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>> Just life.

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>> That's Elder in Residence Bertha Skye, this is the Extra Mile Podcast, and I'm your host Alise[Phonetic] Pippatone[Phonetic].

[Music]

Growing up in rural Saskatchewan with no formal education, Bertha Skye has lived many lives. She's been a cook in four residential schools, she's been a gold medal winner at the International Culinary Olympics. And her role now is as Elder in Residence at Mohawk College. In this show we talk about the challenges facing indigenous students today, and the importance of staying connected to your past. We also learn about Bertha's three dreams, seeing Niagara Falls, travelling the world, and why she never wanted to marry a farmer. Here's my conversation with Bertha.

>> I had a Cree mother, she was a full-blooded Cree, my father was a Metis. He had a Cree mother but a Scottish father.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And he was a descendant of Simon Fraser, and he was so smart, my father never went to school.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> My mother had grade four education. She went to residential school. And I was born during 1932 when there was a depression happening. And lived through the Depression, I was 10 years old when I – the war was over. So, during that time when the war was happening, it was – a lot of people were starving, they had no food, everything was rationed. And my mother and father didn't want to live on the reserve.

>> Yeah.

>> It – my father bought land off the reserve and that's where we were raised. We went to school with – this is when they didn't call them immigrants, they called them the settlers then.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> We had people from England, and Swedish, French, German, Dutch that moved into this area, and we went to school with them. And they had a difficult time coping with the weather, and they didn't know how to survive in this cold – cold weather, winter. And my parents had big gardens, and they showed us how to grow lots of potatoes and things that they would keep through the

winter like, cabbage, turnips, carrots, and onions. That was our food, we had root cellar.

>> Is this kind of rare?

>> So, in order to have – have all this –

>> Yeah.

>> All the family had to work. My – all the children, my siblings, we were taught how to work. And I was sitting in a garden daydreaming, one day when I get married, I will never marry a farmer. I don't want to do this all my life.

>> So, you knew at that age –

>> Yeah.

>> You don't want to be a farmer, but you're work ethic was there.

>> And one day I'm going to see Niagara Falls.

>> Yeah.

>> That's what I would say. Really three things I always wished for. I want to see the world, I want to travel, and –

>> And so, when –?

>> When I was 17 –

>> Yeah.

>> I – there was a job opening when the war was over. They turned the Army barracks into a residential school. And they had jobs posted, me and my sister applied, I was only 17 years old in 1949 I believed. And I wanted to be one of the cooks and I was hired.

>> So, this is where you started I mean –

>> Yeah.

>> Growing food –

>> I worked in four residential schools.

>> As a cook?

>> Yeah.

>> Can you talk about your experience as a cook –

>> Yeah.

>> In a residential school. And what were the things you did and saw?

>> Well, see, they had no buses then.

>> Yeah.

>> And they had to haul all the children in trucks. They'd go to the reserves, round up children, put them in trucks – in cattle trucks.

>> Wow.

>> That was an abuse and their hair cutting was an abuse. And – but we fed them good, because I cooked and all our food was government inspected.

>> What does that mean?

>> And it was good food.

>> It was government inspected before it came into the –

>> Well, yeah.

>> The school you mean, okay.

>> Yeah. So – but to see little children four years old –

>> Yeah.

>> Five, six, taken away from their mother for a whole year, you know, that was a form of abuse too, you know. When I think back, you know, but this was government, I had a government job, always had a government job. And I thought I was doing the right thing.

>> So, at the time did you recognize it –

>> Yeah. Yeah.

>> For what it was, or in retrospect?

>> Yeah, but I look back –

>> Yeah.

>> Oh, I was involved in that, you know, working in residential schools. My next job was Norway House, Manitoba, that was north end of Lakeland and Paige[Phonetic]. And that was a – like an Alcatraz, it was on an island. And there was no way anybody could get out, only by boat, you know.

>> So, people were trapped there?

>> So, kids couldn't run away, you know? That – I only lasted a year because it – I couldn't stay the – closed in on an island.

>> Yeah.

>> Then I went back to Prince Albert and worked in a school. And they posted another job at Moose Factory. And lo and behold I accepted, yes, I'll go.

>> Where's Moose Factory?

>> Moose Factory northern Ontario.

>> I didn't know that.

>> On James Bay. So – and at that time my husband was out of teacher's college.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And there was a position there to teach. At the same time he was sent there and I was sent there.

