



### **Iris Nicholas**

My name is Iris and I am the daughter of Louis Nicholas and “Bonnie” Veronica Deveau-Nicholas. I have two brothers, Wayne and Vaughan. In 1961, when I was six years old, our mother was sent away to the sanitorium for treatment for tuberculosis. We were taken to the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School where we spent seven years.

Mom passed away at the sanitorium three years later, when I was nine years old. Life at the residential school was difficult even for the few students, like me, who were treated well by Sister Gilberta and the other nuns. We were mistreated by the older girls because we got preferential treatment and they took out their frustrations on us. I played the flute and sang and performed in every concert we had. I also witnessed abuse and it affected me emotionally.

My grandmother passed away, when I was twelve years old, while I was away in Shubie School. I was devastated by the loss of my Mimi, my “rock,” who I relied on her to be here when I got home. I was filled with self pity, anger and despair and blamed everybody for my life.

When the school closed down in 1967, I was 13 and I did not want to return to my community because my Mimi was not there and I was desperate for a better way of life. I agreed to be placed in the foster home of Sister Gilberta’s brother in Rockland, Massachusetts, where I lived for two summers and the following school year in grade nine. My foster mother was stricken with cancer and I was sent back home to live in Tobique. She passed away a year later. I felt like I was all alone: neglected and abandoned by all those who loved me. When I moved home I began to drink to dull the pain and I became an alcoholic by the age of 14.

I got involved with a man and I got pregnant with my first child at the age of age 16 and had my son when I turned 17. I had six children, one right after the other. I gave up a son and a daughter to adoption as a young mother; with an alcohol addiction I could not look after my children. I struggled with alcoholism for 20 years. My children Troy, Todd and Jason and Michelle were severely neglected when I was drinking, but my oldest son Troy, watched over them and they stayed together and took care of one another.

When I was 25, I married a military man, like some other women did. I hoped he would take me away from here and take care of my family; I hoped I would get to travel and see the world. We moved to Revere, Massachusetts with our daughter Michelle, and my sons. Our marriage only lasted for two years before we were divorced because of our alcohol abuse and his family violence. I was grateful to my relatives who kept us safe until were able to get the resources to come home.

It was just after my fortieth birthday, that I talked to my cousin, Annie, about feeling suicidal because I was so tired of drinking and being sick. She came back with her brothers Diamond and Terry, on Sunday to take me to my first AA meeting and every Sunday night after that for six months. It made me happy to see the Elders of my community there who encouraged me to come back. They said they were proud of me for making positive changes in my life. It helped me to realize that it



was up to me, but I was not alone. I went to a rehabilitation centre for 28 days after that and I kept on working on myself and getting well and have been on this path ever since. I have been sober for 27 years, one day at a time.

I joined the Survivors' group and attended the "HEALING BEGINS" program and began to meet with the psychologist once a month. I attended the talking circles where we shared our life experiences and learned to trust again and we realized that the impacts of our lives have extended to the young people too because many youths in our community are suffering from alcohol and drug abuse. I have hope for our grandchildren that I see dancing and praying for us at the powwows. This generation is learning about our cultural teachings that we were forbidden to learn as children, and they will pass these down to our great-grandchildren. My spirit is uplifted and happy and proud.

After I sobered up I need I needed to find something to do with the rest of my life. I decided to move to Dartmouth to stay with my cousin, Gloria, who helped me find a job. I began upgrading classes at the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre. With the patience of my teachers and my own perseverance (it took three tries to pass the Math and Science tests), I earned my General Education Diploma in 1989. I was inspired to continue with my education because I wanted to be someone that could help my people.

I attended the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, NB, as a mature student, and I opted to live on campus to spend more time on my studies. It was very challenging, and I had difficulty with the prerequisite science courses I needed to get into the nursing program. My counsellor encouraged me to change my goal from nursing to becoming a teacher. I learned that our people were very different and unique and have our own indigenous way of thinking, learning and being. My English professor told me while I did not know English, I knew Maliseet—I was going to become a Maliseet language teacher! Although I had to limit my course load to four courses a year in order to succeed, I finally graduated with a Bachelor of Education Degree in Elementary Education in 1999. My ten-year education journey began with my GED. and finished with my BEd!

When I came home to Tobique, I found work as an adult care provider for two years, until I finally got a teaching job to train with the Maliseet Language teacher at the high school. Working with the high school students was challenging because they did not want to listen or learn, but I completed my Maliseet Language training. The next year, I started my dream job of teaching the Maliseet language at the elementary school to the kindergarten to grade five students and I loved it and enjoyed it every day. I retired, at age 65, due to health issues that are slowing me down and need my attention.

One of my most difficult times in my life was when my son Troy was dying from HIV at the age of 29. He decided to stop the recommended chemotherapy treatments. His friends were there to take care of him once he made his choice about how he wanted to die and he accepted death. He taught me about accepting death. I was sober and I was strong enough to handle it. I will always cherish my last memory of him when he kissed my cheek and then he kissed my hand—that was the last time I saw him.

I realize that the Great Spirit kept me here to fulfill my purpose, as a mother, a teacher and a grandmother. I was not a good mother and I apologized to my children and asked for forgiveness. I taught our Maliseet language to many children. Today, I have good relationships with my adult children and they let me be the best grandmother I can be. I feel so blessed to have sixteen grandchildren and three great-grandchildren and to be capable of loving, nurturing, and listening to them. Being here for them whenever I am needed makes me feel so good.



I have survived the residential school and I have survived 20 years of alcoholism. I survived 10 years in school and I was blessed to teach for 10 years! I learned to love myself and I know who I am. I give thanks to Creator for my resilience and strength as a Maliseet grandmother. I am in a good place in my life and I have all that I prayed for, all that I need: my family, my home, and time to spend with my grandchildren. My life is worth living every day!

