

Poverty on the Reservation

One Woman's Experience

by *Ellen Sands*

L'auteure de l'article suivant, une autochtone Chippewa-Potawatomi de la Bande indienne de Walpole Island, nous parle de sa jeunesse dans la réserve, de sa vie en tant que mère célibataire et de son retour aux études. Elle rend hommage à la force et à la détermination de sa mère et soutient qu'il est essentiel d'être libre de choisir pour se sortir de la pauvreté.

I don't understand what is wrong with growing up on an Indian reservation. I had the same lifestyle as other kids who grew up in town. I went to school, played with my friends, did chores at home, and worked at our family's business. But according to the outside world, I was a savage who needed to become civilized.

The people from the outside told my grandparents that my mother would turn out better if she went to school at their school. You guessed it—the dreaded residential school. My mother told me many stories about that school. Her stories include being slapped and yelled at by her teachers, about the many times she rescued her little sister from being beaten because she peed in her bed, and about the time she and her friends were told not to speak Indian. Yet she remains loyal to them. She might never have finished school if she had not gone there.

I appreciate my mother's values and her teachings. It has been a long and winding road to realize that simply by adopting a good value system, life can be run a little smoother.

I spent much of my childhood under the watchful eyes of my parents. My parents spent long, hard-working hours running a business, which was a combination of a restaurant, variety store and teen room.

The major turning point in our lives was when our mother made a decision which to this day she does not acknowledge as being of great consequence. My mother had had a desire since childhood to be a nurse. In her 40's she decided to go for it. We watched as she left home for college and put everything she had into her studies. She graduated near the top of her class and we all went to her graduation as proud as peacocks.

She was the very first Indian to ever work at the local hospital in town. She worked twice as hard as anyone at that place because she knew there would always be some form or another of prejudice. On her job she was called "stupid Indian" by one of her co-workers. But she would always come back with "you must be stupid, too, then because I have the same training as you!" We saw such determination in her never to give up because she was finally doing something she enjoyed and was more content and happy with herself.

I thank my mother for that. I feel that one act was the most influential example that she, as a parent, could ever give us—choices and what you do with them. Since that time each and every one of my brothers and sisters have returned to school to get a better education. I remember one year five of us graduated from programmes ranging from Bachelor of Arts to Fashion Design, to Marketing Administration, to Journalism, to Aircraft Pilot, to Sales and Interior Design. I still get shivers when I think about it.

Education is the key. With education you decide your future, not the government, not the dominant society, not the people around you.

I became a single parent when I was 20. I stayed home with my boy for his first two years and lived on welfare. I'm glad I got to stay with him because there are so many changes children go through during that time. But when he became a little older I started thinking about what kind of future he was going to have. We lived with one of my sisters and didn't own very much. I had no idea what I was going to do.

My sister told me about a college pro-

gramme that was going to be starting soon on the reserve. So I applied and was accepted. Up to this point I had never finished anything. If I didn't like the school I was in, I would quit. If I didn't like a job I had, I would quit. For me it was always so easy to quit and go home.

I started that six month college programme with the goal of trying it for at least the first month. That first month came and I liked the programme so I decided to try another month. And that routine kept me in school. Next thing I knew I graduated. I was so proud of myself. I realized that I could finish something that I started. After that I enrolled in another programme. This time, I went to a real college.

I'm now in my sixth year of school, taking courses that interest me, not really working towards any one particular diploma. Right now I'm employed as staff and enrolled as a student at the University of Nations in Kona, Hawaii. I'm studying Biblical Counselling and Children's Leadership Training to work in the Mission field with Native youth.

I don't claim to be anyone special. I can assure you that I faced opposition all the way. But the difference is I made choices for myself. I refused to let people, of any race, put me down.

There is no need to face another day of poverty if we can make choices that will enhance our lives not tear them apart. We need to educate ourselves, then our children, if we are to overcome. After all, isn't that the way our Elders had to do it?

Ellen Sands is a Chippewa-Pottawatomi Native from the Walpole Island First Nation in southern Ontario.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

- More than 70 per cent of Native households live below the poverty line. Estimates of unemployment rates for Native women and men range from 50 per cent to 90 per cent across Canada.
- Thirty-nine per cent of all Native families are single-parent families headed by women.
- In 1980, the average annual income for women of Native ancestry was \$6,073.

Reprinted from *Women Against Poverty, A Report of the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee, 1989*

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