

BRINGING HOPE AND HEALING TO FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

SGI Canada member Constance Brissenden met her partner Larry Loyie five years ago while teaching a creative-writing class at the Carnegie Community Center in Vancouver. Larry, of Cree First Nations descent, was involved in volunteer work promoting literacy at the center. In pursuit of his lifelong dream of becoming a writer, he attended Constance's workshop. Two years after he participated in this workshop, Larry had written his first play, *Ora Pro Nobis* (Pray for Us), which is based on his painful childhood experiences in a residential school in northern Alberta. Like many other First Nations children in Canada, Larry was separated from his family at an early age and forced to attend a residential [public] school. There he was forbidden to speak his birth language or practice the spirituality of his people. He was also subject to verbal and physical abuse.

A theater major with a specialization in playwriting and directing, Constance felt that Larry had an important message to convey in his writing about First Nations people, and she was able to help him with his play. She directed productions of *Ora Pro Nobis* in Vancouver, Toronto and in Larry's home community in northern Alberta.

Larry has gone on to write *No Way To Say Goodbye*, commissioned for the Kinuso, Alberta, First Nations AIDS Conference held this May, and *Fifty Years' Credit*, a work in progress dealing with the media's view of native life.

Constance and Larry have continued to work together on various teaching and writing projects. They have just finished writing a children's book, *As Long As The Rivers Flow*, which will be published in Toronto, and are currently working on a guide to native traditions.

In addition to collaborating on writing projects, the couple also works together in First Nations communities, often as volunteers. Since 1990, Larry has traveled extensively, researching First Nations traditions and literacy issues. Now Constance frequently accompanies him on his speaking engagements before students and native groups. She helps organize presentations and co-teaches creative-writing workshops.

Working in the First Nations community has been a gratifying experience for Constance. As a non-First Nations person she felt awkward at first, but her Buddhist practice helped her overcome her self-consciousness and connect with people on a life-to-life basis. As a result, she has made many treasured friends in the native community.

When Constance joined the SGI in 1978, she had finished her graduate studies and was working as an editor in charge of play publication for a playwrights' union. In spite of her accomplishments, she says, "I felt like a disappointment to my family and friends. I didn't have much depth. When I scratched the surface of myself, I was very shallow, without the inner resources needed to struggle and succeed, or to support others in their difficult times."

Now, after 20 years of Buddhist practice, Constance is proud of herself. In addition to being author of more than 1,500 feature stories and seven nonfiction books, having worked as managing editor and head writer for Expo 86, as a writer for CKVU television in Vancouver and being a teacher of creative and business writing, she has found the energy and commitment to support Larry in his work to help the First Nations people.

Given the different social and cultural backgrounds, in which they grew up, it was unlikely that Constance and Larry would ever meet—let alone become life partners. Larry, named Oskiniko (Young Man), was born in Slave Lake, Alberta, to a traditional Cree family. He attended three years of public school before being taken from his family at age 10

Title: Bringing Hope And Healing To First Nations People

Subject: Living Buddhism 08/99 v.99 n.8 p.40 LB9908p40 Canada

Author:

Keywords: Bringing Brissenden Canada Community Constance Difference Diversity Experiences First Healing Hope Larry Loyie Making Nations People Tolerance Writers

and placed in a residential school. At the age of 14, he began working on farms and logging camps.

After joining the Canadian Forces, he spent two years in Europe and then returned to Alberta where he spent more than 25 years working as a fisherman, longshoreman, logger and native counselor. Then a knee injury in 1984 made it impossible for him to continue doing heavy outdoor work. While recovering from knee surgery in Vancouver, he found himself doing a lot of reading at the Carnegie Community Center library, where he met Constance.

In fact, it is not surprising that Larry could make the shift from laborer to writer. After he left school at the age of 14 and began working as a logger, Larry became an avid reader. He recalls, "I read everything in the bunkhouse. Because of my age, I could not participate in what the other workers were doing on weekends.... When I first saw the Carnegie Center's poster about a free creative-writing class, I realized that I had always wanted to write."

Larry has used his ability as a writer to heal his personal wounds as well as the wounds of his people. He says: "A lot is required for native people to heal. What we went through in the residential schools will not be resolved in my generation or the next. For native people, writing—whether it be traditional stories or life experiences—is a good way to ease the pain. It helps others understand who we are and what we went through. It's a way to share our traditions and our healing journeys."

Larry feels a deep sense of gratitude to Constance and the SGI. He says: "The SGI has filled a void in my life.... Every time I hear the philosophy of the SGI, especially the letters of Nichiren, I think deeply of their meaning.... After going to a meeting with Constance, I feel very fresh and clear.... We usually continue to talk about the topics on the way home. I appreciate my partner and am thankful that she has let me join her in her endeavors."

Constance also feels deep gratitude to Larry for allowing her to share in his life with the First Nations people and for giving her the chance to grow as a person. Both she and Larry have had to work through many of the problems that come with a cross-cultural relationship, and they continue to struggle with cultural differences that impede mutual understanding. Larry explains: "A non-native person will have a hard time understanding the way we think. Our culture is so different. Most people perceive native culture as something from Hollywood films when it is really nothing like that at all."

Both Larry and Constance have no disagreement when it comes to the philosophy of the SGI, however. They both feel that the SGI has helped them shape meaningful, fulfilling lives. Constance says: "Looking back, I see that I have come a long way from my early days in Vancouver in 1983. I had no money and little experience as a writer. Today I have a steady freelance job with British Columbia Transit. My contract is flexible, and I take time off whenever I want. In this way, I can continue to work with Larry in the native communities whenever the opportunity arises. I truly enjoy my life and appreciate every minute. I feel confident and hopeful every day and embrace every new experience as a chance to give something back to society."

As Larry and Constance build a beautiful legacy together, they continue to bring hope and inspiration to the First Nations people. They can be reached at livingtradition@bc.sympatico.ca ☐

(From the July 1999, *SGI Quarterly*)