

Rita Joe's Obituary
May, 2007

Rita Joe, Mi'kmaq poet

Born Whycocomagh, March 15, 1932

Died Sydney, March 20, 2007

"On the day I am blue,
I go again to the wood where the tree is swaying,
Arms touching you like a friend,
And the sound of the wind so alone like I am;
Whispers here, whispers there,
Come and just be my friend."

October Song, Rita Joe's last poem found on her typewriter.

One of Rita Joe's daughters once asked her about her ability to write poetry.

"The words are floating through the air and I just catch them," she replied.

The gentle, soft-spoken Mi'kmaq poet's words touched many lives and brought her great acclaim and many honours, but she humbly described herself as a housewife with a dream to bring laughter "to the sad eyes of my people. . . ."

Her journey from the reserve in Whycocomagh after she lost her mother at the age of five, included foster homes and the Shubenacadie residential school; lost years which she regretted in later life.

"It was a time when you prepare for life, so that you're ready to face the world at 16," says Murdena Marshall, a Mi'kmaq educator and long-time friend and confidant who lived near her home on Eskasoni First Nation. "She lamented in later life about missing those years, and poetry was a means of talking about it. But not in a mean way."

A powerful poem which conveys her thoughts about what the residential school took from the young Mi'kmaq who

were forced to lose their language, is entitled I Lost My Talk:

I lost my talk
The Talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
the scambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.

An ability to convey her thoughts through words came early.

Daughter Francis Sylliboy says that once, when she was asked by a nun and the principal at the Shubenacadie school where she got the words she had written on a piece of paper on her desk, Rita pointed to her head and her heart.

Sister Dorothy Moore, a Mi'kmaq nun from Membertou First Nation, who along with Rita Joe was awarded the Order of Canada for her work as an educator, was at Shubernacadie school with her in 1943 and 1944 and remembers " a very gently girl; you couldn't help but gravitate to her. "

She often uses the poem I Lost My Talk in her lectures to demonstrate how deeply the residential school experience touched young Mi'kmaq who often spent years away from their families and communities.

Rita began writing poetry in the late 1960s, but she didn't tell her 13 children and her husband until her

work was selected for an award. Her first book, Poems of Rita Joe was published in 1978. She published another six books of poetry and received several honorary degrees and an Aboriginal Achievement Award for her work.

She wanted to portray her people in a positive way, says Francis.

"She wanted to pass along the positive, gentle, loving image of the Indian."

Publisher Ronald Caplan of Cape Breton Books worked closely with Joe.

"Her work offers evidence of her continuing journey to understand and share the unique combination of native spirituality and Christianity that is Rita Joe's daily life," he told The Cape Breton Post. "Through her eyes, and in her days, the horrors and joy of human life are remembered, lived and shared. She is a survivor of her gentle war, a reporter from the front lines."

In the introduction to her book Inu and Indians We're Called, published in 1991 she said she tried to have a positive outlook on life and reflect that in her writings.

"When I was one of the winners in the Literary Competition of the Nova Scotia Writers Federation, I remember thinking, 'now my people will think, if she can do it, so can I.'"

Last summer, while I was filming a documentary on Mi'kmaq life in Nova Scotia with director Terry Fulmer, we were invited to shoot a segment on Eskasoni home care at the home of Rita Joe. Her family graciously allowed us to film their mother being treated for her Parkinson's disease, but the illness had progressed to the point where we felt that to show her in that condition would serve no purpose.

But despite the illness, she continued to write, and her daughters found October Song on her typewriter.

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