



Rose Ann (Knockwood) Morris

My name is Rose and my Spirit name is Sunset Rose, nina telu wisi, Walgua'siet, which was given to me by my father when I was a little girl. I was born in Millbrook on July 13th, 1929, to Theresa (Simon) and John Stephen Knockwood, one of five children. My siblings are Henry, Joe, Isabelle, and Noel. My mom's niche was quillwork and my dad's special calling was to sing the ancient Mi'kmaw hymns and prayers at funerals and special masses, Midnight Mass, weddings and especially on St. Anne's Day. I still have his prayer book with all his writings in it.

My family spoke only Mi'kmaw at home and we were poor, but we were happy living in Indian Brook. In the summer of 1937, our lives changed forever, with a visit from the Indian agent, who came to our home to order my parents to take their children to the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School by the first of September. I remember the day that my whole family walked together to the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie. We were greeted by a woman dressed in black and wearing long beads with a crucifix who smiled at us. I saw the tears in my mom's eyes as she and dad left us there.

When she took us inside, the nuns separated us; our brothers, Joe and Henry, were taken to the boys' side, and my sister Isabelle and I were taken to the girls' side. My first day there was a whirlwind. They took off my clothes and scrubbed me, and put powder in my hair and gave me some other clothes to wear. The nun cut off my long braids and threw them aside. My sister Isabelle saw her cut my hair and was so upset. She cried so hard, because she knew it was wrong. She told the nun that our mom would not cut our hair. I was there for eight long years, from the age of eight to sixteen years old. Although there were some happy times, these are clouded by the memories of abuse—sexual, physical, and mental and emotional abuses that I endured there until I was discharged in 1945. The day I was finally leaving, at age 16, Sister Mary Leonard told me that I could come back to stay for another year if I wanted to go to the high school in the village, but in my mind, I was saying, "No Way!" I was out of there for good and I would never have to return!

We lived down the Meadows in Indian Brook when I came back home, and Louis Benjamin Morris's family lived there too. I saw Ben, growing up at the residential school, but we were never allowed to talk. As teens, we became good friends and after a year long courtship we were married when I was 17 and he was 19. We raised seven children: Louis Dennis, Elizabeth Christine (Betty), Donna Marie, Helen Theresa, Patricia Anne, Adrian Patrick and Phillip Benjamin. We have eleven beautiful grandchildren, twelve great-grandchildren and three great-great-grandchildren. My husband Ben worked hard to support us. We had a garden and a horse to work the land, and he hunted, fished and gathered what we needed. I worked as a housekeeper and babysitter and my family did seasonal migrant work in Maine for many years. We had been married for 40 years when Ben passed away in 1985 at the age of 58.

After my husband's passing, I did not know what I was going to do to support myself, but I needed to find work. I applied for the position of welfare officer for the Acadia Band and received the job offer on the date of the first anniversary of Ben's death. I felt like he was watching over me. In 1985, I decided to enroll in the Mi'kmaq Bachelor of Social Work program at Dalhousie



University as a mature student. For the next five years, I continued to work as welfare officer and I attended school part-time. I graduated with my BSW degree in 1991 at the age of 62. I achieved my goal to do something positive with my life and when I look back, I feel proud to have accomplished that! I retired at age 65 and I discovered a passion for painting, which I love to do. I continue to make baskets and enjoy my pastime of gathering medicines and sharing our culture. As an Elder, I share my counsel and advice and teaching to those who come here. I am a storyteller, author, songwriter and singer, and a poet. I wrote three books, "Our Story Tellers" in 1996, "The Stick People" in 1999, and "The Stick People II" in 2002. My son, Phillip and I created a CD, "To My Great Grandchildren" in 1999. It is time for me to make another one for my great-great-grandchildren.

My healing began when I discovered my Mi'kmaw identity. I remember listening to a tape recording of ancient Mi'kmaw chanting and I burst out crying; something happened inside me to reconnect me to my Spirit at that time. I remembered my dad and what he taught us. I was a grown woman when I began to search for my identity and learn about my cultural teachings. It was like I awakened from a deep sleep and I was eager to experience my culture and traditions. I learned about the sacred medicines and developed my prayer to connect to my Creator and my ancestors and our Mother Earth. It was a beautiful gift to find myself, and I got stronger in my faith every day. I learned to appreciate the beauty of nature and all that surrounded me and experienced more happiness and positive energy. I started to attend the mawiomis and spiritual ceremonies to be with others who were learning; we shared our stories and our gifts with each other. Today, I see myself as a very special person. I am a life giver and I am a proud Mi'kmaw great-great-grandmother! I give thanks to Creator every day.

I truly believe that the root causes of the loss of our Mi'kmaw language and culture were in the policies of the Canadian government and the Indian Residential school system that punished us for speaking Mi'kmaw, belittled us for being Native, and damaged our self esteem and identity as Mi'kmaq. We survived that. Today, I am proud that there are so many of our young people who are graduating from high schools and universities, and that they know who they are and are proud to be Mi'kmaq!

I have so much gratitude for our traditional teachings and medicines and our medicine people who helped me to heal. We need to protect our medicines and preserve our teachings and pass them on. My prayers are for our young people and future generations to realize the value of their Elders. Take time to sit with them, ask questions and learn about what you need to help you to understand our Mi'kmaq history: about our courage and resiliency and our identity, to be proud as a Mi'kmaw person. Nmultes.

