

Equality fight dominates life's work

Bertha Allen, the recipient of this year's lifetime achievement award from the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF), was born in 1934 in the small community of Old Crow, Yukon, an area of the north made famous by Native writer Edith Josie.

Allen said that life in Old Crow was very traditional. It was an isolated community like many of the places where Aboriginal people live.

"Very seldom did you ever see a plane come in. Most times the only visitors we had were our relatives from Alaska that came by the river, usually in the summertime when they could travel by water.

"We had RCMP back as far as I can remember ... and their planes would come in occasionally."

It was in this environment that Allen grew up, so some might find it difficult to believe that she went on to become an accomplished communicator who rubbed shoulders with Canada's power-brokers in her work to champion the rights of women in this country.

"I come from a long line of leaders. I was raised by my grandparents, and my grandfather was a traditional chief. It was instilled in me as a young woman that I was to take that role on."

Allen is a member of the Gwich'in First Nation, and currently lives in Inuvik, N.W.T. In her role as an activist for social change, she has been a tireless promoter of equality rights for women.

Long-time friend Greta Bates said that whenever a Native voice was needed in Ottawa or elsewhere, Allen was the person people counted on. As a founding member of many organizations that promote the status and rights of women, she provided much leadership.

Allen is the former president of

the Advisory Council on the Status of Women of the Northwest Territories and the founding president of the Native Women's Association of the N.W.T. She is also a former president of the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Allen helped found the Northwest Territories Training Centre, where she worked as a life skills facilitator. The centre has been providing opportunities for Aboriginal people for more than 20 years.

Allen has also worked to improve health and social services for the people of the north through her participation as a member of the Territorial Hospital Insurance Services Board, the Inuvik Medical Transient Centre, and as an appointee to the Council of Grandmothers, an organization that advises the government of the Northwest Territories on health, wellness and social development issues.

Allen was a trailblazer in the struggle for Aboriginal and northern women's political equality. She served on the Northwest Territories' Constitutional Committee, the National Aboriginal Advisory Committee to the RCMP Commissioner, the Northwest Territories' Judicial Appointments



Bertha Allen, advocate for social change and women's rights, this year's winner of the lifetime National Aboriginal Achievement Award.

Committee, and the Multicultural Advisory Committee to the RCMP, and was the only woman to sit on the Commission for Constitutional Development, known more widely as the Bourque Commission.

Allen is the recipient of the Governor General's Award for the Commemoration of the Persons Case (1999), a Northwest Territories' Commissioner's Volunteer Award, highest level (1987), and the National Health and Welfare Canadian Volunteer Award (1987).

So what is Allen's secret for success?

Education, she insists.

"It's more important than in any time in our lives. In order to move forward, you have to have

many types of education. Education of the past, education of the future, and you also have to have a formal education. It is very important in order to walk forward in this world," she said.

Allen attended Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton, where she completed many courses in lifeskills, professional development, leadership training, business development, public relations and management.

Allen used these skills to further her aspirations. She credits an aunt and uncle with helping to mentor her.

"[They] were sent away to the residential school to get an education. So they were an inspiration to me."

And she has been an inspiration to others. Her work on women's issues has made life easier for countless others.

"There is still lots of discrimination towards women. It's not as bad as it was at one time, but it's still out there.

"Women have attempted to make many changes towards equality of men and women, and more so for Aboriginal women. Women always have to be on the alert that their rights are protected in our society ... You want equality in all phases of a woman's life, employment, in every move that you make," she said.

Allen said she is beginning to slow down—she is now retired from public life—and this has given her time to reflect on her accomplishments.

"As I age and reflect, I try to see what difference I have made in the lives of our people and the lives of our nation. I feel very pleased that I have played a part in making life better for people in our Aboriginal society."

Which makes receiving the lifetime Aboriginal Achievement Award such an honor, she said, because NAAF pays tribute to many accomplished people.

"It is nice to recognize those who have made a great

contribution to our society. Things just don't improve if we stay silent. A lot of us dared to make noise ... so that we can make changes and get a better life for our community," she said.

"As you age you look back to all what you have been involved with and you wonder if anybody will remember some of the hard work of our Elders, who have started these organizations. It is an honor that people who have a great respect for you put your name in to be recognized."

Allen told *Windspeaker* before attending the awards gala, held in Saskatoon on March 31, that she was excited that she would get the chance to see old friends and colleagues on the night of the ceremony. We asked her if she had any advice for the young men and women who are taking on the new challenges presented in the world today.

"My wish for young people is that they will continue to make sacrifices of themselves and get involved in making their own lives, and the lives of family and their community, a better place by getting involved in organizations. Because organizations are the ones that push government to meet our needs. You have to come up with solutions, just don't complain."

She said much has happened over her lifetime that has made life better for all peoples in Canada, and in particular, the people of the North.

"Collectively, we have addressed issues and political issues and economic issues at a community level and all these things are still being addressed.

"The younger generation that has taken over from where a lot of us have left off are still continuing and they have to be on top of issues to maintain services and improve the life of our Aboriginal people."

By George Young



Achievement is meant to be shared.

AMMSA thanks the many organizations that, by participating in this special publication, supported the vision that Aboriginal achievement is something to be shared with our entire community.

In this way we help assure continued achievement.

Windspeaker's coverage and profiles are available on-line at www.ammsa.com/achieve