

# Humble Olympian prefers the quiet life

She's been home in the Northwest Territories now for about five months, but has been skiing only a handful of times. Shirley Firth Larsson, former Olympian and this year's National Aboriginal Achievement Award winner for sport, said family comes first now. She admitted, however, the few times she's been on the trails, it's been heaven.

"It's so beautiful, like a dream to see all the trees with white crystals" Simple, poetic descriptions and quiet memories are what Firth Larsson still carries with her after an unprecedented 17 years on the World Cup circuit, a career that took her to four Olympics, not to mention competitions all over the world, and won her and her twin sister, Sharon, 79 medals between them.

"I don't talk about skiing whatsoever," Firth Larsson said. "I want to live a humble life. I don't want anyone to know me... That's how I want my children to be. Society puts so much pressure on people who are known."

The desire for anonymity could come from Firth Larsson's quiet beginnings at her first home in Aklavik. Born in 1953 and 10 minutes ahead of her sister, Firth Larsson said she had a happy childhood as part of a big family.

"What I always remember is when my parents were on the trapline," she recalled. "The things that come into my mind is when I would lie on the banks and listen to ice crystals, like chimes or bells in my mind."

Firth Larsson said she learned the ways of the land before she even went to school. She remembers her mother being a big influence on her, teaching traditional life and stories to the Firth children.

"She would take us out to snare rabbits and look at animal tracks—what they were. Things you don't learn today. It was part of life," Firth Larsson said. "That's like how people learned to read books; we were learning to read footprints."

It wasn't until she was 12 that Firth Larsson tried skiing for the first time. But once on the skis, she said she was in love.

"When I went skiing, I found it so wonderful. It was something you could do by yourself and use your own power," she said.

Her trainer, Father Jean Marie Mouchet, must have recognized that power too, in the Firth twins. He took Shirley and Sharon into his newly developed ski instruction program for First Nation youth. Firth Larsson said it was fun and exciting, but a lot of work as well.

"To begin with we didn't know how to ski. Normally you glide on your skis and we ran, which used up more energy than anything else," she laughed. "Once you understood that you had to train to win, once you set your mind to it, then it was easier. But you had to really discipline yourself."

The Firth twins' first big competition was in 1969 in Alaska, and Firth Larsson said she remembers Father Mouchet and her coaches telling her that they'd be competing against an American



DEBORA STEEL

Shirley Firth Larsson — Achievement award recipient in the area of sports

Olympic athlete—and if they beat her, it would be really great.

"And then I remember beating her," she said. "Just by a couple of seconds and it upset her whole lifestyle because it was unheard of—especially by a Native girl. So that was pretty funny! And at the time you don't really think of being Native. Just the way it was. When you're on the starting line there's no color or size or anything, just the one who was the winner."

From that point on Firth Larsson said skiing got more serious for her and her sister. By 1972 they were competing in their first Olympic games, in Japan, alongside five

other Canadian skiers from the MacKenzie Delta.

When the Firth sisters finished their first games without a medal, Firth Larsson said she felt like the whole country was disappointed.

"I think we didn't live up to the Canadian expectation. People on average wanted you to be a winner, and we let down a lot of people," she said.

But she also remembers the rush and excitement that led her and Sharon to continue competing. In the years that followed they went to three more consecutive Winter Olympic Games, setting a record for female athletes in Canada. Firth Larsson also had her best placing at a World Cup event when she came in fourth. At the Olympics her best showing was 21st.

Although they competed in nearly every race together, Sharon said they both celebrated each other's victories.

"When you're an athlete you compete against yourself. And as long as you know you've done your training and your homework and your preparation you can't really let the other person race for you," she said.

"When Shirley won it was good; when I won it was good. We fed off each other."

In 1984 Firth Larsson competed in her last Olympics, in Sarajevo. A year before she had married Jan Larsson, a man she met through skiing, and wanted to step out of the spotlight and start a family.

"I moved to France and didn't have to live up to anyone's

expectations," Firth Larsson said. "I lived a quiet life and nobody knew I was an athlete and I didn't tell anybody I was an athlete. I lived in a small little town and had people making friends with me as me, and not as someone known."

Firth Larsson said she loved skiing, but it's not a lifestyle she wants for her three daughters, with whom she doesn't even talk about her life in sport.

She doesn't want to talk much more about her private life, her three children or her husband. What she will say is that last year two of her teenage daughters told her they wanted to learn more about their family, they wanted to move to where the Firth twins grew up—the Northwest Territories.

Firth Larsson said she was happy and excited to come home.

