Office of Indigenous Academic and Community Engagement

səlxwéyn sqʷél    SELWÁN SKÁL

ELDERS' VOICES

2022 Members
Gerry Ambers
Skip Dick
Kathy Horne
Barb Hulme
Doug LaFortune
Eydie Pelkey
May Sam
Wilbert Papik

Former Members
Late George Cook
Ruth Cook
Late Marie Cooper
Ron George
Late Skip Sam
Late Samantha Sansregret
Late Joyce Underwood
Dr. Victor Underwood
Christine Welsh
Barney Williams
Bev Williams
Elders are the foundation of Indigenous communities. They are the keepers of sacred stories, songs, language, culture and traditions. They are pivotal in protecting Indigenous ways of knowing and being that have been passed down for countless generations. The Elders’ cultural wisdom defines and informs the manner in which Indigenous people live in the modern world.

Today, the University of Victoria’s (UVic) səlxʷéyn sqʷéél / SELWÁN SKÁL Elders’ Voices program includes several Indigenous Elders in the capacity of Specialist Instructors. They provide the cultural and spiritual foundation for the Office of Indigenous Academic and Community Engagement (IACE) and support relationships between this office and UVic’s executive, faculty and staff. səlxʷéyn sqʷéél / SELWÁN SKÁL Elders’ Voices was created in 2007 as a partnership between Camosun College and the University of Victoria. Funding for the program initially came from the Province of British Columbia’s Aboriginal Service Plan. The two educational partners reached out to students, Elders, First Nations and urban communities on southern Vancouver Island, seeking guidance on their educational priorities.

One theme that came from these conversations was that Indigenous students and communities wanted to see more meaningful engagement between Elders and post-secondary institutions. The result was a shared Elders in Residence program. Over time the partnership between Camosun College and UVic has evolved so that each developed their own program that reflects the unique needs of their students.

Soon after səlxʷéyn sqʷéél / SELWÁN SKÁL was launched, the First Peoples House opened at UVic. This facility, located in the heart of campus near the quad, offers a welcoming environment for Indigenous students. With many UVic students travelling far from their home territories to attend university, the First Peoples House became a “home away from home.” Today, First Nations, Inuit and Métis students can visit the Elders in Residence at the First Peoples House for support, guidance or simply a friendly chat.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Elders kept in touch with students with virtual meetings on iPads supplied by the IACE through a grant from the MasterCard Foundation. This opened up a new way for remote students to engage with Elders, even when they weren’t on campus. A hybrid Elders’ Voices (both virtual and in-person meetings) will continue in the future, so that students attending classes in Victoria, and those studying remotely, can also meet with Elders.

The Elders participating in səlxʷéyn sqʷéél / SELWÁN SKÁL are valued members of the UVic community. Their knowledge informs research protocols, human resources and policy development. Academic and administrative departments frequently consult with Elders about cultural practices. Most importantly, Elders offer a vital support system for UVic students, staff and faculty members.
Skip Dick

If you’ve attended a convocation, Indigenous Recognition Ceremony or conference at UVic, there’s a good chance you heard Dr. Skip Dick offer the territorial welcome. A respected Elder and Songhees Nation member, Skip has touched the lives of countless community members, students, staff and faculty through his involvement at Camosun College, UVic and local sports and Indigenous organizations.

Skip is a life-long advocate for post-secondary education for Indigenous youth. He is one of the founding members of the Elders’ Voices program, which started as a partnership between UVic and Camosun College. His community work covers more than 50 years of service including being one of the founders of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre in 1969.

An athlete in his youth, Skip continued to be involved in sports for several decades. In 1989 he was named “Manager of the Year” by the BC Lacrosse Association. He was one of the founders of the Victoria Thunderbird Soccer Club. Besides his community work, Skip has enjoyed diverse career paths in construction, logging, economic development and education.

