

Elder Murdena Marshall, MEd, HonDLitt - Mi'kmaw Nation

(bioblurb – updated 2 Dec 2012; 1000 words)

Elder Murdena Marshall is from the Bear Clan of the Mi'kmaw Nation; she lives in the community of Eskasoni in Unama'ki – Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Murdena is a Spiritual Leader, a fluent speaker of the Mi'kmaw language, an Associate Professor (retired) of Mi'kmaw Studies at Cape Breton University (CBU), the spouse of Albert Marshall, the mother of six children, the grandmother or great grandmother for many more, and a friend to thousands.

In 2009, Murdena along with her husband Albert were conferred the degree Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* by CBU for their tireless efforts to help promote Mi'kmaw culture and language along with cross-cultural understandings, reconciliation, and healing. Together, they have developed KECCA (Knowledge Education & Culture Consultant Associates) to better enable their work and to encourage a strong future for the Mi'kmaw Nation and its peoples.

Elders Murdena and Albert are strong advocates for "*Etuaptmumk / Two-Eyed Seeing*", a phrase that Albert coined for the gift of multiple perspectives and that they encourage be used as a guiding principle for the co-learning journey of different cultural knowledges working together. Their message has been picked up across Canada within a diversity of arenas of application and also within global celebrations for the International Year of Astronomy 2009. 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.

During 2010-2011, Murdena was a key participant among 23 Elders from Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqiyik, Innu, and Inuit communities and territories in Atlantic Canada who worked together within the "Honouring Traditional Knowledge" research project of the Atlantic Aboriginal Economic Development Integrated Research Program within the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs. Elders brought forward Eight Recommendations as to how they wished to be consulted and see Traditional Knowledge included in Aboriginal community economic development projects and research, as well as in all aspects of education, health, law, environment, etc. The Elders' recommendations were subsequently reviewed and supported through consensus by the Atlantic Chiefs in September 2011.

Murdena received the Outstanding Leadership Award from Eskasoni First Nation in 1989 and a National Aboriginal Role Model Award in 1996. In 2006, she was awarded the Grand Chief Donald Marshall Senior Memorial Elder Award by NS Premier Rodney MacDonald. In 2011, Murdena's achievements were recognized in the Senate of Canada in Ottawa by the Honourable Jane Cordy, Senator from NS, who saluted Elder Murdena as an exceptionally strong and distinguished woman, one who is able to break down barriers and help educate those around her.

Murdena was born in 1942 in Wycocomagh in Unama'ki-Cape Breton 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 and the first elected chief of the Mi'kmaw Grand Council, with helping

her to learn to navigate the two worlds in which she found herself – that of her Mi'kmaw 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'kmaw 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'kmaw girls found themselves greatly outnumbered by the 90 or so non-native Catholic girls. Murdena "did her time there" but 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'kmaw 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'kmaw 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 create 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.

Through her "retirement" years, Elder Murdena has been actively involved in numerous activities (some mentioned earlier) and also with many organizations such as UINR (Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources), NAHO (National Aboriginal Health Organization), NADACA (Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselling Association), and the Native Women's Association of Canada, plus workshops and conferences of local to international stature. She is a driving force within the Elders' Advisory Council for the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre, a visionary project led by the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq to develop a Centre "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."

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.