"I knew that one day or another I would move back," she said. "I had a feeling one day the children would want to know their roots. They decided to want to know it sooner than I expected it. That's why we're back here in Yellowknife because my daughters want to know where they come from."

Firth Larsson said she's honored to receive a National Aboriginal Achievement Award, and she wanted to dedicate it to all women, in particular mothers. She said raising strong children is what really deserves recognition.

Article by  
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# Belcourt gives Metis a new lease on life

Who better to receive the National Aboriginal Achievement Award in the area of housing than Dr. Herb Belcourt, who has spent the last 30 years putting roofs over people's heads.

"Well, I think it's just great," said Belcourt. "It's not everyday that you're recognized by your own peers."

This award recognizes Belcourt's dedication to providing homes for Metis families through the CaNative Housing Corporation, which currently has 165 houses in the Edmonton area. Over the years, CaNative has also provided daycare services and classes in urban life skills.

When *Windspeaker* asked Belcourt what he was like as a child, he said that he has never been a child, nor a teenager, "because it always about work."

For Belcourt, growing up in the 1930s with nine siblings, there wasn't much else to do but go to school and come home to work.

"I suppose that I have to give the credit to my dad and mom for their work ethics. When I left home, my dad gave me quite the lecture about saving my money for myself."

With a Grade 7 education, that's exactly what Belcourt did. In 1958 he ended up working for himself, and that was the beginning of Belcourt's multi-million dollar business.

The idea of creating a housing corporation was brought to



DEBORA STEEL

Herb Belcourt — Achievement award recipient for Housing

Belcourt's attention at a meeting in 1970 about the condition of homes for Aboriginal people, and "from then on, we really never looked back."

CaNative incorporated in 1971, under the guidance of Belcourt, his cousin Orval Belcourt and friend Georges Brousseau.

"In the past, people questioned our motive. They felt that it was our intention to become millionaires over this housing deal, but I told them that was not the intention," said the 74-year-old resident of Sherwood Park, a bedroom community east of

Edmonton. "We've been kicked at from every angle, from our own Native people and from the federal government.

Maybe it came from the Native politicians. I have no idea, but it came from within, that we were going to take and run with all of this money and that was the biggest fear that they had. They audited our books, and you have no idea how many times. They could never find anything wrong, and we kept excellent books."

There may have been many doubts from the government and others but he has proved to be a leader, a respected role model and dedicated businessman. This has shown through in the many awards and accomplishments he has garnered.

He has been the recipient of the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal for Community Service (1977), the Premier's Leadership Award from the Province of Alberta (1999), the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2003 and now the National Aboriginal Achievement Award.

As well as housing, Belcourt and his colleagues have looked to better the lives of Aboriginal people through education funding with the Belcourt Brosseau Metis Awards, donating \$13 million to help further education for Metis people. These awards were developed after the liquidation of CaNative in 2002.

"We've got something like \$14

million sitting in the fund today and it just sits there and earns interest," said Belcourt. "That's the money that we're using for scholarships and bursaries and this will go on forever. The money will never, ever, ever be depleted. These awards are directed at Metis students because First Nation students get help. Metis people don't get sweet tweet, so we felt that it was something we had to do for the Metis people."

His commitment and contribution to post-secondary education has not gone unnoticed, because in November of last year, Belcourt was honored by NorQuest College and its auditorium was named in his honor. This was the first official dedication NorQuest had ever undertaken.

"Many students come here, Aboriginal students in particular come here to get their high school back on track, or they look at getting the skills they need to further education in either a specific career or trade," said Dr. Wayne Shillington, president of NorQuest College. "That's what we were recognizing when we named the auditorium that day. It was to recognize the scholarships that Belcourt had committed so students could pursue their goals."

For the past three years, the long-time local business entrepreneur, volunteer, and community leader has donated more than \$100,000 to the college to help fund

programs and student endowments.

Through CaNative, Belcourt has donated dollars to Athabasca University, the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, Grant MacEwan College, Native Counseling Services of Alberta and to Edmonton Catholic Schools.

"He is such an incredible person with a great deal of passion and compassion," said Frits Pannekoek, president of Athabasca University. "He's one of the warmest people you will ever meet who is interested in everyone and everything around him and he's particularly interested in people who are trying to move ahead. He's interested when people need help and he's always there to try to encourage, nurture, and push a little in the nicest possible way."

Belcourt is amazed at all of the honors and recognition he has received lately, but he remains humble because he said he is "here to do something to help people, and not himself."

"There are a lot of Native people who are ashamed to be Native and they shouldn't be. They should be proud of who they are because if you're proud the world will be proud with you."

Article by  
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