Until the 1960s, the Indian Act required First Nations people to disenfranchise from their communities if they enrolled in a college or university. This discouraged many from pursuing education after high school. When Skip entered Camosun College in the early 1970s, there were only 24 First Nations students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in all of British Columbia. He became active in recruitment efforts at Camosun College, resulting in being on the team that set up the upgrading and business management programs that gave many Indigenous students an opportunity to enter college. Within one year of launching those programs, 200 Indigenous students had enrolled at the college.

Skip, who is the father of five children and 13 grandchildren, continues to advocate for Indigenous access to post-secondary education. He sees the First Peoples House as a “home away from home,” and he encourages students to continue practicing their cultural values while they are away from home at university.

He is especially proud to see Indigenous youth graduate and enjoys watching the Chiefs, Elders and parents nodding and smiling as their young people go up to receive their diplomas at the convocations and the Indigenous Recognition Ceremony.

“My thanks is to see students succeed,” Skip said. “I’m here for the students.”

“If I’ve done anything for you, don’t thank me. My thanks is to see students succeed. I’m here for the students.”
Eydie Pelkey

Eydie Pelkey's family ties reach far and wide into Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth territories. She has family in Tsawout, Nitnat, Cowichan, Stó:lō and even Nooksack and Lummi in the United States. It's not surprising, considering she comes from a large extended family—her parents had 54 grandchildren and 106 great grandchildren.

Eydie has two children—John and Lisa—eleven grandchildren and five great grandchildren. It's fair to say that family is the most important part of Eydie's life. But her community is a very close second.

Eydie has spent her life advocating for her community. She's volunteered for more than 25 years for the Saanich First Nations Adult Care Society, which is dedicated to assisting community members leaving the hospital, recovering at home or entering long term care. She has held many volunteer roles in her Tsawout community, including serving on the Longhouse and Lands committees.

As a child, Eydie attended residential school on Kuper Island and later was sent to St. Mary's in Mission. When she was forty, she went back to school to take the Indigenous language program at Camosun.

“I took the language program with my father when he was in his sixties,” she said proudly. She also took health director's training at UBC and courses in social services and emergency training at Vancouver Island University (formerly Malaspina College). Eydie hopes to complete a Bachelor of Education degree in the future.

A few years ago, Eydie went back to university to study language revitalization. “I knew many young students who were struggling. Young people need to be encouraged especially when they're going through difficult times,” she said.

Eydie has been part of Elders' Voices for several years, and enjoys interacting with staff and students at the First Peoples House.

“Grandparents play a big part in our community and students still need Elders in their lives,” she said. “In our culture we were always taught to listen to our Elders out of respect. As a teenager I spent a lot of time with my great-grandmother in Cowichan. My dad would say, 'When your grandmother is talking, you sit and listen.'”

“I enjoy helping younger people and encouraging them to finish their education. We're like aunties and grandparents for students at the First Peoples House.”

“Our Elders teach us that there's nothing wrong with making a mistake. It's a learning experience. If you need help, ask for it.”
Doug LaFortune

Every morning, Doug LaFortune picks up his coloured pens, draws a new design and shares it on his Facebook page with his close to 4,000 followers. The drawing might be of a human, an eagle, an orca or a frog. There is always a little story to go with each creation. What makes his daily gift of a drawing even more meaningful, is that a few years ago Doug suffered a stroke and he believed his career as a Coast Salish artist was over.

“After my stroke I couldn’t hold a pencil. So I decided to start writing my name. Then I started to draw but I wasn’t very good. I kept going until I could draw again.” Through perseverance and his daily ritual of drawing, Doug is not only back working as an artist, he’s inspiring everyone to never give up and to stay focused on what’s important.

Doug, a member of the Tsawout Nation, started out in his teens with the goal of being an artist. After high school he studied fine arts at Camosun College. To make a living, he took a heavy equipment operator course, which led to several years working in the logging industry. It was a visit to renowned Coast Salish artist Simon Charlie’s studio in Koksilah, that he realized what he was born to do. Doug studied with Simon after he encouraged him to pursue art again.

