

## Elder Murdena Marshall - Honoured



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“The most important ingredient in health is love” says Murdena Marshall who is from the Bear Clan and lives in Eskasoni, Unama’ki – Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. She then adds “Love is also the first of the Mi’kmaq Seven Sacred Gifts of Life and it is the only one you receive unconditionally ... it is given to you by Creator and your Mother.” When Murdena speaks like this, it is from that place of deep knowing where heart and head are one. She has long shared these and other traditional understandings for the benefit of people everywhere. Murdena is a Mi’kmaq Elder, a Spiritual Leader for the Mi’kmaq Nation, an Associate Professor (retired) of Mi’kmaq Studies at Cape Breton University (CBU), the spouse of Albert Marshall, the mother of six children, the grandmother for 13 and great grandmother for five, and a friend to thousands. At home and beyond, she is highly respected, greatly valued, and much loved.

Murdena was born in 1942 in Wycocomagh and was only eight years old when her Mother died in childbirth. Following cultural tradition, she went to live with her maternal grandparents although her Grandmother died shortly thereafter. Thus, it was her Grandfather, aunts, and uncles who raised her. Murdena credits her wonderful Grandfather, the late Gabriel Sylliboy who was the first elected chief of the Mi’kmaq Grand Council, with helping her to learn to navigate the two worlds in which she found herself – that of her Mi’kmaq people and that of the non-native. Even though he could not read, write, or speak in English, he insisted that Murdena and all his grandchildren be formally educated in English while he and others ensured that Murdena was immersed in her Mi’kmaq language and culture.

And thus, Murdena attended Indian Day School in Eskasoni to Grade 8, then Grades 9 and 10 at Catholic Middle School in Arichat, and Grades 11 and 12 at St. Joseph’s Residential Convent School for Girls in Mabou. At St. Joseph’s, Murdena and the other nine or ten Mi’kmaq girls found themselves greatly outnumbered by the 90 or so non-native Catholic girls. Murdena says she “did her time there” but she did not complete her final year. Instead, she found full time employment in marriage to Albert and motherhood to the six children who quickly arrived. Murdena indicates that the loss of her young son Tommy in 1978 changed her spiritually, emotionally, and physically. She decided to become a teacher so that she could pursue her quest for knowledge and serve her Mi’kmaq community. She took courses from the Nova Scotia Teachers College in Truro and in 1984 graduated from the University of New Brunswick with a Bachelor of Education degree. She also completed a Certificate in Mi’kmaq Immersion at St. Thomas University. Murdena taught in

community for a while and then went to Harvard University where she completed a Master of Education degree. She again worked in education in community for a period before, in the 1980s, joining the faculty at the University College of Cape Breton, as CBU was called at the time. Murdena played a key role in developmentally enhancing the university's Mi'kmaw Studies program and in teaching in it for many years; she saw the program grow from only a few students to over 200. In the mid-1990's, Murdena was instrumental in helping propose CBU's radically innovative and globally unique Integrative Science program, one that enabled students to learn indigenous and mainstream sciences side by side as science courses in a science degree. While this new program was threading its way through various, frustratingly slow institutional channels, Murdena's health began to fail and she retired from the university.

Although officially "retired", Murdena is still actively involved in many organizations and events, especially those that enable her to continue her passionate work to promote and revitalize Mi'kmaw culture, including language, spirituality, education, and science. Her work and achievements were the subject of a formal tribute made to Murdena in the Senate of Canada in Ottawa by the Honourable Jane Cordy, Senator from Nova Scotia, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. Senator Cordy honoured Murdena as being an exceptionally strong and distinguished woman, specifically mentioning her abilities to break down barriers and to help educate those around her.

This 2011 tribute in the Senate of Canada joins the growing list of other significant recognitions that Murdena has received. In October 2009, she and her husband Albert were each conferred the degree Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, by Cape Breton University for their tireless efforts to help promote Mi'kmaq culture and cross-cultural understandings, reconciliation, and healing. Indeed, Albert is the Elder who coined the phrase "Two-Eyed Seeing" for the gift of multiple perspectives and suggested that it be used as a guiding principle for the co-learning journey of different cultural knowledges working together. Together, Murdena and Albert are strong advocates for Two-Eyed Seeing and their message has been picked up across Canada in a diversity of arenas of application ranging from local community educational initiatives to provincial species-at-risk policy to national health research to global science celebrations! In October 2011, Elders Murdena and Albert highlighted Two-Eyed Seeing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's National Atlantic Event in Halifax, NS. They were key participants within the Knowledge Circle on Rights and Natural Resources and spoke with the wisdom of their ancestors and their own rich understandings gained through many years of personal learning and experience.

