

Retired Nurse Brings Aboriginal Stories to Light

by Valerie Bean

GRACE POULIN HAS CLIMBED SPIRITUAL RUINS in Peru, travelled throughout Europe, flown over Mayan Ruins in Mexico, and posed nude for a local artist. She has taken clog dancing lessons, yoga, Tai Chi, and creative dance and is currently working on her Master's thesis. And she's done all this since retiring eight years ago.

After a fulfilling, but demanding career as an Obstetrical Nurse, working with high-needs newborns, the retiree returned to school to pursue her interest in Indigenous Peoples and will graduate in 2005 with a Master's Degree in Native Studies.

This is not the first time Grace, 68, returned to school to pursue a post-secondary education. She had to abandon her studies, in 1956, when she became engaged. At the time, married women were not allowed to live in residence as all students in the Nursing program were required to do. So, she married, moved to Toronto and had four daughters (born in 1959, 1960, 1962, and 1964). In 1971, she and her husband, Harold returned to the newly amalgamated cities of Port Arthur and Fort William.

While her husband worked as a construction labourer for \$5.00 per hour, she contributed to the household income by working at home as a seamstress. "In those days," she chuckles, "we called it 'making ends meet.' Today they call it a home business."

The decision to return to nursing was, in part, an economic one. "I had three kids still at home and my husband was out of work."

In Thunder Bay in 1976, few students were in their thirties, much less 40-year-old mothers studying full time while raising teenagers.

"It was somewhat unnerving at first," says this determined lady. "I had been out of school longer than the median age of my classmates!" Her classmates, however, accepted Grace easily, perhaps because she was able to relate to them as she did her daughters, who were not all that much younger.

She made it through the next two years on student loans, bursaries, and part-time jobs, including a "hellish" job at a pharmacy where her demanding boss, a man around the same age as she was, had his staff—all nursing students—work six-hour shifts "on our feet" and without breaks.

In her second year, she worked through a marital separation and subsequent reconciliation.

Twenty years after leaving school, she returned to her studies and graduated with a nursing diploma at 42.



She was born Dorothy Grace Pizey, the second of three daughters to British-born immigrants, and adopted use her middle name to avoid "Big Dot", "Little Dot" monikers favoured by her mother Dorothy's family, it could be said, that grace, best describes the most prominent attribute of her personality. She's encouraged fellow retirees to pursue post-secondary education, nursed friends through bouts with cancer, supported others in finding new life in widowhood and through marital separation and divorce, and overcome personal loss. She lost a close friend of 42 to cancer, her husband, at 56, to a heart attack, and her father in 1991. Aware of the fragility

of life, she remains in close contact with her two sisters, mother, daughters, and grandchildren with frequent visits and even more frequent email notes.

Her mother, Dorothy Pizzey, who celebrated her 100th birthday in December 2003, has shown Grace the benefits of a spirited and balanced lifestyle.

“I was taught, and have since learned through experience, that facing challenges head-on results in personal growth, which is imperative to creating a balance of healthful mind, body, and spirit.”

Creating that balance includes adventures with friends; white water rafting, hot air ballooning, sightseeing in Alaska, flying over the Mayan ruins in Mexico, and hiking in the Andes and the desert of Peru, keeps this senior young at heart.

Grace was determined to pack travelling into her retirement portfolio before embarking on more studious adventures.

“Before a trip to Europe in 1991, I had not been out of the country. I’ve since treated myself to a boat cruise to Alaska and the trek through Peru. I took those trips immediately after retiring, before I had to tighten the purse strings to live on a modest, fixed income.”

Hanging out with younger people helps, too. Working with newborns, “I was always around new life,” says the former nurse, “and now I’m around kids with bright, open minds.” She says she is constantly amazed by the younger students’ views.

“They come to post-secondary education with the knowledge of limitless possibilities, a global view of life, and their place in it. It’s very different from my experience, having grown up in the 1950s. It was expected that I would stay home and raise children,” she says matter-of-factly, “and it was expected they would come first. So I try to

learn from them. It’s refreshing, and it reminds me to keep my mind open to new possibilities, too.”

