

Wendy Grant-John

Building on her legacy of leadership

A woman's worst enemy in her efforts to achieve greatness, said Wendy Grant-John, a recipient of the 2006 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards, is herself.

"The biggest obstacle women have is accepting the notion that they are second-class citizens, that they are not equal to men when they walk into a room," said Grant-John, three-term Musqueam First Nation chief and this year's award recipient in the Community Development category.

Grant-John, the first woman elected regional vice-chief to the Assembly of First Nations, credited her upbringing for giving her the confidence to compete in a man's world.

"Believing in myself came from the people who raised me," she said. Her father, Willard Sparrow, and grandfather, Edward Sparrow, were also Musqueam chiefs.

"I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that is proud of who we are as Musqueam people. That respect and grounding in my own culture gave me the strength to never feel that the non-Aboriginal community is any better, or that they owe me anything.

"My father used to tell me 'there's no such thing as can't. You can do anything you set your mind to,'" she recalled. So it came as quite a shock to realize her gender was an issue for some people when she ran for national chief of the Assembly of First Nations in 1997.

"I never experienced it growing up, as Musqueam chief or B.C. vice-chief."

What she does know first-hand is the damaging effects of racism to Aboriginal people. Among the first group of Aboriginal children to attend public schools, Grant-John said growing up in Point Grey was "the worst years of my life."

"But I wouldn't change a thing because it helped me understand what it feels like to be treated as a second-class citizen, to be poor in a rich neighbourhood, to have racist comments made about you. I don't think you could represent Aboriginal people unless you've been through that, and I went through it in spades. It was real, it was palpable, and it was horrific."

The high school that saw Grant-John tormented by fellow students now has a First Nations program thanks to her pioneering work with the Vancouver School Board, and the treatment of Aboriginal people has generally improved. But another form of discrimination is quietly rearing its ugly head, said Grant-John.

"Other minority groups see us as undeserving of the recognition we have fought so hard to achieve. They regard us as having 'special rights,' because of a lack of knowledge about our history; and because they aren't being acknowledged the same way," she said.

Grant-John's keen sense of the inter-cultural discord may be attributed to an illustrious career bridging both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments. As Musqueam chief, she launched the first Aboriginal commercial fishery in Canada and led her community to win two landmark Supreme Court cases that solidified Aboriginal rights in the Constitution.

Her stint as associate regional



Wendy Grant-John — Achievement award for community development

director-general for the department of Indian and Northern Affairs also gave her rare insights into some unique challenges.

"There is good will on both sides," said Grant-John. "But there is a lot of ignorance and misunderstanding in the non-Aboriginal government about who we are and how we operate according to our traditions.

"There's also a lack of understanding on our part, of how the non-Aboriginal government operates, its structure and inability of individuals to make a difference.

"As a result, the individuals in the non-Aboriginal government who want to do something end up getting all the flack and judgment by Aboriginal people," said Grant-John. "When in fact the structure itself is the problem."

Grant-John said the chronic disrespect for Aboriginal elected

officials just fuels the fire.

"Our chiefs deserve to meet with the decision makers, but are instead sent to front-line workers. That inability to bring balance and equity to negotiations is a huge problem."

Quick to admit that her career came at a no small cost to her family life, Grant-John said the sense of social responsibility flowed in her veins. The Sparrow family has so far produced six elected chiefs, including Grant-John's uncle, brother and sister.

"Growing up, it was clear that for my father, everything revolved around taking care of business for the community," she recalled. "My children were very young when I was first elected chief, so they went through what I did with my father, where I was gone all the time.

"I kept saying to them—and to myself—that the benefits to the greater community would be worth it in the long run. Now they're adults and they're coming to that realization. But when you're living through it, it's hard to leave the dinner table or cut short a holiday with your family to attend to your community. It's a huge sacrifice."

Even during the toughest of times, Grant-John said she could always count on her mother for support and inspiration. Born of Scottish parents, Helen Sparrow was the first non-Native woman to live on the Musqueam reserve, where she raised 10 children, sometimes under conditions a far cry from what she was used to.

"For the first six years, we had no running water, no electricity, no heat. She gave up who she was and became part of who my dad was, allowing us kids to grow up surrounded by our own culture and value system," said Grant-John.

"She told us that even if we walked off the reserve, nothing can change the fact that our skin

is brown, and that it was up to us to be a part of both worlds without losing ourselves as Aboriginal people."

The National Aboriginal Achievement Award adds to Grant-John's growing list of accolades, including the YWCA Women of Distinction Award for Social Action and an honorary doctorate of Law from Royal Roads University.

"I hope this award makes her feel like 'Yeah, I did a good job,'" Grant-John said of her mother. "I know it's a cliché but she's always proud of every accomplishment of every one of her children."

Not surprisingly, Grant-John said her greatest achievement isn't marked by a trophy.

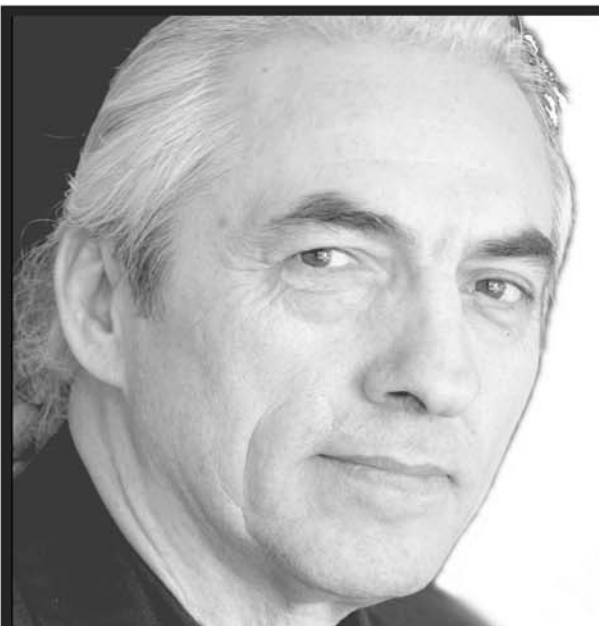
"When I spend time with my grandchildren, I'd show them the longhouse and talk about what life would have been like for our ancestors. And I'd stop and say 'You know, now.' Just like my grandmother used to say to me.

"To me, that's my proudest achievement, being able to share the knowledge of my culture with my grandchildren in a confident way."

While officially retired from public office, Grant-John said there's no quitting politics, even as she operates a seafood market and deli that highlights Aboriginal products. The Longhouse Seafood Market on Dunbar Street in Vancouver, said Grant-John, is the first step in a long-term vision to showcase Aboriginal traditions and excellence, to break down barriers and to provide coastal communities greater opportunities for economic development and self-reliance as the treaty process comes to fruition in the next years.

Article by
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This page made possible through sponsorship by The Assembly of First Nations.



On behalf of the *Assembly of First Nations* and *AFN Regional Chiefs*, I wish to congratulate the nominees and recipients of the **2006 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards.**

The Awards celebrate excellence among First Nations, Métis and Inuit. We honour the accomplishments of the recipients, who bring knowledge and strength to our people and communities and serve as role models for Aboriginal youth.

Phil Fontaine
National Chief



The Assembly of First Nations
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