

Elder shares valuable lessons

Elsie Paul to receive honorary doctorate

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SHORES DISTINCTION: At the beach near her residence on the Tla'Amin (Sliammon) First Nation, Elsie Paul, wearing a cape made by her daughter, will be bestowed with an honorary doctorate degree from Vancouver Island University for life's work. (paul galinski photo)

It's an educated guess but bestowing the title of doctor on revered Tla'Amin (Sliammon) First Nation elder Elsie Paul will likely receive high marks in the Powell River region.

Typical of her nature, Paul was humble upon discovering Vancouver Island University (VIU) will confer an honorary doctorate degree on her in the new year.

"I got a call from Ralph Nilson [VIU president] and he told me I had been selected for this award," Paul said. "I was floored and speechless...Why me? Why would I receive this honour? I felt there were other people out there that I know that work so hard and do so much."

Paul said she's now okay with the prospect of receiving the honorary doctorate. "I never thought that I could get this recognition because the things I do in my life I do

because I enjoy doing them. I've been involved in my own community and tried my best to be there for people when they need help or support.”

She will receive the degree at VIU's convocation ceremony in January.

Paul, 78, is known in the Coast Salish region by her traditional name, Qazustala's, which means a welcoming person with a wealth of knowledge, someone who shares her culture. “This is a remarkably suitable name, given that Elsie is one of the few remaining elders of Tla'Amin First Nation who is fluent in the Tla'Amin language, and who has dedicated her life to creating healthy communities through learning,” said Arlette Raaen, principal at VIU's Powell River campus.

“She has spent her life in service to others, in a variety of forms of justice reform and social activism, drawing on traditional teachings. She has set an example in living her own life and has shared these practices through her many professional activities.”

Nilson said Paul has always believed in inclusion and the importance of connection with communities. “It is our great honour to recognize Elsie Paul with an honorary doctorate degree,” he said. “The indigenous knowledge that she carries today is rare. Her memories reach back in time several generations to a time when first nations traditions were a way of life.”

Paul said her culture is very important to her and the learning of traditional values was vital to her generation. She said as a child, she grew up around a lot of the older people.

“I lived with my grandparents since I was a child,” Paul said. “I was always around the older people and was able to learn and observe being around them, how they lived off the land and how they survived.

“For me today that's still really important. I can think back and visualize all the places we've lived. There are very fond memories of my childhood and growing up around the older people, and how rich the culture was, just how strong our people were back then.”

Paul's initial learning methods were very different than what would be found in a modern-day university setting. “There was not the education system in place today,” she said. “There was a totally different kind of education and teaching in the society,

through the stories and legends. As children, we would sit while grannies were weaving, or while my grandfather was skinning deer, talking about the things they were doing. You were learning by watching. It wasn't a classroom learning I received as a child."

Paul's educational experience did include attendance at residential school. Her grandparents did their utmost to spare her from the experience. "They always made it a point to be away from the community and up the coast the month of August when the children were collected to be taken to residential school," Paul said. "Once they had their quota they left the rest of us alone," she added, laughing. "That was fortunate for me. That's the only reason I was able to learn from the old people, because I wasn't taken away until I was 10 or 11."

The pursuit and passing along of wisdom is an important part of Paul's first nations culture, and something that was lost for many of her people when children were taken away to residential schools. "The family ties and the importance of being around parents and grandparents was broken," Paul said. "The whole family system broke down, which we are now trying to rebuild."

Her first nations Salish language was her first tongue and English came later. There are only three communities that speak the dialect: Tla'Amin, Klahoose and Homalco.

Paul has served as a bridge to ensuring preservation of the language and culture. She said that when she was hired by the precursor of VIU, Malaspina University College, it was special for her and an honour to be able to tell the stories of the people and share some of the history. "I talked about how we lived, what we lived on, the kinds of foods, the kind of government in our own communities," she said. "I spoke about how people lived in harmony with their neighbouring communities. Those are the kinds of stories that I talk about at the university and I feel that's really important because there is not really a true picture of who we are as a people. Somehow, it's lost."

"I'm hoping that one day, we'll have it in book form. You will be able to pick up a book and read about the Tla'Amin people."