In 1989, Murdena received the Outstanding Leadership Award from Eskasoni First Nation and in 1996 she received a National Aboriginal Role Model Award. On Treaty Day in 2006, she was awarded the Grand Chief Donald Marshall Senior Memorial Elder Award by Nova Scotia Premier Rodney MacDonald. In 2009, CBC Radio conducted an interview with Murdena about her thoughts

on leadership; it can be heard at:

<http://www.cbc.ca/informationmorningcb/2009/11/murdena-marshall.html>. And, many years ago in recognition of Elder Murdena's significant contributions to science education, the "Murdena Marshall Science Scholarship" was created at CBU; it is for a Mi'kmaq student graduating from a science or science-related degree program at the university (<http://www.cbu.ca/scholarships/scholarships>).

Elder Murdena's major "retirement" projects are numerous and diverse. During 2010-2011, she was a key participant among the 23 Elders brought together from Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, Innu, and Inuit communities and territories in Atlantic Canada by the "Honouring Traditional Knowledge" research project of the Atlantic Aboriginal Economic Development Integrated Research Program (AAEDIRP) within the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs (APCFNC). The project was initiated because of the critical importance of consulting with Elders and having their perspectives included in community economic development projects and in research on Aboriginal economic development, as well as in all aspects of education, health, law, environment, etc. As a result of this project, the Elders put forward Eight Recommendations (which can be viewed at <http://www.apcfn.ca/en/resources/HonouringTraditionalKnowledgeFinal.pdf>). The recommendations received formal approval from the Atlantic Chiefs at their 16<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2011, a decision passed by consensus.

For over a decade, Elder Murdena has been a driving force within the Elders' Advisory Council for the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre and Interpretive Trails, a visionary project led by the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq. This profoundly meaningful and exciting project that the Elders' Council guides is ever the closer to realization. Its website (<http://www.mikmaweydebert.com/home/>) explains that "the future Centre is dedicated to sharing, protecting and exploring the stories and lives of our earliest ancestors and those who have come after them in Mi'kma'ki".

For almost two decades, Elders Murdena and Albert have poured their love, wisdom, and energies into the Integrative Science research program of Dr. Cheryl Bartlett at CBU. In this regard, Murdena has also presented on or taught about Traditional Knowledge, Two-Eyed Seeing and Integrative Science in a variety of locations from New Zealand to western Canada to Fredericton, Halifax, and Cape Breton. Presentations in Cape Breton have often taken place in community schools, boardrooms, or cultural centres but a great many have also occurred in the architecturally innovative "west wing" (also known as the "up-side-down canoe") attached to Murdena and Albert's home in Eskasoni.

In 2008-2010, Elder Murdena worked closely with Elder Lillian Marshall from Potlotek (Chapel Island) First Nation and Prune Harris from the Integrative Science research program at CBU to write the children's storybook "*Muin aqq L'uiknek te'sijik Ntuksuinu'k / Muin and the Seven Bird Hunters*"

(2011, Cape Breton University Press, <http://cbup.ca/books/marshall-marshall-muin-bird-hunters/>). The colourfully illustrated, 36 page book tells the story, in both Mi'kmaq and English, of the very old Mi'kmaw night sky legend that traditionally served as an oral calendar. In November 2011, the book was selected for inclusion in the 2011-12 Canadian Aboriginal Books for Schools catalogue, published by the Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia. Elders Murdena and Lillian also worked with Prune in a collaborative project that saw this same story made into an animated video (in Mi'kmaq, English, and French) as part of the global celebrations for the International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009). The Muin video was released publicly at the National Science and Technology Museum in Ottawa in January 2009 when Murdena and Lillian participated in the inaugural Canadian IYA2009 celebrations. The event was streamed live on the internet and thus Elders Murdena and Lillian brought the message and power of Two-Eyed Seeing within the video to numerous Aboriginal schools that were interactively linked in for the occasion. Copies of the Muin DVD and storybook have also been distributed widely in Nova Scotia and far beyond by the efforts of many people, including Dr. Jim Hesser, Director of the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory of the National Research Council of Canada in Victoria, BC. Jim led Canada's celebrations for IYA2009 and had initially suggested to the international steering committee that it encourage all countries to include indigenous astronomy alongside mainstream astronomy in the global celebrations. In honour of his passions about sharing understandings of the night sky with people, a group of Cape Breton Elders including Murdena gave Jim the Mi'kmaw name *Apata'sk, wesintew* (he who lies on his back watching the stars) when they met with him in Eskasoni in December 2007.

Through her "retirement" years, Elder Murdena has also been involved with numerous additional organizations and events, as for example, UINR (the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources), NAHO (the National Aboriginal Health Organization), NADACA (the Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselling Association), the Native Women's Association of Canada, and workshops and conferences of local to international stature.

In addition to the seemingly endless work that Elder Murdena does in helping organizations and individuals learn to weave their understandings between the indigenous and non-native worlds, she still makes it a top priority to do what she calls her "sacred work" within her home community of Eskasoni. Each Wednesday morning as often as possible, Murdena counsels at rehab. Plus, for Murdena, there is seldom a day goes by that she is not also tirelessly continuing with other aspects of the work and service that she was taught at a young age to consider as her lifelong responsibilities.

All of the above provides just a few brief insights into why so many people, far and wide, say "We love you Murdena! Thank you!"