

Christy Bressette answered these interview questions in 2013 and her responses were presented in the exhibition *Shine: Spotlight on Women of Lambton*.

When did you know that you wanted to pursue a career in education?

Growing up as an Anishinaabe person, I have been surrounded by educators for my entire life where everything we did as a people was framed within the objective of ensuring a better life for the next generations to come. The best way to prepare the next generation for survival is to equip all learners with the skills and knowledge required to 'succeed', within the fullest sense of the term. Within in the Anishinaabek culture, since the 'success of one, becomes the success of all,' teaching and helping one another is paramount. Everyone helps each other, shares, and passes important information down to the next generation. Growing up within a culture that values the family, the earth, and all creation, meant that the value of education, as tool to sustain and empower many, was highly regarded. With so many life-teachers positively influencing my life, I knew that a career in education would be right for me.

I knew for a long time, even while I was a child in public (First Nation integrated) elementary school that my frame of reference and cultural background was different from the mainstream dominant culture at school, but it wasn't until I was in grade 7 that I came to realize that "different" didn't have to mean inferior. Through my science presentation on fish and traditional fishing practices of the Anishinaabe to my mainstream classmates, from an Anishinaabe cultural perspective, I brought a deeper appreciation for all of creation through a wholistic teaching style that included the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical realms. When I witnessed many of my non-native classmates and teacher considering the value of life and existence beyond merely physical realms for the first time, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher and help show the world a different way of knowing and being.

Can you talk a bit about your doctoral dissertation, *Understanding Success in Community First Nation Education Through Anishinaabe Meno-Bimaadziwin Action Research*, and the accomplishment of being the first Indigenous student at Western University to graduate with a Ph. D. in Educational Studies?

My PhD dissertation was the sum of my own wrestling with education for Indigenous peoples up to that point in my life. Largely, my PhD dissertation was an extension of my M.Ed. research (*The Importance of Native Control of Native Education within Native Communities*), and my M.Ed. was influenced by the struggles and ignorance I faced

daily within my undergraduate university experiences and general mainstream society in relation to negative attitudes toward and about Canada's First peoples.

Understanding Success in Community First Nation Education Through Anishinaabe Meno-Bimaadziwin Action Research (Abstract)

As involuntary minorities within their own ancestral lands, Canada's First Nation people have experienced trauma within western-based education systems such as federal residential and day schools, public, and independent schools, which has resulted, in many cases, in social devastation and economic disparity. An indigenous and community approach to education and research promises to provide a solution to such intergenerational problems.

This research provides compelling evidence that improvement to First Nation education is possible when initiated at the local community level. This is an important discovery as most non-native policies and initiatives designed to improve education for native people have failed. A community-based culturally relevant definition of success in education has been demonstrated to bring about increased levels of critical awareness that provide incentive for an informed response that contributes toward improvements to education for First Nation people at the community level.

This research involved my entry into the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation community as a researcher, possessing both "insider" and "outsider" status, initiating relationships with people based upon our commonalities of culture and roles in society. In efforts to facilitate increased awareness levels in response to areas of difficulty within education, I facilitated a community-based inquiry using a culturally-based methodology that I have termed *Anishinaabe Meno-Bimaadziwin* Action Research.

The results were successful in that participation within the community-designed and community-driven research led to increased awareness and incentives for transformative action in education at levels that surpassed community involvement within other initiatives that were not community-based. The results of this research provide insight into the potential that exists within a First nation community to devise culturally relevant solutions to challenges that occur within education. These findings support the validity and effectiveness of community-based development and initiatives in education, and on other areas of local community development within First Nation communities. These findings provide

a strong argument in favour of increased native jurisdiction and self-government initiatives at the local community level.

Can you tell me about your involvement on the Board of Education at Kettle and Stony Point?

I have been involved formally with the KSPFN Board of Education, which later evolved into a community based committee, directly for over 15 years, but connected to community-based education for most of my life. During my time as chair of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation Education Committee, I was pleased to help oversee numerous historical advances for our community and students, namely the successful negotiation of the *Education Services Agreement* between The Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation and the Lambton Kent District School Board and new partnerships forged with The Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF) and the Martin Indigenous Education Initiative (MAEI).

Education Services Agreement between the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation (KSPFN) and the Lambton Kent District School Board

The evolution of an improved relationship between our community, KSPFN, and the local public school board, led to the signing of the Education Services Agreement:

Respect, collaboration, reciprocity of information, and a quality, accurate, and balanced perspective within education are essential building blocks for healthy relationships. Premised upon that intent, members of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation Education Committee are excited and expectant about a renewed relationship with the Lambton-Kent District School Board signified today through the signing of a new Tuition Agreement" says Dr. Christy R. Bressette, Chair of the Kettle and Stony Point Education Committee, and former alumina of North Lambton Secondary School (NLSS). She continued, "As members of the Education Committee, we recognize that purposeful investments in education today are strong investments for the future and we support a renewed relationship with the LKDSB toward that end. (Lambton Kent District School Board – News Release, Oct. 14, 2010).

The Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF) and the Martin Indigenous Education Initiative (MAEI)

The Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF) and the Martin Indigenous Education Initiative (MAEI) have joined with the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation (KSPFN) in the development of a unique and culturally based multi-year literacy project to model the recommendations of *With Our Best Future in Mind*, the report outlining the implementation of full day learning and a child and family services system in Ontario:

On behalf of the KSPFN Education Committee, Dr. Christy R. Bressette, Chair, echoes the sentiments expressed by the Chief: "Our entire community welcomes this venture and anticipates moving this project forward toward the establishment of a unique literacy model to help ensure that all Indigenous learners have every opportunity to succeed, having been grounded upon a solid literacy foundation (Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation website: <http://mwmccain.ca/>)"

What opportunities do you see in Indigenous education in southwestern Ontario, and what challenges do you see? Are these different from elsewhere in Ontario?

