

Citation read on the occasion of the granting of the degree of

Honorary Doctor of Laws to

Ruby Dunstan

by the Senate of the University of Victoria

June 9, 2015

Madam Chancellor, I'm honoured to introduce Ruby Dunstan — Nlaka'pamux Elder, historian and elected leader, defender of her people's territory, tireless worker for social justice, and cherished and respected member of the Lytton First Nation of British Columbia.

Nearly 20 years ago, the provincial government announced the creation of a Provincial Park encompassing the entire Stein River Valley — a place of “spectacular scenery and outstanding historical, cultural and spiritual values.” The new “Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park,” — to be co-managed by the Lytton Band and BC Ministry of the Environment — ended an immense struggle to protect this beloved valley in the heart of Nlaka'pamux territory from destruction by clearcut logging. At the forefront of that struggle was Ruby Dunstan.

Chief of the Lytton Band at that time, she, together with the chief of the Mount Currie (Lil'wat) Band, worked with their communities and many environmental organizations to defend this iconic watershed. Tirelessly and determinedly, she travelled between Victoria and Ottawa, and even to New Zealand, to face the executives of the company and government decision-makers. She spoke eloquently at the Stein and Earth Voice festivals, inspiring all those who attended with the force of her words. In the end, she rallied public opinion, and convinced the government to protect the watershed and in 2007, she received the Lieutenant Governor's Award in honour of her work in building Parks Systems in the province.

Defending the Stein Valley is by no means Ruby's only remarkable accomplishment. Born in 1941, she attended St. George's Indian Residential School in Lytton. On leaving school at the age of 13 she was told that, as a young Native woman, she would never be able to have more than a menial job. They obviously did not know Ruby Dunstan! In 1965, by that time a mother of four young children, she ran for a position as Lytton Band Councilor and was elected. As a Councilor, she witnessed many difficult social problems confronting her community, often linked to residential school abuses. After serving on the Council for 10 years, she pursued formal training in social work, first completing grade 12 equivalency at Cariboo College in Kamloops and then enrolling in a special five-year outreach Diploma Program through UBC's School of Social Work. Throughout, she served her own First Nation as a social work professional.

Two years after graduation, Ruby Dunstan was elected Chief of the Lytton First Nation, becoming the first woman chief in her band's history. She served in this role from 1983 to 1991. From 2001 to 2004 she was project facilitator for the Nlaka'pamux Cultural Reconnection Project at Lytton, at the same time working for community wellness against drug and alcohol addiction. From 2004 until her retirement in 2012 she served as a social development worker for the Lytton First Nation. At this same time, Ruby played a lead role in the creation of the Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage School. Envisioned as early as 2001 but becoming a reality in 2009, the school has been a huge source of pride and inspiration for the Nlaka'pamux community. During this career of service, Ruby, in addition to her own four, was busy raising two nieces, a grandnephew and ten foster children.

Ruby is the first to credit her elders and teachers for endowing her with the fundamental values that underlie everything she does. In turn, her humanity, generosity and determination have inspired a whole new generation of British Columbians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Her vision and passionate advocacy for the land and its people have indeed earned her a place in our hearts and in the history of our province.

Sadly, Ruby was unable to receive her honorary degree last fall, because her beloved husband Willoughby Dunstan, fondly called "Spud," was seriously ill. He passed away on November 8, 2014. He was always there, keeping the home fires burning, running the family ranch, while Ruby worked and travelled. He was her rock; the family called him their "Nlaka'pamux warrior." He was so proud of her, and I know he is here with her today in spirit.

Madam Chancellor, it is a very great privilege to present to you and to this convocation, Ruby Dunstan, for the Degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

Written and presented by
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