>> I'm guessing your husband is – wasn't a farmer.

>> It was the creator made our marriage there.

>> Okay.

>> You know, we met there, and we worked there for to two years and we got married. And he brought me to Six Nations.

>> So, this is where you've been –

>> My dream –

>> You're still at Six Nations?

>> My first dream.

>> Yeah.

>> And the first place he took me –

>> Niagara Falls.

>> Was Niagara Falls, and –

>> Was it everything you had dreamt of?

>> Oh yeah. Yeah. It was, you know, I used to dream about this, you know? And –

>> And there you are standing in front of it.

>> And my husband was a school teacher, I didn't marry a –

>> A farmer.

>> And then my other dreams started happening. No matter where I applied for a job I was hired, because of my work ethics, I had good work ethics. I was on time, always happy, I got a long with everybody. And –

>> When did you start cooking then? After residential school you were a team of a – you were with a team of indigenous chefs –

>> That was in '92.

>> Who won a ton of medals, how did that happen? How did you enter into these competitions.

>> They did a survey.

>> Okay.

>> Who would best qualify from across Canada from the East and West Coast, who would qualify to cook to enter in a World Culinary Olympics. And they said, they had these names from different provinces, and no matter where they applied, Toronto, Hamilton, London –

>> Yeah.

>> My name kept coming up, so –

>> You mean people were referring you.

>> Yeah. And one day I got a call from Ottawa, and they said, “How would you like to cook in the World Culinary Olympics?” Oh, I never heard of it before. Ooh, that would be great [inaudible]

>> Sure. So –

>> “Well, look, we’ll give you a call, another call another day.” And I told my husband, I said, some jerk called me from Ottawa, he wanted to know if I wanted to cook in the Olympics. And you know, I forgot about it then, you know. Next day I got a call, “Yes, you’ve been selected. Meet us at the Royal York tomorrow at 2:30.”

>> So, you had one day to prepare.

>> Yeah.

>> Mentally.

>> And oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh! “And we’ll fit you with a chef’s outfit, give you knives, and give you all the information.” And everything was falling in place so fast –

>> Was the first time you cooked in a competition then?

>> Oh, yeah. Yeah. I –

>> So, how did –

>> I just cooked in small ones –

>> Yeah.

>> Like baking pie and desserts, or I –

>> How many chefs –?

>> I had a catering business too later.

>> Oh, really? How many chefs were involved in the competition?

>> Five. Five of us.

>> Okay.

>> There was four men and myself.

>> So, how did it pan out?

>> Very good. I'm, you know with being a Cree from Saskatchewan, all of a sudden you're in Germany. And Germany, and it was – they had a big convention centre, the biggest place I ever saw. It was 14,000 cooks, they all had 8 by 8 kiosks.

>> Wow.

>> And it was 14,000 cooks, and –

>> So, how was it done? There was, like a gun was fired, everyone had to start cooking?

>> No. No, we did that at night. > Okay.

>> During the day we displayed our cooking.

>> And what did you cook? What was your – what was your dish?

>> We used [inaudible] native cuisine.

>> Yes.

>> Which was – you wouldn't believe what was our first gold medal.

>> I can't –

>> Guess. Guess. Anything.

>> I don't know. Was it your Three Sisters Soup?

>> No. No. A leg of rabbit.

>> Really?

>> A leg of rabbit. Nobody ever entered that before.

>> So, it was something unique.

>> Yes.

>> And did you use –

>> That's native cuisine with wild rice –

>> Native and traditional ingredients and methods?

>> [inaudible] heads, that's all native food. That was our first gold medal. You know, we couldn't get over it. We used [inaudible] food like Arctic char –

>> Uhn-huhn.

>> Muskoxes, buffalo, moose, what – you know, fish. Canada is rich in food.

>> Yeah.

>> We have the five great lakes all on the fresh water, more than any other country. And we have a lot to offer to the world, like wild rice. Now, that exploded, everybody's using it.

>> It's super fancy –

>> Yeah.

>> And gourmet now.

>> Yeah, it is. So, after – and my Three Sister Soup, the whole country's making it, you know, because it was entered in the World.

>> So, you accomplished your third dream. First, don't marry a farmer.

>> Yeah.

>> Number two, this is your life advice.

>> Yeah.

>>Number two, see Niagara Falls –

>> Yeah.

>> Number three, see the world. And now you are here as an Elder in Residence.