- Having a good working relationship with the local public school board is and will continue to be key moving forward as we continue to strive for improved educational outcomes for Indigenous learners.
- Kettle and Stony Point First Nation is connected to and provides leadership to the *Indigenous Education Coalition*, in efforts to provide quality culturally-relevant support to 12 indigenous member communities. It also bridging the academic and achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This example of mutual respect and collaboration between all education stakeholders (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) toward a common goal of positive education outcomes for all students, concerning Indigenous education, should become a national model.
- Aazhoodena (Stoney Point First Nation) land will soon be returned to the people after the land was appropriated under the War Measures Act in 1942. The return of this land will provide the community with resources and a land base which will assist with the goal of returning to a place of sovereignty and self-sufficiency. Education will be key in preparing the next generation of people to rebuild the community from the ground up.

Your spirit name is interesting, Neta Noo-Ke Kwe (hard-working woman). Can you tell me a bit about when and why you received this name?

I received this name from my late grandfather, David Bressette in my early 30s. Unfortunately, since I had to leave my home community (Kettle and Stony Point First Nation) for schooling purposes, (11 years away to various universities), I didn't get a chance to spend too much time with him. So he waited until I returned and could observe my life, as a spirit name has to fit the person's spirit. I was honoured with the name that he chose for me, "Neta Noo-Ke Kwe." This is a name that not only honours me, but all of my ancestors - the ones who worked so hard to ensure that I would be successful today.

I believe that this name given was appropriate because as I reflect upon my own life, I have been "hard-working" in my ongoing pursuit to raise awareness of the history and rights of First Nations people, while at the same time "hard-working" to help facilitate successes within community-based education. Hence, the title of my PhD dissertation, *Understanding Success in Community First Nation Education Through Anishinaabe Meno-Bimaadziwin Action Research*.

Are there women in your life and community who influenced your career goals or outlook on education?

The women in my immediate family life have been every influential in that they have taught me about the importance of being a woman – givers and protectors of life, the family and how important it is that we help teach others about how to take care of the Earth, ourselves, and those ahead even as far as seven generations.

My paternal grandmother, Evelyn Rhea Johnson (1931-1989)

Despite the negative experience of being forcibly sent away to Indian Residential School, my grandmother Evelyn Johnson was one of the very few Indigenous women to serve her country during WWII war efforts in Canada. Although, as a First Nations person, she was mistreated by the government and suffered many abuses at the hand of racist policies, she felt such a responsibility to help safeguard the Earth and her family that she enlisted for service within the war efforts. Through her life-lived examples, my grandmother taught me about the importance of forgiveness, responsibility, duty to country and self, self-respect, and the responsibilities that we have as Anishinaabek people to the earth and to all people, in the spirit of conservation, stewardship, and unity.

My maternal grandmother, Eunice May Bressette (1925-1998)

My grandmother Eunice Bressette taught me about perseverance, commitment to family, and the importance of education. After school, my grandmother would always ask me what I learned at school, so she could help me better understand the lessons. I would share with her what was taught and she would always help me to try to make a relevant cultural connection to my learning, so it would mean more to me. Her gift to me was showing me that no matter what I had to do, I could do it, and I could enjoy it, if I had the right attitude and could find meaning in the work I had to do. I was able to use this strategy to help me succeed in school and in virtually every workplace and social setting.

My mother, Arlene Lou Bressette (1946 -)

My mother, Lou Bressette, has also greatly and positively influenced my life. I watched my mother raise me and my two sisters while working full time as a personal support worker. If that weren't enough, she then decided to study secretarial arts and then social service work at Lambton College. I was so proud of how she managed to raise all of us the kids, together with my father, get her education, help her daughters with their education, and work full time too.

Mom was a new generation of Anishinaabek woman – independent, formally educated, closely connected to the Anishinaabek culture and community, yet able to successfully navigate relationships within mainstream society.

Also impressive was her choice of work. She worked as the native liaison at the Sarnia Womans' Interval Home where worked to help Indigenous women and their families recover and start-over after suffering from relationship abuse. After years of dedication to the service of Indigenous women, she then decided to serve Indigenous youth and people with intellectual disabilities as the program manager of KSPFN Employment Services. Mom still works every day, in her 66th year, trying to help improve the lives of Indigenous people and thereby safeguarding the survival of future generations.

Mother taught me about the power of being women, and how to use that power to safeguard the family, community, and the Anishinaabek Nation. Everyone who encounters mom, comes away a better person for having known her. She is my personal hero and example.

Can you tell me a bit about your current position?

I am currently the coordinator for Indigenous Education with the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). CMEC is an intergovernmental body founded in 1967 by Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Education. Indigenous education has been a part of the work of CMEC since it was made a priority by ministers of education in 2004. Since that time, CMEC has:

- undertaken significant work in support of Indigenous education data collection and analysis;
- created a best-practices database for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education;
- begun work on teacher training as it relates to Indigenous education; and
- established an ongoing dialogue with national Indigenous organizations (NAOs) and with the federal government on a variety of Indigenous education issues.

Within my role at CMEC, I have also assisted with the planning of two unprecedented national gatherings:

- CMEC Summit on Indigenous Education (2009) brought together ministers of education and of Indigenous affairs, national and regional Indigenous organizations, federal government representatives, and other stakeholders to discuss issues related to Indigenous education.
- CMEC Educators' Forum on Indigenous Education (2011), which brought together educators and researchers from across the country to engage in face-to-face dialogue, exchange ideas with their colleagues and peers, and network on Indigenous early childhood and K–12 education.