

The Contributions of Elders in Education

Mr. Speaker, as the Minister of the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, I would like to take a moment to honour our Northern elders.

Elders hold a special place in our society. They are the foundation of our culture and our spiritual and cultural leaders passing traditional knowledge and skills through generations. They are the professors of tradition, and like teachers, spend much of their time in the classroom working with students. It is important that young people see them in the community, which is why many of our schools prominently display their images and works.

There are a few people who I would like to recognize specifically. In Fort Smith, Jane Dragon is highly involved in education and preserving languages as a past board member for the Northern Life Museum, Canadian Museum of Nature, and the Western Arctic Leadership Program.

Former counsellor Florence Barnaby of Fort Good Hope works to promote healthy lifestyles free of drugs and alcohol, and works closely with women in abusive relationships.

Inuvik translator Leonard Harry was awarded the Community Language Leader Award in 2003 for his translations in media and at culture-based activities.

I am glad we have so many great elders for our students to look up to. You can often find Elders in our schools leading cultural camps, sharing stories, preparing traditional crafts, and giving advice to students. They teach the significance of being grounded in culture and the importance of education.

Earlier this month, Margaret Vandell of Fort Providence helped students from Deh Gah School and Bompas Elementary School through the rites of passage. As well as helping with culture camps, Margaret is well known for her passion for language, love of the land, and passing on the knowledge of elders.

Elizabeth Mackenzie, who passed away this year, signified this commitment with the words “be strong like two people.” These were her last words, and when we honour them, we are better people for it. The legacy of Mrs. Mackenzie reminds us that while our cultural identities are important, we must also look to the future. It is hard to know how many lives Mrs. Mackenzie touched in her 91 years. In 1991, her name became synonymous with education when we named the Behchoko elementary school after her.

This year also saw the loss of Philip Zoe. Mr. Zoe modeled the traditional way of life and the importance of combining values from our past with the realities of modern life. When talking to those who were close with him, the first thing people mention is his commitment to traditional education. He was a constant presence in schools and cultural camps, sharing stories and his love for traditional crafts. Today Philip Zoe and his wife Bella are honoured as the new culture room at the Jean Wetrade School in Gameti has been named after them.

Mr. Speaker, we are fortunate to benefit from the wisdom of our elders and their desire to share their knowledge with our youth. I know there are many elders in our communities who are committed to making a difference in the lives of young people and I am pleased to be able to recognize some of them today.

Masi, Mr. Speaker.