>> Yes.

>> You also work at Sheraton and McMaster.

>> Yes.

>> So, you're all over the place. You told me before you meet hundreds of people, so –

>> Oh, yeah..

>> You have to re-meet them every time you meet them.

>> Yeah.

>> What is your– explain the role of Elder in Residence for people that might not know. What do you provide for students and what do you do here at Mohawk College?

>> Well – I walk a mile for students, because I think so much has been taken away from them through residential schools. Their culture. Like, so many people don't know how to bead, work with leather, and that's a way of our people.

>> Mm.

>> And it's–

>> You have a whole table laid out here with different crafts –

>> Yeah. I did this for McMasters so I thought I'd do it again.

>> Yeah, what do you have –?

>> But this is what we do with – students, teach them –

>> Can you explain a little bit of what are the crafts that we have.

>> How to make things like this. It was nurses at Polytech, I used to go to Polytech too. And this one nurse, you know, had no food for lunch. "I'm low on funds", okay, come on over here. We start making earrings, any kind of earrings. These will sell for five bucks, and these will sell for 15.

>> Yeah.

>> Start making them, and that's what she would do. If she made three pairs, she would get \$15, that was her lunch money, you know.

>> So, you taught her how to –

>> Oh, yeah.

>> So, how to be self-sufficient in this way.

>> They get – they get really – the good beaders by the end of the year.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> You know.

>> And so, you're here Wednesdays throughout the day –

>> Oh, sometimes twice –

>> Sometimes –

>> Sometimes three times a week.

>> And students typically come and sit with you and just bead with you, or do they, you know –?

>> Just talk.

>> Open up and talk about things?

>> Tell stories.

>> What are the common struggles that you find our students have?

>> Racism.

>> Hmm.

>> Is – I would say that'll never go away.

>> What do you do to reassure students that want to quit or are up against some of these issues that you've talked about?

>> In order for a native person to follow their dream and succeed in a White man's world, we live in the native world. In order for them to succeed in our native world, we need our education.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> We have to correct what the government has done. And get our education, in a more responsible way – and not to be forced on us.

>> Yeah.

>> Do it at our own way.

>> Out of your own volition.

>> Yes. And it's up to the parents to teach their children and talk to their children. And so many parents today have no time to talk to their children, you know.

>> I find I talk to some of my colleagues, and they're surprised to know that residential schools have been in existence in recent history. And so, I imagine grandparents and parents of the students we see today probably have a very jaded or particular idea of what education is about. So, how do you talk to students about the positive aspects of being here?

>> They always want to know things – they're – my mother and father went to residential school, and we don't know anything about our cultures.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Or traditions, or ceremonies, or ceremonies for native people are really strong. We have four native medicines, cedar, sage, sweetgrass, and our Indian tobacco what we grow.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And without those – and if we use them, we pray to the creator. I mean the same god you – anybody has, Jesus, whatever Japanese calls their god, Chinese, it's all the same. But we pray in a different way. We use the animals, the earth, the trees –

>> Do you find a lot of students come and really are meeting with you to learn those things?

>> Yeah, a lot of it. And I smudge them, and explain what smudging does, and –

>> For the benefit of our listeners, could you explain a little bit about smudging and what that is?

>> Well, you could use cedar –

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Sage, sweetgrass, and the Iroquois use traditional tobacco, which is – they grow it themselves. And it – and you use – when you light it, you cleanse yourself, it's a spiritual thing. You use an eagle feather, an elder to smudge you use an eagle feather. And the eagle feather we use so much in our culture to cleanse with the smoke.

>> So, what is the – what – the role of elder in native cultures is really unique I find. What is the role of elder for our students?

>> I think –

>> What's the significance for them?

>> Well, I'm going to tell you a Dr. Hill approach the host at MT years ago –

>> Dr. Rick Hill.

>> Dr. Dawn Hill.

>> OH, Dawn Hill, another one of the Hill family yeah, okay.

>> And she says, "All the things you've done in your life, I would like you to be a an elder at McMaster." I'm sorry, I said, I can't accept, because I have no knowledge, and I don't have qualifications to be an elder. "Oh, come on", she says, "All the travelling you've done and worked with children, I think you'll do fine. Well, try it for three months." I'm still there today.

>> Yeah.

>> Yeah.

>> After about 17 years I've been here.

>> So, in your role as Elder in Residence here, what do you get out of this? I know that you do a lot for our students and staff, but what –?

