



Mary Rebecca Julian

I was born on April 23rd, 1941 to Mary Ellen Pictou and Francis Levi Thomas in Old Town, Indian Brook Reserve. I have two sisters, Mary Imelda (Hubba) and Anna Mae and a brother, Francis. When I was a baby, I was given to my mother's Aunt Madeline and Uncle Big Andrew Francis for them to raise me and they took me to Maccan, Nova Scotia. We stayed there until 1942 when Centralization was forcing people to move back to Indian Brook. Many of the men were leaving to join the army and the women were left to care for the children and the elderly.

My Aunt Madeline was stricken with tuberculosis and was sent away to the sanitorium in Kentville, Nova Scotia. I was given back to my mother, but I did not know her or the Elder, Madeline Kuji, who stayed with us, and I continued to run away every day. At the age of four years old, I was taken to the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, where I was a student for the next five years.

When I first got there, I could only speak Mi'kmaw and I knew how to swear. I was not even allowed to go to church. Father Mackey would have me removed when I swore. I got a strapping everyday for something and I believed that I was bad. After awhile, the strap did not hurt, but it just made me act out more. Every time there was trouble, I seemed to be there. We all had chores to do and I used to have to dust around the second floor of the school.

I was punished often for speaking Mi'kmaw and I used to tell them off when I was being strapped. I often thought that we were being set up to be beaten. During the May Procession, the nun stood the children on long narrow benches to sing and I lost my balance and fell down, taking others with me and we all got a strapping for falling. Everything the nuns did was confusing. One nun would give us cardboard boxes for us to make into cards and then another nun came by and would give us a strapping for playing cards. I hated the fire drills in the dead of winter; we had to go down the fire escape and jump down into the snow in our bare feet.

One of my punishments was to weed the gardens. I liked to work in the gardens, but I did not let them know that. Sometimes the nun would forget about me and I would stay there all day. I think that is where I got my green thumb. The residential school toughened me up for what was to come in my life. We were not accepted by our peers and community and had to bear the stigma of being a survivor from our own people and that was hard to deal with. We had to learn to fight to win or outrun the biggest bullies.

When I was nine, my mother remarried and my stepfather, Noel Sappier, came to the residential school to rescue me and we moved to Pictou Landing until I was 14. I spent a lot of time with the Elders, his sisters-in-law, Aunt Bella, who taught me how to get maple trees for baskets and Malij Joe, who taught me to make crepe paper flowers and fishing baskets from maple whips, young maple trees.

Everybody contributed to the household and worked, as we did not have welfare or family allowance in those days. Picking mayflowers, making wreaths and axe handles, handmade



crafts and whatever we made, we peddled around Pictou County to get what we needed. The family production of the handcrafting and making things to peddle seemed to stop once family allowance and welfare or ration started. Each family got \$9.09, regardless of the size of your family. We had a potato garden and we fished every day, and if we were lucky, we had chicken for our Christmas Dinner. My sisters and I swam every day of the summer and we had fun. We fished and dug clams, quahogs and picked berries, strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and raspberries, all of which we sold to restaurants around Pictou County.

Our family lived in Pine Tree in the summer as migrant workers for a farmer, living on the land, harvesting crops and preparing them for sale to the Sobeys markets. My job was to do the lawn and weeding the flowerbeds and gardens, something I learned at the residential school. We were allowed to take some produce home that could not be sold and we got free milk and butter. We traded axe handles and baskets for meat and other necessities. One year we stayed there until November before we moved back to Pictou Landing.

We went to school in Pictou, where I spent three years in grade five. My stepfather took me to another school in Pine Tree, where I was tested and finally moved to grade six. At 15 years old, I was going to school and doing seasonal work in a lobster factory and came back in time for my tests and passed them. I eventually quit school in grade eight, after my sisters and I went to harvest potatoes in Bridgewater, Maine, and we missed two months of school.

I moved to Millbrook to return to school to try to get a GED but did not continue once I found a job at a Chinese restaurant and then later, I worked as a housekeeper. I went back to Maine as a teen migrant worker, where I worked for eight months. I continued on to Framingham, Massachusetts and found a job at the hospital morgue and forensic laboratory. That was a bit hard to stomach so I did not stay there very long.

In 1958, my stepfather passed away and my mother went to live in Indian Brook, so I moved back to Nova Scotia. I met up with up with my husband, Stephen Julian, who has been by my side for almost 60 years and we have been married for 55 years. We have eight children: Douglas, Walter, Wanda, Sam, Patsy, Anita, Keith, and Raymond. We have 14 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

I was a homemaker, raising my family until my youngest son was old enough to start school and then I returned to the workforce and I have been working ever since. I completed courses and cultural programs to learn to make duffle coats and wooden flowers, quillwork and beading. Later, I taught these skills to others. I still make baskets and flowers and do beadwork and crafts and I go to powwows as a vendor. I still rely on Mother Earth for our medicines, learning how to use them from my stepfather, when we didn't have access to doctors. I had learned to be resilient and resourceful.

I became a certified Mi'kmaw linguist in 1984 and began teaching the Mi'kmaw language in schools throughout Nova Scotia. I worked at the Shubenacadie Elementary School for several years before coming to L'nu Sipuk Kina'muokuum to teach the Mi'kmaw language to grades primary to grade 12.

I received the Grand Chief Donald Marshall Sr. Memorial Elder Award in 2013, which was an honour for me to be chosen among my people. I still enjoy teaching the language and culture that is based on our cultural practices and traditions. Although I have been doing this for more than 30 years, and at 75 years old I am still taking courses to improve my teaching skills. Although, I am a



craftsperson and have created one-of-a-kind pieces in baskets, quillwork, leather work, beading and sewing, I am currently an art student and enjoy learning to paint as a relaxing pastime. I like to encourage the young people to believe in themselves and to never give up on their dreams. I believe you are never too old to learn and I love to learn new things. Numultes, Nuji Wina'muit (The One Who Teaches)

