

# Huge tribute to woman whose memory remains

Inuvik Drum | August 20, 2015



Elizabeth Greenland leaves behind a living legacy

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Elizabeth Greenland may be gone, but everything she was and stood for remains.

Lori Greenland, left, joins Shannon Flett and Melissa Kisoun in Elizabeth Greenland's home last Thursday to make wreaths and crosses for the deceased elder. - Sarah Ladik/NNSL photo

It's in the rich smell of the caribou stew staying warm on the fire in front of her house on Co-op Hill. It's in the sounds of the small children playing on the balcony, and up the stairs and inside the house. It's in the haunting sounds of Gwich'in voices singing prayers from a CD player in the corner.

It's in the gingham dresses hung up around the room and the plethora of photos of children and grandchildren that plaster every exposed surface.

More than anything, it's in the people packed cheek-by-jowl into the living room, stepping over each other to get to the kitchen or outside, covering wreaths and crosses with colourful fake flowers, sipping tea, but more than anything, remembering their matriarch.

"She taught us to do things for ourselves," said her son William Greenland. "To do it how you want it done, not how someone else wants it."

Elizabeth died Aug. 7 at the age of 95 and people have been pouring into town since then, coming to say their last goodbyes.

While a proper service was held on Aug. 15, family members and friends from near and far have filled her house for weeks. Children, nieces, nephews and cousins have flocked from as far as Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia and the Yukon.

"For all of us that live away from home, just talking over the phone made you feel like home," said Shannon Flett. "She always made you feel good, but it always made you miss her even more. She was a woman that when you left, you wanted to come right back."

Elizabeth was a well-respected elder in the community and a fierce fighter for Gwich'in language and traditions.

Her children said that when she was admitted into long-term care, she would teach the nurses - no matter their heritage - a few words of Gwich'in; "hello," "thank you," and "I love you big."

She was also the founder of a dance group for young people. The dresses from the group are displayed on the walls of her house. It had started as something for her children, but had quickly grown to include children from the community.

"Now they're growing up and keeping those traditions alive themselves," said Cheryl Greenland.

While these accomplishments would be more than enough, they are all the more impressive since Elizabeth raised 13 children alone when she was widowed in 1980. Some were adopted, but all agreed that she never loved anyone differently.

"It was all about family," said Lori Greenland. "It was all unconditional love; she had no favourite. She was strong, raising a family on her own. Her values, what she believed in, she was true to them."

As a role model, her family said they couldn't have asked for better. Before she had her children, Elizabeth had her own dog team and would travel to Fort McPherson from Dawson all alone.

"She and her sister were like role models to us," said Agnes Moses, who will be 80 this year. "I marvel at how through all the adversity, all the hard times, she kept her family going. You see all these people, all these young men and women, and you can see she taught them."

As for what she taught them, Elizabeth's family replied "respect" in near perfect unison when asked.

"The biggest thing was respect and kindness," said Peter Greenland. "She worried a lot about us, but she never complained. Being so far away, for me, it's harder. I left and I remember her as she was years ago."

William agreed that his mother had always worried about her far-flung family, noting that if you hadn't called in too long, she would send someone to tell you to phone home.

"She'd ask how things were, and you'd tell her they were fine," he said. "But it's almost as though she knew something was wrong, so you had to tell her the truth."

Her daughter remembers other lessons.

"If we had problems, she would tell us to talk about it and pray," said Lori.

"She taught us how to be respectful of everyone, taught us how to listen."

Lori said Elizabeth's grandchildren were her medicine, her reason for carrying on. As Labrador tea boiled on the fire, a number of those grandchildren caroused through the yard and around the house, seemingly oblivious to the notes of longing that coloured the laughter that rang through the house.

"The four-year-olds, these young kids, they know exactly what's going on," said Barry Greenland.

"She loved them so much. They know they've lost their grandmother. They were taught how to love each other."