>> What do I get out of it?

>> What do you get out of it? Yeah.

>> I tell you, at my age, when I come walking up those steps, I have one sore knee from the falls I've had and arthritis.

>> Just life.

>> When I walk in the corridor, I see all those students in the corridor, and I get my energy.

>> Yeah.

>> They give me energy, and I start walking, hey, I'm not even sore anymore.

>> Yeah. They make you young again.

>> Yeah.

>> Maybe that's why your hair is still [inaudible]. If you had one thing that you wanted to share that people should know about our native students here, what would that be?

>> Well, those students work hard.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> They're resilient, they're committed to their community.

>> Yeah.

>> And they're families, that's why we care for them, because they are our future. And they are our future leaders. We live in two different worlds, native world, White man's world, in order for them to succeed they have to get their education. And this what is what I always tell them, so –

>> Can you tell us a little bit more about how your parents influenced who you are today? How they went the extra mile for you?

>> Well, for one thing they taught us good work ethics, and because of the things they taught me, even how to tan a hide.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And work with leather and beading, and now I'm teaching that – what – to the children of – I call them children, students.

>> Yeah –

>> And –

>> You're passing that on to them.

>> Yeah.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And when she didn't have beads she'd use porcupine quills.

>> Yeah?

>> She'd dye them with roots, she didn't have dye –

>> Uhn-huhn.

>> But she knew what kind of roots to dye. And the porcupine quills, and –

>> Wow.

>> That was something that nobody does anymore.

>> Yeah.

>> Yeah.

>> So, she was able – you were able to go way back –

>> Yeah.

>> And understand, you know, before dyes, before beads –

>> Yeah.

>> What are the ways that these used to be made. And now –

>> Yeah.

>> Be able to explain that to students.

>> Yeah. There's so many things they've taught me.

>> Uhn-huhn.

>> And then too many things that I've seen that – like yesterday, a medical student said, [inaudible] – how we used to make soap –

>> Hmm.

>> You know, our own detergent to wash clothes. And things to sanitize our house –

>> Yeah.

>> With 11 children we all survived without getting –"

>> Bleach or having –

>> Yeah.

>> You know, [inaudible].

>> It was boiling ashes.

>> Wow.

>> We had three wood stoves that had all of the ashes. You just used everything from the earth, you know. And my mother was good at sanitizing, and we all survived, 11 of us, you know?

>> That's probably really eye-opening for people that you meet today –

>> I know.

>> That don't believe there was a world before any of this stuff that we can easily buy at the store. I want to go back a little bit to your experience working as a cook in the residential schools. You'd said that you felt guilty for being a part of working there, but clearly you made a positive impact on students there.

>> Yes.

>> You were involved in making sure that they were happy and healthy –

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And well-fed, so can you speak a little bit about some of the other –?

>> Well, when I was through cooking, the girls would be sitting in their dormitories –

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Doing nothing, I'd take my radio, go to the gym –

>> Yeah.

>> And they had a big gym in Prince Albert for the – where they had the – where the soldiers used to – what do they call those, great big auditorium?

>> Mm-hmm.

>> So, they were able to play ball in there, or play volleyball, or anything. And I'd go there and do exercise with the – the girls. And the boys, they didn't like their haircuts, I bought the clippers, and I was the barber.

>> So, you were taking care of their emotional well-being too, right?

>> Yeah, I did.

>> Making sure they felt at home –

>> Yes, especially when –

>> As best as they could.

>> Boys were in grade eight, they said, "I don't like this haircut", and I'd start cutting the hair, and yeah.

>> Grade eight is very sensitive age.

>> Yeah. Yeah.

>> That's great.

>> So, that's one of the things I did.

>> Thank you so much for sitting down with me and giving us a bit of detail around your life, your amazing life. And I'm so happy that you've been able to realize all of your dreams. Thank you again for sitting with us. And thank you for everything that you do for our students.

>> And you go places if you follow your dreams.

>> A big thanks to Bertha Skye for sharing her story, and going above and beyond for students. Thanks also to my colleague Shawn Coffee for recording and editing our conversation. You can find more information about Indigenous Student Services in the show notes, or better yet, drop in and visit Bertha yourself. And if you know someone that's going the extra mile for students at Mohawk College, send an email at extra_mile@mohawkcollege.ca. And if you liked the show, give us a five-star rating. Thanks for listening.

[Music]