



# First Nations Court Elder becomes Dr. Sasakamoose

Muriel Sasakamoose, a Kamloops Cknúcwentn First Nations Sentencing Court Elder for the last eleven years, has been awarded an honorary doctor of letters degree by Thompson Rivers University. Now 86 years old, Dr. Sasakamoose has been a lifelong advocate for equality and justice. She has been instrumental in achieving significant legal and practical changes for Indigenous people in Canada, including the right to vote in federal elections, the right of Indigenous women to retain their status if they marry a non-Indigenous person, and improved conditions on reserves.

## First Nations Court Elder

In 2011 she brought the commitment, perseverance, and political action skills she learned from her parents and Elders to a committee working to establish a First Nations court in Kamloops. When the court began sitting in 2013, she became one of its Elders.

Indigenous and First Nations courts deal with Indigenous and First Nations people who plead guilty, take responsibility for their offences, and commit to a healing plan. Elders are respected community members who help judges craft effective sentences and then support sentenced offenders and hold them accountable as they work on healing and rehabilitation.

Dr. Sasakamoose said:

“Each of the elders brings a different gift to the court, whether it’s knowledge of our culture or counselling experience or something else. I’ve done a lot of things in my life, but I find the First Nations court particularly satisfying because I see people making changes for the better quite quickly, and with our support fewer people are going to jail.”

She explains that people are encouraged to own up and apologise in First Nations court. “They speak for themselves rather than through lawyers. While they may progress slowly in the beginning, they can make real changes with the counselling and programs we elders refer them to. And then we celebrate their progress with a blanket ceremony, the traditional way to give warmth and support and love.”

## **Lifelong advocate for equality**

Born in 1938 on the T̓k̓emlúps te Secwépemc reserve, Dr. Sasakamoose was the eldest of 13 children. Her parents, Mildred and Gus Gottfriedson Sr., taught their children the value of education and the importance of community service and political work, by example. Their work to advance the rights of Indigenous people in Canada was honoured both locally and nationally.

Dr. Sasakamoose began her own career as an activist for equality in the 1940s when she and her brother became the first Indigenous children to attend a public school in Kamloops. Indigenous children were still being sent to residential schools, but her parents fought that. They ensured she could learn the strong English communication skills she would need to become an effective advocate. Dr. Sasakamoose talks about her experiences matter-of-factly and with humour, but the fact that she and her brother walked to school across a railway bridge for five years before they were allowed on the school bus that passed them every day is just one aspect of the discrimination they experienced as young children.

Her administrative career began early. Mentored by her great uncle, she began attending Band Council meetings at age 7 and discussing what happened with him. She went on to take business courses at Cariboo College and band management courses at UBC and to work in First Nations band administration in BC and Saskatchewan.

She and her parents fought for Indigenous people's right to vote in federal elections. When they achieved that goal in 1960, she worked for Elections Canada managing elections on T̓k̓emlúps te Secwépemc and did so in every federal and provincial election for sixty years. She has also voted in each of those elections, believing it important to exercise the right she and many others fought for.

She and her mother were founding members of the BC Native Women's Society. Together they lit a spark across Canada, involving organizations in other provinces in a campaign to redress the injustice of the federal Indian Act provision that stripped First Nations women and their children of Indian Status if they married a non-Indigenous person. It took a long time, but their campaign was successful when the Indian Act was amended in 1985 and 174,500 Indigenous women and their families were eligible to regain their status.

## **Community service**

Dr. Sasakamoose has contributed to the wider community as a member of the Cariboo College Board, the BC Board of Parole, the Royal Inland Hospital Foundation Board, the Roman Catholic Diocese Social Justice Board, and the Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre Community Advisory Board. She lectures to Thompson River University classes in law, health and social work.

Her significant contributions were recognized when she was awarded a Commemorative Medal for the 125th anniversary of Canadian federation. She also received an International Women's Day award from the Kamloops Sexual Assault Centre and was named one of the Thompson-Okanagan's "Top 10 Badass Women"!

A story told at the June 4, 2024 ceremony conferring her degree spoke to Dr. Sasakamoose's

wide network of friends and colleagues. One of her friends is said to have joked, “Muriel does know everybody. I was at an event with her and was surprised to see her sitting on the stage talking with the Pope. Next thing I knew, everyone was asking me ‘Who is that guy sitting with Muriel?’”. Judges Cleavelly, Dickie, Frame, Harrison and Thomas attended the ceremony honouring Dr. Sasakamoose.

She has been married to Peter Sasakamoose of Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation for 66 years. They have two children, three grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren who have carried on their family traditions of hard work, education, and community service. They also acted as foster parents to more than 20 Indigenous children.

Chief Judge Gillespie said:

“The BC Provincial Court is fortunate to have the Elders like Dr. Sasakamoose sharing their extraordinary experience and wisdom in our Indigenous and First Nations courts. We congratulate Dr. Sasakamoose on her well-deserved honorary doctorate. Her life has been dedicated to justice, equality and community service and we are so grateful for her contribution to the Kamloops Cknucwentn First Nations Sentencing Court.”

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