Today, Doug’s carvings can be seen in museums, universities and public parks around the world. His Welcome Figures are the first thing you see when you arrive at the First Peoples House at UVic.

While the creation of art has been part of Doug’s life for more than 50 years, he balances it with a strong family life. His wife Kathy helps him stay grounded and connected with this children and grandchildren, some of whom have pursued careers as professional artists. “We are the foundation of the family. We try to make sure our kids are together,” Doug said.

It wasn’t until 2016, when they were crowned “King and Queen” at the Elders Gathering in Tsawout, that they realized they had become Elders in the community. After that event, they were invited to do talks and share their stories. Doug and Kathy work as a team as Elders at the First Peoples House.

On the first day that Doug and Kathy joined Elders’ Voices at UVic, a student came to see them and she was exuberant and happy. “Six months later, she came back and wanted to go home up north,” Doug said. “So we said to her, ‘just take a little break and relax. You’re doing so much and it’s overwhelming.’” A few weeks later, the student came back and said she was ready to keep going with her education.

“It’s important that we’re there for the students and that we’re showing them that it’s possible to overcome difficulties,” Doug said. That is something that this Elder and artist has definitely mastered.

“When you’re young, your life is like a blank book. You can do anything you want. You can go anywhere you want.”
May Sam

May Sam’s inner warmth lights up any room she enters. She is well known at the First Peoples House, whether it’s in the Elders’ lounge chatting with students, or in the Ceremonial Hall providing an opening prayer for an event or ceremony. May has been part of Elders’ Voices for many years, along with her late husband Gabriel “Skip” Sam.

May was born in Mill Bay and raised in Lhumhumuluts’ in the Cowichan Valley and Skip was from the Tsartlip Nation. May attended St. Catherine’s School until grade seven, and moved to Tsartlip after she and Skip were married. They spent many years farming and later working in the commercial fisheries.

“When we were younger, we worked in a potato patch and we worked hard for every potato that we picked,” May said. “Taking care, making sure we worked hard for what we earned. Then when we got a trawler, we became our own bosses but had to learn the reefs and the area and depth of the waters. We had to teach ourselves how to do that.” She has many wonderful memories of the years she and Skip fished together.

“Those were the good old days,” she said. “The million-dollar life we didn’t realize it at the time.”

May is passionate about knitting. She spins her own wool and creates beautiful Cowichan hats, scarves, sweaters and other clothing. Her father Everest taught May how to knit and encouraged her creativity. She was featured in The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters, a documentary by Métis filmmaker Christine Welsh and was on the cover of Seaside Magazine.

May and Skip worked together in their roles in Elders’ Voices. “We were really proud to be with the youth,” May said. “Just talking to them and making sure they’re okay.”

May enjoys working with students and her warm personality is well known. “I hug everybody, even the first time I meet someone. It’s just the way I am,” she said. “I just like to greet everyone that way. It’s a blessing. And I put my arms on their shoulders and pray that they’re okay.”

“That’s our pride,” Skip once said, “to be with our grandchildren, nieces and nephews. I’m also glad to be with the students. They ask questions, I try to answer them. We are honoured to be here, for whatever they need.”

May and Skip are the parents of three children and twelve great-grandchildren. “Our family is just our whole pride and joy,” May said. “Our children and the work that they do taking care of people, we are really, really proud.”

“I hug everybody. It’s a blessing. I put my arms on their shoulders and pray that they’re OK.”
Kathy Horne grew up witnessing first hand the hard work and sacrifices her grandparents made so that their children and grandchildren could have a strong traditional way of life. As a child, she lived next door to her paternal grandparents. Her grandfather, Queesto Charlie Jones, was a whaler, carver and fisherman from Pacheedaht who lived to be 111 years old. Her great-grandfather on her mother’s side was Billy Yukum, a Tseshaht fisher, medicine man and healer in Port Alberni.

