

2023

Indigenous Nurses Day

Patrick Thomas' Career Healing In Detox Centres

Written By: Eagle Andersen

With a storied career treating patients in detox centres and various Canadian hospitals, retired Indigenous nurse, Patrick Thomas has a wealth of wisdom in healthcare.



Patrick Thomas, with one of his horses

Patrick Thomas was born on Lake Winnipeg's Black Bear Island in 1947. His father was a lighthouse keeper, and the isolation of the Island meant that supplies would be flown via float plane. Without power, the family often hunted and fished for food, for a time his father would even travel by dogsled.

When Thomas was six years old, his family moved to the neighbouring Matheson Island. It was there that he would first learn the value of healthcare after picking a lynx that he mistook for a housecat. Matheson Island's nurse treated him and gave him an early nursing memory

"I'm not sure how old I was. Probably seven or eight. I got clawed up pretty bad by a cat," Thomas recalled. "So she helped patch me up, the nurse there. The thing I remember most about that was that she gave me a bag of marshmallows."

A career in nursing

Thomas attended high school in Selkirk, Manitoba, where it was commonplace for many of the young men to work as nurses or orderlies at the local mental hospital. Thomas spent time working in the fishing industry and also delivered supplies to the Selkirk mental hospital in his younger years.

However, it was a stint working an extremely physically demanding job freighting up north that made him take the leap toward healthcare.

"It was a matter of months with no real time off. And I had to figure out an easier way to make a living."

Thomas enrolled in the Victoria School of Nursing's Diploma Program in Winnipeg, where he'd graduate in 1970. While there, he realized that nursing was a perfect fit for his skill set.

"I found that I could talk to people that were worried, anxious, and I think I had a bit of a knack of helping people find relaxation," Thomas said.

Thomas found employment at a hospital in Pine Falls, Manitoba. Early in his career, he felt that hospitals at that time were very well-equipped.

"I think at that time we were able to meet a lot more needs than we did and we did a decade or more later. We were given a little more, a little more time to do things. I think we had better staff-to-patient ratios at that time," Thomas said.

Although the staff was plentiful, Thomas definitely noticed issues with how Indigenous patients were treated by both staff and non-Indigenous patients.

"We got a lot of the patients from up north, and I think there was a racial divide between those patients and the non-native patients that came in. Not really overtly, but in a lot of little ways."

Thomas worked in Manitoba during the 1970s in medical wards and with geriatrics primarily. In 1980, he moved to Vancouver where his first job was working in the extended care unit at UBC. Thomas had a major workload during this time.

"The first three days of my job were supposed to be orientation work," Thomas recalled.

"Each wing had 21 or 22 residents and a nurse was supposed to look after one wing. On day three, I got to work and discovered that the person who was supposed to be handling my orientation had called in sick. They had no replacement. So I had my wing plus another wing with basically a double workload on day three. And that was pretty much my workload for the couple of years that I worked there."

Following this period in the early 80s, Thomas transitioned to working in detox centres. He found great success in this field, starting in the sobering unit before eventually earning a supervisor position. He even was involved with staffing for the Salvation Army for a time. Excluding a brief stint supervising a methadone clinic, Thomas would play a crucial part in creating detox treatments and programs that were well ahead of their time.

“We used a lot of alternative therapies,” Thomas recalled. “We also began the Smart Recovery program, which was a non-spiritually based program based on the cognitive behavior therapy program”

These therapies often included acupuncture and energy healing, which helped a lot of people who hadn't taken to other forms of treatment prior.

Often treating Indigenous patients during his time working in detox, Thomas began to build a reputation for being someone who could really help those in the community.

“It was something when people would come in and they would say, *well, somebody told me I should go see the Indian nurse at the detox.* I thought that was pretty good. That there was word on the street that I got to be a help to people,” Thomas said.

The importance of Indigenous healthcare

Although, Thomas' cousin was a nurse, and some friends from his youth ended up being involved in healthcare, he never saw many Indigenous people in the industry for quite some time.

This changed when he became involved with the Aboriginal Leadership Circle. This allowed him to connect with more Indigenous Peoples from various communities and industries. During this period, he also spent time giving presentations throughout North America about the impact of racism.

“There are issues with racism within the system for the public view of our health care professionals, and their attitudes and beliefs about indigenous health care providers. That can only be changed by us going in and changing it,” Thomas said.

For Thomas, he feels that Indigenous Nurses Day is a good vehicle to celebrate Indigenous nursing and to show the younger generations that there are options in many industries.

“I think there is really a big need for something like an Indigenous Nurses Day,” Thomas said. The whole world is open there. If you decide that you want to do that.”

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