The single retiree also credits her grown children for having spurred her into the 21st century. She bought a computer, in part because her daughters, who live in different cities across Canada and abroad, correspond regularly by email. Before long, she mastered several software applications and hopped on-line, too. Working with ease on her PC, she now laughs at how she was initially “terrified”

of technology.

It wasn’t long before Grace added a scanner and a digital camera. More recently, she bought herself a



cell phone because she would be on the road interviewing subjects for her thesis about the role of Native women in World War II. Now, she has more electronic gizmos than her twenty-something grandkids.



Her fearless approach to pioneering in new situations is what has propelled this Super Senior to meet new challenges and live life looking forward with anticipation, rather than back with regret.

While attending Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, for the 2003–2004 school year, the temporarily transplanted student did something she would “never have considered 30 years ago” and posed nude for a local Kawartha-area artist.

The series is titled Maiden, Mother, Crone. “I fit into the crone category,” she says laughingly.

This full-time university student embraces new ideas while drawing on the “old fashioned values” when it comes to a healthful lifestyle. She eats balanced meals and she enjoys a glass of wine “now and then.” She also does Aerobics and works out with free weights three times a week. She started Pilates during the last semester of school at Trent because, like most university students living away from home, she put on a few extra pounds.

“I didn’t work out regularly until I retired in 1996,” says the near septuagenarian, “but sometimes after an intense 12-hour night shift delivering babies and racing up and down the hospital halls attending patients, I would go for a swim at the Canada Games Complex to release stress before heading off for a solid eight hours of sleep.”

In fact, one of her daughters, then 20, taught her how to swim. “I was scared to death of water. I’d had a terrible experience in water when I was a teenager and avoided swimming altogether.”

“I have close friends from a wide range of backgrounds including Portuguese and East Indian, Catholic and Muslim. I’ve also been exposed to the earth-based beliefs of Indigenous peoples.

“If you keep your mind active, the other stuff follows. You’ll want to have a healthy body and be at peace spiritually. It may sound trite, but it’s true.”

She connected spiritually with the landscape and people of Peru during a trip to South America in 1999, where she climbed hundreds of stone steps of Machu Picchu, hiked through desert, mountains, and jungle, connecting with the “beautiful people and their culture.”

In preparation for the trip she learned Spanish and trained with a fitness expert so that she could hike the uneven trails and countless stairs the tourist group encountered. Although she was the oldest in the group “by about 10 years,” Grace, who munched on cacao leaves and chocolate to keep nausea at bay, was the only member of the tour group not to get ill.

After returning home from Peterborough, this super senior also returned to her regular work-out at a local fitness club for those 55 and older. Initially, Grace joined the club as a fun way to work out and connect with peers.

“I joined primarily because the winters in Thunder Bay are long and cold and we’re indoors so much of the time. I soon discovered that there is a social component to working out. I can stay in shape and socialize at the same time. I enjoy that.”



When it comes to religion and spirituality, Grace considers herself a “recovering Christian” and is open to the principals of different faiths and interested in the customs of other cultures. It is these same liberal views through which she has long-time friends of varying cultural and religious background.



When asked what improvements she would like to see made in Canada, Grace's thoughts immediately turn to local and national political mismanagement of public funds and social justice concerns. But when asked what makes her happy and fills her life, Grace pushes aside political opinions and turns her thoughts to family and a personal sense of well-being.

“Things important to me are family and friends, my spiritual world view, keeping physically fit and being outdoors connecting with nature. I love learning – taking in new ideas and expanding my knowledge base. I have been blessed with the opportunity to pursue all these things with good health.”

Working alongside Aboriginal and other marginalized women during her years as an RN has underscored her socio-economic position and she has never been one to take that for granted.

“I have never experienced racism, nor have I questioned my identity and I've had opportunities that others have not. I come from humble Prairie beginnings and I carry that with me, always. I have been blessed in adult life with a great family, good friends, and what I consider to be a good living. And I am very grateful for all of that.”

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