“Our parents and grandparents had to struggle for us so they could give us opportunities,” Kathy said. “They worked on farms doing seasonal work. They worked in logging camps. My mother worked in a cannery.”

Her ancestors’ sacrifices are one of the reasons she dedicates so much of her time working for educational programs and encouraging her own children and grandchildren to pursue post-secondary education.

Kathy was sent to residential school from the time she was four until she was 14 years old. She was the youngest and last one in her family to be sent to residential school. “Most of my friends who went there are gone, tragically,” she said.

“We have a chance today to educate ourselves so we can be in communities that support themselves,” she said. “You start with education. When you do this, it inspires the young people in your community to also get education and training.”

Kathy and her husband Doug LaFortune are two of the newest members of UVic’s Elders’ Voices. They not only work as a team as Elders, they also work together on Doug’s art career. Kathy is the main contact with art galleries and she keeps Doug’s art commissions and projects on track.

They also share the same dedication to being parents and grandparents to six children and two great grandchildren.

“We made a commitment to raise our families in a healthy way,” Kathy said.

Kathy has had many different careers over the years, but it’s her role as a mother that she considers to be the “best thing in my life.”

She shares the same advice with her own children and grandchildren as she does with the students at UVic. “Be proud to be going to school. You’re representing your family and your community. We’re all involved and proud of your achievements.”

Kathy enjoys working with the other Elders at UVic. “I like how they talk about things,” she said. “Words are so important.”

“Honour who you are and where you came from. You have the power to achieve what you want.”
Gerry Ambers

Gerry Ambers graduated from the University of Victoria with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1992. Close to 30 years later, she’s returned to the university, this time as an Elder in Residence at the First Peoples House, to support Indigenous students on their educational journey.

When she was studying sculpture and painting at UVic, there were only a few hundred Indigenous students enrolled (today there are more than 1400 Indigenous students). The First Peoples House was still twenty years away from being built.

Gerry is Kwakwaka’wakw from the ‘Namgis Nation in Alert Bay, and the mother of five children and six grandchildren. Her art training started long before she began her degree at UVic. She studied Northwest Coast design with acclaimed Kwakwaka’wakw carver Doug Cranmer, in a studio set up for art training in the basement of the former St. Michael's Residential School in Alert Bay (which has since been demolished.) During the 1980s, Gerry assisted Doug Cranmer on the post and beam construction of U’mista Cultural Centre and the Folk Life Pavilion at Expo ‘86 in Vancouver.

Today Gerry supports the work of art galleries, Indigenous organizations and post-secondary institutions on Vancouver Island as an Elder, mentor and healing worker. She became the Elder in Residence at Open Space Gallery in 2019.

Besides her life-long passion for art, Gerry has also been intrigued by spirituality in cultures around the world. She's travelled as far away as Hawaii, Japan, England and India for spirituality and healing training. She is also a master level Reiki in the Usui tradition.

While studying international healing practices, Gerry continued to learn from Indigenous healers. She is called upon to provide cedar brushings, space cleansing and other Indigenous cultural practices.

“As Indigenous people, we've always had ways of healing that come from nature,” Gerry said. “All the plants, the plant medicines, the water, the fire. Even the rocks, the oceans and the rivers. We all need to acknowledge those beautiful gifts that have been given to us.”

Gerry was coordinator of the Kwagiulth Urban Society Suicide Prevention and Intervention Program for 13 years, where she helped develop and deliver programs in Indigenous communities. Later she worked with survivors of residential schools for the Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society.

Her favourite part of being an Elder in Residence at UVic is meeting with students and seeing the energy they create. In her role as Elder, and as a former UVic student, Gerry knows how important it is that “students feel that they belong on campus and that it’s a safe place.”

“We’ve always asked for help from our ancestors and our creator. And that’s a very important part of who we are as Indigenous people.”
When Métis Elder Barb Hulme arrives at the First Peoples House, she offers a smile and encouraging words to everyone she meets. Whether she's meeting with students in the Elders' Lounge, leading a crafting workshop or welcoming students to an event in the Ceremonial Hall, she exudes calm and warmth.

