

Speaking Notes for Sally Bunting

Former Chief of North Spirit Lake First Nation

Konnichiwa, BooShoo (Oji-Cree), Hello

My name is Sally Kakekagamick-Bunting – I am an Elder from North Spirit Lake, ON. Canada. I was born in a small village in Northern Ontario which at the time had no name. I was delivered in small teepee to my mother, Nasen Rae and father, Boyce Rae on April 24, 1951 – at the time there were no clinics, hospitals or buildings in the Northern village I came from. There were no nurses or doctors to help with the delivery; we relied solely on the support of Elder's and medicine men within the community. The small northern village is known today as North Spirit Lake.

During that time, we were living off the land, moving from place to place, looking for food – we would move to different places about every 2-3 weeks. My grandparents were there to teach me all the things that I needed to know to survive – such lessons included: hunting, trapping, fishing, cooking, smoking fish and moose meat or any wild meat we could get.

In the summer time, we would live off berries and other local edible plants. Some plants we would use as medicine to heal things such as cuts, constipation, pain relief, fever and other cold/flu symptoms. I lived with my grandparents because my mother passed away when I was two years old and my father was living in Thunder Bay with an illness called TB; my father passed away when I was five years old. I was five years old when I first went to Residential School; it was very traumatic and a culture shock for me because I never left my community, my reserve, my home, to go to a place that I do not know. That foreign place had foreign language and foreign food. I had to stay in residential school for 8 years (1957-1965). I stayed but I never forgot my language which is Oji-Cree. When I was five years old, I promised myself I would not

forget my language because I knew I needed to be able to communicate with my grandparents. When we came back from residential school, which was two months in the summer, most of the children forgot their language. So, when I was home, because I remembered my language, I had to interpret for other children, my friends, and cousins, to speak with their families and grandparents. In 1887 the first residential school was opened and the last one closed in 1996. The churches began to acknowledge their education scheme which was specifically designed to “kill the Indian in the child”.

After I returned home, in 1971-1979, I learned the traditional ways of my grandmothers – one of them was the practice known today as a midwife – bringing new life into the world. At the age of sixteen, I was hired to be the first Community Health Representative of North Spirit Lake because I knew how to read, write and speak English. This was a time before North Spirit Lake had community nurses and doctors. I was the first line of medical defence and relearning the traditional teachings of my grandparents to survive in my community. One of the responsibilities of the Community Health Representative was to deliver babies. Through my first delivery I had my two grandmothers by my side, coaching me every step of the way. The first baby I delivered name was Homer Meekis – when he was born, he was very ill weighing only 4 lbs 5 ounces. The night he was born, he struggled to make it through the night. He was very dehydrated and had shortness of breath. The next day, an Elder came to talk with the parents and shared that she had a dream about the baby boy delivered the day before. The Elder shared that within her dream she was told the baby boy needed to be given to someone who has gone through much loss in their lifetime. To give him to someone who has suffered loss and despair. The parents decided to gift the baby boy to me – he is my eldest son and currently serving as a Band Councillor for North Spirit Lake First Nation. I would be happy to answer questions about how the Elders were so important to my people in the past.

In 1982, I went looking for outside help because of the physical abuse I endured at the hands of my husband at that time. In 1983, I got a job at – the hospital in Sioux Lookout as a mental health worker, flying in and out of communities, listening to victims. I worked with many doctors, psychiatrists and learned a lot from the professionals. My world was very hard – I did not know where I belonged. I would go home to my community and then back to the outside world. For many years, I moved my family around and my children were with me through my journey.

In 1994, I became the first female Chief of North Spirit Lake. I faced a lot of hardships as the leader of the community as many men still did not approve of a woman in a position of leadership. North Spirit Lake is a dry community, meaning no drugs or alcohol are allowed. At that time, addiction rate was at an all time high and I made it a mission to address the drugs and alcohol crisis in the community. Because of the abuse I endured at residential school, I often felt insecure with who I was but knew I needed to remain strong to lead my community. My lived experiences helped shape me to have a better understanding of community needs – knowing that I was not the only person from my community that survived Residential School. So, I made it my mission to help people with problems like mine – suffering from emotional, mental, spiritual, sexual, and physical abuse from the residential school. If I was going to help them, I had to help myself first which was very difficult. We are always told to forgive; but I can never forget what I went through. And that is my goal still to this day; to never forget the painful past and to help the people who are still hurting today.

Now at 72 years of age, I am currently working as an Elder in Dryden High School working to support students from the six Keewaytinook Okimakanak communities achieve their high school diploma. The six northern communities that make up Keewaytinook Okimakanak are: Poplar Hill, Deer Lake, North Spirit Lake, Keewaywin, Fort Severn, and MacDowell Lake. The students I support are young men and women ages 13-21. My role is to incorporate cultural teachings and language into the daily lives of our students. Also, to share knowledge and help

educate other Dryden High School Students on our Keewaytinook Okimakanak ways and bring awareness to what our people went through when they were taken from their communities and forced to attend residential school as young children. I have been doing this job for 8 years now. Within the last two years, I have really seen growth within my team, helping me bring my vision to life. My vision is to help rebuild the relationship between our First Nations People and Non-First Nations People - to live in harmony together for our future generations. Not to see the colour of one's skin but to acknowledge and appreciate our different cultures. I hope to help our students, coming from northern, isolated communities, feel safe and comfortable during their time in Dryden. We, as a team, try to achieve this by remembering where they come from, acknowledging, and appreciating that different, more land based, lifestyle - not to change them but, to educate them while they are here. Darryl Norman and Rachel Loughery are my co-workers and friends, helping me through this journey.

There are many things that I could say about my life. I hope that those listening will feel comfortable asking me how I have been able to use my life experiences in helping others.

Arigatou, Meegwitch (Oji Cree), Thank you