



Lena Mae Toney Bernard, We'ko'kmaq

(July 29, 1944 – June 18, 2019)

My name is Lena Toney Bernard. I was born on July 29, 1944, to Susan Charlotte Googoo and Ben Charles Toney, one of three children. I have two siblings, Diane and John Toney. I am a survivor of the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in 1950 and both my parents attended in 1939. My husband, the late Lawrence Bernard and I have six children, Laura Prosper, Karen Bernard, Cyrus Bernard, Leonard Bernard, Linda Bernard

and our eldest, Lloyd Gould, my stepson. We have 22 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren, and two more on the way in June 2019. That is our Legacy!

My earliest recollections of my childhood, before I went to Residential School, were filled with fun. My sister, brother and I played down by the river, swimming almost every day. We had a swing on our apple tree, which is still there today. We picked berries and helped Mom to make preserves throughout the growing season. We got our food from the land, working in the garden; our job was picking slugs off potatoes with a can and a stick. We had fun even washing blankets.

I remember the day the Indian Agents came to our house to take us away to the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. I begged my dad not to let them take me. Diane was eight and I was six years old. Mom dressed us in beautiful satin dresses and put ribbons in our hair. We were taken to Orangedale, NS, and put on the train to Shubenacadie, like the other Mi'kmaq children from Eskasoni. I remember when we arrived and walked up the front steps to that huge front door. We were taken to the girls' side by the nun, who took our dresses and changed our clothes and cut off our hair. I was traumatized by my experiences there as a child and I can't talk about all of it. During my time there, I was a bedwetter and like so many other children, was made to wear our wet sheets and march through the dining hall and face the other children, our punishment was humiliation. I woke up every morning and looked out the window and told my friend that I could see my dad's house. I wished I could just swim across the river and go home. At Christmas time, the nuns threw jellybeans on the floor and we would run to them and eat them. My uncle, Levi Googoo, came down from Indian Brook to visit us and brought us some oranges. He visited us a couple more times to check in on us. After 11 long months, I was so happy when my mom came to take us home to We'ko'kmaq and told us we didn't have to return.

I attended Indian Day School on the reserve and at age seven had to repeat grade primary. We had a white teacher who was cruel and mistreated the students. I finished day school with a grade eight education.

I started high school at age 17, in grade nine in Mabou at the Sisters of Notre Dame convent. I flunked grade 10 after I got kicked out of school. One of the



nuns came to me and told me that by wearing a sodality pin I was pledging that I wanted to become a nun. I told her I would never be a nun and I was sent to Sister Superior, who told me to leave. My boyfriend, Lawrence came to pick me up on that day in September.

Two months later, on November 26, 1964, I married Lawrence “Lunch” Bernard, at the age of 18. I was pregnant with my first child in March 1965, at the same time as my mom and sister, Diane. We all had our children in September 1965! When my husband and I were raising our children, my husband was addicted to alcohol and my family struggled with the impacts of alcoholism and the impacts of the Residential School. I’m proud of all my six children. My son had an alcohol addiction, but he has recovered and now works for NADACA and practices traditional healing to help others who struggle with that disease. My other children have always been alcohol and drug-free. All my children finished school and are successful in their chosen careers and their lives and have beautiful families of their own and are close to me.

At 39, I decided to go to school at St. Francis Xavier University, when my children were all in high school. I was a few weeks from graduating from the Community Health Representative course when I got sick with fainting spells. My family doctor told me I had bad nerves and gave me medication. I got sick again at school and went to a doctor at the hospital in Antigonish where I experienced racism. He accused me of taking drugs and sent back to the dorm to sleep it off. I went to another doctor and found out I had diabetes and ended up in the hospital. I am lucky that I didn’t go into a diabetic coma. During that time my husband started drinking again and I quit school and came home to keep my family together and help my teenagers finish high school.

My husband stopped drinking and he was a Mi’kmaq Warrior, protecting Mother Earth and the Water and our Treaty Rights. He taught us about our culture and traditional ceremonies and spirituality. He was supportive of the Survivors who wanted the Warriors to protect them so they could have a traditional powwow in Eskasoni to promote healing for our families. He told our children that I was a survivor of the IRS too. I didn’t want my children to know I was a survivor because I didn’t want them to feel sorry for me and think that their Mom wasn’t fearless. I have a very good friend, Margaret Poulette, who has been with me throughout my life, who is also a survivor. We brought up our children together and stuck by each other and showed our children how fearless we could be. Our nine children were raised together as our posse. We did everything together; movies, suppers, camping trips, adventures with our children, taking off from drinking husbands and going places and doing things for them and with them when they were young. We wanted to give them a good life.

I eventually completed my training and was employed for 12 years with the We’ko’kmaq Band as Director in Adult Care, working with cancer patients in palliative care. I am a cancer survivor. In 2001, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to have my breast removed. In 2005, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and had surgery. My five-year thyroid checkup was good, and I was pronounced



cancer-free. Then in 2006, I had the second breast surgery and requested day surgery so that I could be home and travel to PEI to make it to the River Dance Concert that I had tickets for the next day. We went to see River Dance with my friends, as planned. Then in 2015, after another five years, the thyroid cancer came back. I have been taking Mi'kmaq traditional medicines and treatments to beat thyroid cancer again.

I have a family portrait that includes all four generations of my family. The photo which includes my husband, children, grandchildren, and greatgrandchildren, reminds me of how blessed I am and shows the legacy we have created. I am so grateful for my family and friends and living my life. I am a survivor! I have survived the Indian Residential School. I survived family violence and the impacts of the IRS. I survived cancer, more than once. I am more than a survivor, I am still here, and I am the best I can be, for me and my family. I am a water protector, and with my friend Margaret and the Warriors, I learned to stand up for our lands and waters and our fish. I'm a grassroots grandmother, Elder and friend. I am proud of my family and they are proud of me.

I would like to share some words of wisdom with the younger generation. When you have children, take good care of them, watch over and protect them, because when you are an Elder, they will be taking care of you. Teach them about our history, language, culture, and traditions, so they will know and be proud of who they are. Teach them how to smudge and care about our Mother Earth and the sacredness of water. Teach them to remember and respect the Survivors and all the Ancestors. The Ancestors are needed to help and guide you to live a good life. Wela'lin.

