn Layden is a Saint John resident living with cerebral palsy. She loves coffee, her cat and is an advocate for those living with disabilities. She also owns the small business, Layden’s Keepsakes.

In the Time of Corona

The NB Media Co-op is partnering with various community groups and scholars to deliver online talks on timely issues in the time of corona when we can’t physically meet.
To join these events, check out our online calendar at nbmediacoop.org or our Facebook page.

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180 St. John St., Fredericton, NB E3B 4A9
Email: info@nbmediacoop.org, Website: nbmediacoop.org
 NB Media Co-op @nbmediaco-p