Lori Campbell: Indigenous “Wonder Woman” speaks truth to power

Lori Campbell, director of the Waterloo Indigenous Student Centre and Sixties Scoop survivor, says after years of learning about who she was from a school system entrenched in stereotypes, university offered a new perspective.

NEWS Jan 13, 2020 by Joel Rubinoff Waterloo Region Record

She grew up a survivor of the infamous Sixties Scoop, a generation of Indigenous kids in Canada and the U.S. taken forcibly from their parents and handed over to white, mostly Christian families bent on assimilation, Anglo-European style.

The effects — loss of identity, feelings of shame, loneliness and confusion — were devastating, cited by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as "cultural genocide."

But for Lori Campbell, a Regina native who grew up to become a University of Waterloo lecturer, director of the Waterloo Indigenous Student Centre, two-spirit activist and NDP candidate in the last federal election, it was a setback she was determined to overcome.

Charming, articulate, passionate — and not without a sense of humour — the 47-year-old social justice crusader decided to reclaim her Cree-Métis roots, track down the birth mother she hadn't seen since childhood and connect, for the first time, with her six younger siblings (another died at birth) placed in foster care or put up for adoption.

Discovering an inner power she always knew existed, she comes off today as an indomitable mix of street smarts and compassion, exuding a cool intelligence and wry self-awareness that silently sends the signal "I have arrived."

When we met up at her Waterloo home — adorned with pictures of her beloved horses and Wonder Woman action

figures — her foot tapped restlessly as she recounted in unblinking detail a life that could have ended in ruin, but instead veered into something resembling hope.

Wonder Woman, eh? After what you've been through I'm surprised you don't identify more with Liam Neeson in the hostage drama "Taken."

I told a story at the Indigenous Student Centre — while holding my Wonder Woman mug — about how she was on my lampshade as a kid and how that was the coolest thing. And I started getting things through the internal mail system: action figures, bandanas, finger puppets.

She was a formative influence?

Her and the Bionic Woman.

I can see the superhero connection. You survived 16 years in a small farming community with a "white picket fence" family who — as you squirmed in discomfort — did everything they could to ignore your Indigenous heritage.

People were adopting children because they were told they needed to be taught to be white, essentially. It would be helpful for them. Those heavily connected to churches in particular tended to be the families that took that up. That was part of the benevolence they thought they should do.

It sounds like a Hallmark Christmas special.

The parents I grew up with were not counselled to think it was important to know who I was as an Indigenous person. Creating Euro-Canadians out of Indigenous kids. That was the project.

But you knew you were different. It must have created tension.

I wasn't an easy kid. I was angry. I knew I was from somewhere else. Nobody would talk to me about it — friends at school, teachers.

How did you cope?

I grew up thinking of myself as trying to be white — the best version of whiteness I could be — trying to make people happy, knowing I would never be successful, because inside I was Indigenous, and that meant taking on all the stereotypes.

Such as?

I was told things like "You can't go to gas pumps because Indian kids are sniffing gasoline and dying from it" and "You're not going to be able to drink when you're older because you're Indigenous and they're just drunks" ... (sighs) ... conflicting messages.

Your birth mother, meanwhile, was a sex worker, immersed in a life of lonely, teenaged squalor.

My mom was 14 when she got pregnant with me. Essentially, my biological father is a white pedophile who picks up brown girls. Which isn't a reflection on my mom — it's a reflection on society. It's the racialized kids who are targets.

I love the book titles lining your office. "Dying From Improvement," "White Fragility," "Indigenous Peoples Celebrate 150 years of Betrayal." I'm noticing a theme.

People have a hard time talking about racism because everyone knows that it's terrible to be called a racist and no one, generally, ever wants to be seen as racist.

I read the books and talk to people so I can better learn how to help them understand the ways in which racism may be entrenched into their everyday lives — and then help them make changes — for those that are willing.

Your own turning point came when you attended an Indigenous college at the University of Regina.

I spent 16 years learning about who I was from people in the community and an education system that had no idea. Then I showed up at university and learned from people who knew who we were, that we were all stolen.

That was the start of me being less angry.

As if things weren't complicated enough, at some point

you realized you were gay. Thanks to a special episode of TV's "Knots Landing," you knew that wasn't going to fly.

There was a big to-do because one character came out as gay and he'd just had a child with some woman. Back then to be gay equated with being a pedophile.

What I heard in the home was about how sick and disgusting that was.

Not the best environment to come out in.

Because I was from a small town, I didn't know that gay people existed. There was no representation. You just knew you didn't want to be that. Being a super tomboy is what I did to get by.

By the time you were 24, you'd had enough.

I flew out to tell my parents I was a lesbian and that did not go over well. I heard everything from my brother saying that when he has kids I'm not gonna be able to see them, to my dad wondering "is there a place we can send you to fix this?" Conversion therapy, essentially. My mom was the religious one so that was just horrible for her. She pretty much stopped talking to me.

Have they evolved since then?

No. I used to write them every year. They never returned the letters.

Sad.

All the things they said they wanted, that were important to them — for me to be successful, have a good career, get an education — I worked really hard at, thinking "I'll achieve something and it'll be OK."

But after I was done my second degree I was like "I will never be able to achieve the things that would make it OK for them."

You don't seem bitter.

My parents did what the professionals told them. They tried hard to make it work but they were put in a challenging situation they weren't prepared for. All the things they did were

all the things they knew to make me successful.

They kept me in sports, bought me horse, bought me a car, took me to Disneyland. It definitely contributed to where I am today.

It's bittersweet. They set you up for success, then tried to pull the rug out.

When I talk about my work ethic, value system, all these things are very much in line with theirs. But some things they couldn't reconcile about being Indigenous and 'out.' Is that a thing, Indigenous and being queer?