Barb has deep connections to Métis communities in British Columbia and Manitoba. She was born in Selkirk, Manitoba in the heart of the Métis Nation's Red River Settlement, and is an active member of the Victoria Métis community.

After earning a diploma and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Barb entered the Canadian Armed Forces where she rose to the rank of Major. She is often called upon to represent Indigenous veterans at ceremonies and on committees.

Following her retirement in Victoria, Barb became one of the founding members of Métis Nation Greater Victoria and has served in many roles including administrator, historian, citizenship coordinator and genealogy advisor.

Barb has been involved in UVic's Elders' Voices program for more than three years. When she's not spending time with students in the Elders' Lounge at the First Peoples House, she can often be found leading beading, quilting and embroidery workshops.

She's a strong advocate for cooking meals together. “Sharing stories and food is part of every Indigenous culture,” she said.

Barb enjoys supporting students in their journey to learn about their own cultures. In this way, Barb shows students how to understand, respect and relate to each other as First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

“I like to interact with youth on campus because my feeling is that we may grow older in age, but the more we can interact with the youth, the younger we stay.”

Her favourite part of working at the First Peoples House is watching students graduate and moving on to future successes.

“I feel that UVic is open-armed to Indigenous students. We try to make Indigenous students feel welcome no matter where they're from.”
Wilbert Papik

Wilbert Papik is the newest member of Elders’ Voices. He came on board in March 2022 following the retirement of Elder Victor Underwood.

From his first day in the Elders’ lounge, Wilbert was sharing stories about his traditional upbringing in the Northwest Territories with the Indigenous students who came to welcome him to the First Peoples House.

Wilbert was born in Aklavik, a hamlet in the Inuvik region of the Northwest Territories. It is one of the only places in the NWT that is included in two separate land claims—the Inuvialuit Settlement Region and the Gwich’in Settlement Region.

His father, Josie Papik, was originally from Alaska and his mother, Sarah, was from the Northwest Territories. Wilbert attended the Inuvik Federal School in his youth, and later moved to Alberta to study at the University of Calgary.

He’s held a wide range of vocations throughout his life, including accounting, carpentry, computer repair and teaching. He held the position of Housing Manager for the Aklavik Housing Association in the early 2000s.

When you listen to Wilbert talking with the students, it’s clear that he continues to have a strong attachment to his homeland and the activities that are part of his Arctic upbringing. He enjoys the outdoors and getting out on the land to camp. He returns to the north as often as possible to hunt and fish.

Wilbert was active for many years with the Inuvik Delta Drummers and Dancers. The group toured extensively, presenting traditional drumming and dancing at festivals, museums and art galleries throughout the Arctic region, including Alaska.

His commitment to supporting students with their post-secondary education is evident as he offers advice to Indigenous students attending the University of Victoria. “Try your hardest to learn your studies,” he says, “and carry on in what you want to become later in life.”

Wilbert has an unwavering confidence in the younger generation’s ability to learn and grow. His favourite part of working at the First Peoples House is meeting new people of all ages. He advises students to “not be afraid to ask questions.”

He sees his role as an Elder in Residence as a way to share knowledge with the younger generation. He says, “I think it’s good for students to be able to look to Elders for guidance.” He reminds students to continue to “learn from the way your parents did things.”

When not at the First Peoples House, you can find Wilbert drumming at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre’s weekly drum circle. Music is one of his lifelong passions and hopefully we’ll be treated to his drumming and singing sometimes when he’s in the First Peoples House.

“I think it’s good that Indigenous students at UVic have Elders to look to for guidance.”
First Peoples House was designed by Indigenous architect Alfred Waugh. The two featured house poles were carved by Tsawout artist Doug LaFortune.

For more information about Elders’ Voices please contact the Cultural Protocol Liaison at iacecl@uvic.ca 250-472-4106.
We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the University of Victoria stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.