

2022

Indigenous Nurses Day

Western Canada's First Indigenous Nurse

By: Eogle Andersen

With a legacy that continues to live on to this day, Indigenous nurse, Rose Casper led a life full of healing and caring for others



Photo Courtesy: Casper Family

On August 23, 1934, in Xwisten (Bridge River), Rose Terry was born into a large family of 8 siblings. Although she grew up in Xwisten, like a lot of other Indigenous children at the time, much of her childhood was spent attending the Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS).

One of Rose's daughters, Audrey Casper, 59, said that even at the early age of 5, her mother remembered that feeling of waiting on the cattle truck to pick her up on the side of the road.

Although the distance from Xwisten to Kamloops is only around two hours, "it was a long ride because they had to go from community to community to pick up all the other kids," Audrey said.

Rose's oldest son, Larry Casper, 62, said his Mom rarely spoke to him about her experiences at KIRS.

However, Larry explained that "she was a top student. Newspaper articles indicated that she was at the top of her class in one of the areas. Probably with her good nature and personality, with her also being a good student [this likely] helped protect her from the things that she had seen around her.

Rose would spend eleven years at KIRS. She channeled her work ethic and academic talents to look for a way out.

Audrey explained "she would be sitting in grade ten math while the grade elevens would be learning in the same room. So she wanted to learn both" in order to graduate as soon as possible.

Her perseverance and effort paid off when she graduated from KIRS in 1952.

A path of healing

"She experienced a lot of seeing people sick, both at school and in the community, that really inspired her to enroll in the St. Joseph's school of nursing in Victoria," Larry said.

Rose excelled academically during her time at St. Joseph's. By the time she had completed her nursing certification in 1955 she had been awarded the prize of Best Clinical Nurse in her class and had secured employment as a registered nurse (RN) in Victoria.

This gave Rose Terry the title of the first Indigenous nurse in all of western Canada. Over the next few years, she would split her time between Victoria, Vancouver, and Lillooet as an RN.

In December of 1958, the young nurse became Rose Casper when she married Victor Larry Casper. Shortly after, Rose would secure employment in Shalalth, B.C. She remained serving the community for over 50 years in various roles including as a community health nurse (CHN) and as a home care nurse.

Throughout these next five decades, Rose's selfless nature was a constant in Shalalth and surrounding communities. With limited healthcare for a long time, she was often the first to respond in many situations.

Another one of her sons, Clifford Casper, 57, explained that she was always ready to help when needed, "that's the way that she was, she would never say 'no' to people."

The lack of other healthcare options in the region for many years meant that Rose was more than just a nurse. Often aided by the driving of her husband and his brother, Rose would also act as a first responder on many occasions.

"I remember her delivering babies on the road, delivering babies in speeders on the tracks, she would even [deliver babies] on the boats too, on the way to Lillooet. All hours of the night," Clifford recalled.

She was able to help people heal in a variety of ways.

“She acted as a social worker in a lot of cases,” often helping people deal with a variety of personal issues, Clifford recalled.

“She’d go see them, to check on them. There were other times when she’d be just listening to people. She had a good ear.”

Rose’s legacy

Although Rose passed away in November of 2021, her legacy of healing and selflessness will surely live on for a very long time.

One way in which her legacy endures is through the creation of the Rose Casper Healing Center in Tsal’alh. It was founded in 2003 and provides a variety of healing services to community members.

Rose was even able to break ground at the Healing Center, shoveling away the first scope of dirt at the site during construction. It was fitting that Rose was recognized by a community that she had given so many years to.

“She was quite honoured and she accepted the appreciation of the community. She worked hard for them,” Audrey said.

Another way in which Rose’s legacy exists is through her children. Rose and Larry Sr. brought a total of eight children into the world.

Although one of the children, Lorna, passed away at an early age, Rose’s children have been able to emulate her leadership and hard work.

This is evident through Larry’s time spent as Chief, and Clifford’s many years on the Band Council “We all went on to progress towards education and good jobs,” Larry explained.

“All of us are working... A lot of us serve on different boards like Community Futures or school boards,” he continued.

The siblings have found success in a variety of other fields like forestry, automotive repair, and accounting.

Several family members also followed in Rose’s footsteps by becoming highly certified in first aid. Including her son, Clifford, who even spent a decade as a first responder working with the BC Ambulance Service.

Larry also recalled his Mom putting a lot of emphasis on instilling the values of education and physical health. Two facets of life that are crucial to succeed in the medical field.

“Getting our vaccinations, brushing our teeth. All those things, looking after our physical well-being was another value that she shared with us. That’s looking after ourselves, the physical part,” he said.

Rose’s teachings and values will certainly live in through her children and their successes.

As Canada’s first Indigenous Nurse in all of western Canada, Rose Casper, and the impact that she had is recognized through the Indigenous Nurses Day celebration.

