

2022

Indigenous Nurses Day

An advocate for healing: Jeannette Watts

By: Eogle Andersen

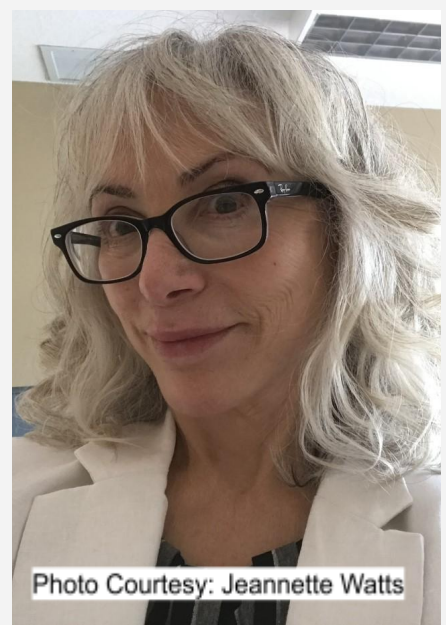


Photo Courtesy: Jeannette Watts

On April 10th, 2022 we recognize all Indigenous Nurses from across the province. Jeannette Watts is one such nurse who has had an immense impact on the field.

Jeannette Watts is the current Nurse Manager for the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council in Port Alberni, British Columbia. In this role, she's constantly advocating for cultural safety and innovation in the Indigenous nursing community.

She originally began working with the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council in 1982. However, the path of advocacy and healing that she has embarked on began long before she was even born.

A rich lineage

Jeannette's ancestry is very rich. Her Great Grandfather, Chief Francois Thomas Adolph was a very influential figure in the British Columbia interior region during the early 20th century. On behalf of La Fountain Indians, he was one of sixteen chiefs that signed the Declaration of the Lillooet Tribe on May 10, 1911.

This document was constructed to both assert the Lillooet Tribe's claim to their land, and reject recent actions and impositions of settlers in the area. He was also a member of the 1916 Delegation of the Indian Rights Association, which traveled to Ottawa.

Outside of his political endeavors, Chief Francois Thomas Adolph played an important role at home. He even raised several of grandchildren.

Jeannette explained, "my dad was raised by him, along with a lot of his cousins and they lived on a ranch out in 12-Mile, just outside of Lillooet. That's where they grew up."

These experiences on the 12-Mile ranch would have helped to shape her father, Leslie Adolph, into the man he became. His grandfather ingrained in him the value of hard work. This resulted in him living a full life, spending time in the Marines before finishing secondary school and college, before becoming a school teacher.

Jeannette's father played a huge role in her decision to pursue a career in nursing "My dad very much wanted to make sure his daughters were strong and independent."

"It was my dad who always encouraged me to get into nursing. He used to say to me, 'someday you'll be flying to different communities as a nurse' and I did. I did do that kind of work, where I was up north and evacuating people." she said.

Becoming a nurse

With her father's encouragement and her work ethic, Watts decided to pursue a career in nursing.

She enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at the University of Oregon. After graduation, she officially became a community health nurse in 1977.

It was during this time that Jeannette was able to make her father's vision a reality. The young nurse provided care for individuals in remote First Nation communities across northern British Columbia. The locations that she traveled to were often very isolated and had little access to expansive medical care.

After spending three in her role as a community health nurse, Jeannette made the decision to expand her education. She ventured to the University of Hawaii where she would earn her Master's in Public Health.

Following her time in Hawaii, in 1982 Jeannette joined Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council as a health program coordinator. Since then, she has spent the entirety of her career working with the Nuu-chah-nulth in various roles including both nurse supervisor and nurse manager.

This allowed her to be on the ground floor for some very important work. Jeannette has played a key part in developing countless nursing policies that teach nurses how to practice in a culturally respectful manner.

She is a strong advocate for respecting cultural safety in medicine. She was integral to the development of the Nu-chah-nulth nursing framework which focused on partnering with First Nations to deliver medical care that takes into account traditional and cultural factors

Inspiration and achievement

For this work, she was awarded the CRNBC Health Advocacy Award in 2001. Watts has had a very successful career so far and also earned the Phyllis M Baird Memorial Award and the Award of Excellence in Nursing Administration in 2004.

”To uphold the value of the Nu-chah-nulth people, they want to make sure that they get nurses who understand. If they’re not Nu-chah-nulth or they’re not First Nations, helping them understand the history, and why we’re at where we are and what we need to go forward.“

Although Jannette played a crucial role in helping improve nursing in the region, she said that there were many other exceptional Nu-chah-nulth nurses that she had the opportunity to work with

One such individual was the late Ina Seitcher.

“Ina Seitcher was originally from the Nu-chah-nulth community and she also roots in the interior Salish. Ina worked with Nu-chah-nulth for many years, and she led a lot of the developments we have that are very respectful of the Nu-chah-nulth values.”

“All the nurses - myself included learned a lot from the work of Ina.” she continued.

Indigenous Nurses Day is an important celebration that allows us to recognize the achievements and the effort put in by these hardworking individuals.

Jannette explained that in the fallout of the pandemic, it’s crucial to give Indigenous nurses recognition. “I think it's really very important.”

“It's happening, where there is much more visibility and recognition. When you think about what nursing has been through the last couple of years. That's just another example of why it's so important that we keep building up our staffing of Indigenous nurses.”

With the help of her colleagues, Jeannette is hoping to help develop some smaller schools of nursing in the future. Smaller, more locally based schools could better take into account local cultural values and expectations. They would be able to focus extensively on culturally safe practices.

As we recognize her work in the field, Watts continues to innovate. There certainly is still a lot of work to be done in the industry. However, with passionate people like Jeannette Watts working hard, the future of Indigenous nursing is encouraging.

