

Beloved radio and TV host inspired many

Myra Cree is the recipient of the 2006 National Aboriginal Achievement Award in the media and communications category. For more than 30 years she made outstanding contributions as a radio and TV host for CBC's French network and was an inspiring role model.

Myra acknowledged the honor several days before she passed away on Oct. 13, 2005. It is the first time that the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation has honored a recipient posthumously. Her daughter, Myra Cree-Bernier, went to Vancouver to accept the award on her mother's behalf.

Myra Cree was born in 1937 into the Mohawk community of Oka-Kanesatake near the Lake of Two Mountains, 53 kilometres west of Montreal.

Myra always loved words, especially the spoken word, and had a deep passion for the French language.

"After teaching for two years, Myra realized that her favorite moment was recess," chuckled Solange Gagnon, Myra's companion for the last 36 years. So, she turned her career towards journalism instead and found her true path in life.

Myra was first heard over the radio on CKRS in Jonquière in 1960. One year later, she joined Sherbrooke's CHLT TV station using the pseudonym, Myra Morgan. She gained a reputation for her intelligence, generosity, poise, humor and rigorous work habits.

She married lawyer Jacques Bernier in 1963 and had four children—Myra, Jacques, Martin and Isabel—in as many years. Her husband died in a car accident in 1969. Two years later, Myra returned to work at a time when very few women were working full time. From 1973 on, she became a mainstay at Radio-Canada, CBC's French-language network.

With *Actualité 24* in 1974 and the *Téléjournal* in 1975, she became the first woman in the history of Radio-Canada to host

the evening news. In fact, she was among the first women in North America to anchor evening news programs, as was Jan Tennant of CBC's *The National* out of Toronto and, in 1976, ABC's Barbara Walters in the United States. Myra Cree's work helped to blaze a trail for women in the media.

Yves Bergeron was assistant producer at Radio-Canada when he first met Myra.

"She was very confident in her talent as a woman, as the first one on the air in 1974. She was so confident, in fact, and knew what she was good at and what was good for her, that she didn't even do the standard audition for the position and she got the job."

Bergeron recalled how "she had an exceptional ability to see things from the outside and be very sure of herself. She could uphold her opinions and yet express them in such a manner as not to offend anyone."

From 1978 to 1984, she ran the religious affairs magazine, *Second Regard*. Her warm voice and clever turn of phrase caught the interest and deep admiration of her audience. From 1985 until her retirement in 2002, she was on the radio for Radio-Canada with *L'Embarquement pour si tard* and *Cree et chuchotement*.

"Myra was appreciated by everyone," said Bergeron. "So much so, that absolutely everyone from the network was at her retirement party."

Cree's life and work inspired Radio-Canada host, Monique Giroux, also from Oka.



Myra Cree — Achievement award recipient in media and communications

"She really was a role model for me. She was like a sister, best friend and professional mother to me. Those who were fortunate enough to have met her were fortunate indeed. I sincerely believe that."

Myra's brilliant career brought her professional recognition and public affection. The Quebec Federation of Professional Journalists awarded her with the Judith Jasmin Prize for outstanding work in radio-journalism in 1981. She became a Knight of the *Ordre national du Québec*, the province's highest award, in 1995. In 1997, Myra won the Humor Prize for Radio Montreal. In 2004, she was awarded the Paul-Gilson Grand Prize from Public Radio Stations of French-speaking communities.

As for Myra's greatest involvement in her community, daughter Myra feels it was her mother's lifelong commitment to improving local governance, promoting peace and justice,

fighting crime and encouraging dialogue between members of the community as well as between Natives and non-Natives.

"The shock of the Oka crisis in July 1990 led to a sort of awakening for Myra," explained Gagnon. Myra Cree-Bernier said "My mother was always proud to be Mohawk and she didn't believe in violence." Cree-Bernier explained how her mother helped found the Movement for Justice and Peace at Oka-Kahnesatake, an

organization created to bridge the gap between Native and non-Native people in the Montreal region.

"There were about 20 of us in the movement when it was founded and my mother became president. She believed in developing peaceful ways of resolving problems."

Myra was proud to be the daughter of elected Grand Chief Ernest Cree and granddaughter of traditional Grand Chief Timothy Ahiron, according to André Dudemaine, Innu founding member of Land Insights (*Terres en Vues*). He felt that this heritage helped her to believe in merging traditional Mohawk government with more modern forms.

"She was a citizen of her community and also of the world," said Gagnon. Myra believed the future lay in cultural diversity and in opening up as many horizons as possible.

In 1991, she edited *Native*

Languages of Quebec, a book that heightened interest in language preservation. She wrote that Mohawk should be valued and spoken more by young Mohawks to prevent cultural extinction of her proud nation.

Myra hosted segments of Montreal's First Peoples' film and video festival starting in 1988. In 1995, she co-chaired the campaign of the 25th anniversary of *Recherches amérindienne au Québec*, a Quebec edited magazine devoted to Native studies in North America. She served as president and spokesperson for Land InSights, an organization that encourages and promotes Aboriginal culture and talent as part of the annual Montreal First Peoples' Festival. She worked hard to obtain grants for its projects.

"Myra Cree had been Land InSights' board president since the founding of our organization," Dudemaine explained. "Myra was a dependable ally, a sincere friend and an inspired spokeswoman."

"She made us laugh so much. That was really important. Whenever we found a clever turn of phrase or word, she would give us a dollar. But if she gave us two dollars, wow, then you'd be really happy because you must have said something really amazing," he laughed.

Myra Cree was a trailblazer in many ways. "Her tenacity as an Aboriginal woman in the predominantly non-Aboriginal, non-female world of media was unprecedented," said Quebec Native Women's President Ellen Gabriel, a Mohawk from Myra's community.

"She really was a true role model. Here was a Mohawk woman in a French-speaking milieu who never forgot her identity and her small community. Her work at CBC modified the representation of Aboriginal people in the media."

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