You're asking me? I was going to ask you what "two-spirit" means.

The term two-spirit is something that connects me to who I am as an Indigenous person in a very historical context.

I'm connecting to that deep-seated responsibility of knowledge I have to continue on and teach others.

In other spaces, I'll say I'm "indigiqueer."

So you reclaimed your identity. Your shame was gone.But when you finally tracked down your birth family you found them scattered across three provinces in varying degrees of distress: fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, physical and cognitive disabilities.

I seem to have been put of this role of responsibility as "the successful one." If there's a problem or issue or somebody gets lost, or put in jail, or overdoses, I'm the one who gets a call about it.

Why you?

I can talk to a justice worker or a police officer. I can talk the language, write a letter. I don't have a bush Indian accent like lots of my relatives back home. How a social worker on the phone responds to me is a lot different than how they respond to my brother.

It was your activist aunt, Maria Campbell — playwright,

broadcaster, filmmaker and Métis author of the celebrated memoir "Halfbreed" — who first dangled to prospect of a political career, though you were a hard sell.

I was like "Why would I do that? Why would I want to get into that toxic space of mainstream politics?"

And she just said "Well, to be Indigenous *is* to be political."

Somehow the idea stuck. And when you were approached by the NDP to run in the last federal election, you took it seriously.

I have a responsibility to the Indigenous people of Waterloo and queer community of Waterloo and my own communities in Saskatchewan, to put to good use all of the mentorship and teaching I've had along the way.

Not only do I have a responsibility, but there's an additional level. Nobody's ever told (Waterloo MPP) Catherine Fife she's responsible for the white community, but you take me and it's not just the Indigenous but also the queer community. That compounds things.

You're a minority within a minority.

My culture teaches me that collectivism is most important. For me to say 'no' because I was nervous is an individualistic view.

I notice you're tapping your foot almost non-stop. What's up with that?

(Laughs) ... I don't really know. I've always been a pretty driven, intense person — trying to think hard, work hard, do my best, and say what needs to be heard, or might have some sort of impact on anyone who is listening.

What is "tokenistic reconciliation?" It has an ironic, darkly humorous ring.

Tokenistic reconciliation is providing lip service to reconciliation — hiring or appointing an Indigenous person into a role and having them advise you, but then still doing whatever you think is the best decision.

You're getting advised, and may even lead people to believe that you are taking the advisement, but in reality you aren't. The Indigenous person is just there as a token — and so is the reconciliation.

That sounds like Jody Wilson-Raybould, Canada's first Indigenous justice minister, ousted from Liberal cabinet — and eventually the party — after a controversial showdown with the prime minister. What does this tell you about the state of politics for Indigenous people?

We need more people there. We need elected officials who represent the people of this country, and we don't have that. You can't put in one Indigenous person and one Black person and one queer person and think that's gonna change the system.

Macleans recently ran a cover photo of the country's conservative premiers, all middle-aged white men in suits. How does this change?

Most politicians are doing what we elected them to do, so if you want to see something different, vote for someone different. Showing up at rallies and protests to show support, then voting for the political leader who won't do anything makes no sense. That's just pretending. You actually also need to vote.

There's a scathing "Saturday Night Live" skit where patronizing white liberals — convinced Donald Trump's racist overtures are an anomaly — are stunned when he wins the 2016 election, while Black comedians Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock nod at each other knowingly.

There's never a good time to just sit back and let things play out, to not keep pushing, to try and get what we think is fair and just.

That's how you build movements and get things to move forward.

But why run for the NDP? They haven't won an Ontario election since "Ice Ice Baby" topped the pop charts. Federally, wouldn't you be better served infiltrating the Conservative ranks, or at least the Liberals?

I would be lying if I didn't say if you want to get elected, maybe run as a Conservative. Even in this riding (Waterloo), you could run a dead squirrel and it would get 23 per cent of the vote ... (laughs) ... I think I'm better than a dead squirrel.

I wonder if a younger generation sensitive to identity politics and Indigenous rights might eventually solve the problem for you. Can social change be a simple matter of demographics?

My auntie (Maria) still thinks things are going to get worse before they get better. We haven't hit bottom. And once we do, things will change back really fast. The work we're doing has to keep going that so we're ready to pass on intergenerational knowledge.

What's the biggest challenge?

To help people realize it's not about just trying to be benevolent or do something to help Indigenous peoples.

A lot of times people want to volunteer at the Indigenous student centre and I don't need volunteers. What I would like is for you to go out for coffee with your friends and tell them what you learned at this public lecture and talk about UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), residential schools. It's *your* job.

So the biggest challenge is ... other people's good intentions?

Sometimes people just want to feel good because they feel bad for us, and they want us to see them feel bad and that makes them feel even better about themselves. There's other ways we can do that.

Such as?

Why aren't all the parents outraged that there isn't education about Indigenous history and contemporary realities in Canada in the school system? Why isn't every parent in the city or province beating down every elected official's doors saying "We want our child to have that education — it's important!"

So you want parents to get off their butts?

We can position the next generation to be better prepared than what we are. If we invest in that now, we won't have to do that again, because the kids will know it. It will become common knowledge.

You sound frustrated.

It's not every Indigenous person's job or every Black person's job to educate people on the history of slavery. You could spend the next year reading books written by Indigenous scholars that talk about these issues with personal experiences. I don't need to be in the room.

How much of your life is reflected in the greeting card on your shelf: "I chose the road less travelled. Now, where the hell am I?"

Hahahaha. I only know how to be me and all I can ever do is simply try to take the next best step — make the next best decision. I trust in that.

jrubinoff@therecord.com

Twitter: @JoelRubinoff

jrubinoff@therecord.com

Twitter: @JoelRubinoff