

INTERGENERATIONAL SURVIVORS:

HOW CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY ARE HELPING NEW GENERATIONS OF INDIGENOUS YOUTH



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When Youth Unlimited outreach worker Katie Jarmer first met Francine four years ago, she didn't know much about her, other than it was a struggle for her. What she did know was that Francine needed support. Slowly they built a bond and Francine's story began to unfold.

Francine was born into the Squamish First Nation in Vancouver. At four years old, Francine's mother died of cancer, leaving her and her two brothers to live with their grandmother on the Capilano Reserve. After her grandmother's death, fourteen year old Francine entered foster care.

Francine's world was once again turned upside down. "It's really hard to move out of your house to somewhere you don't even know," Francine says. "My foster family cared about me, but it was so different. I felt like I didn't belong."

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Francine's mix of grief, social isolation, and anxiety soon became overwhelming. "I missed most of my grade nine year," says Francine. "I just couldn't do it."

ERNIE'S STORY

For Ernestine (Ernie), a long-term community activist and YU volunteer in Mission, Francine's story rings true to her own. Ernie, from the Skatin First Nation, was orphaned at one year old. Ernie was then adopted by a white family and grew up outside of her reserve.

Ernie experienced the tensions of a third culture kid. Because she grew up in a non-Indigenous family, she lost her status card for much of her life. "I have the best adopted family," says Ernie. "Yet, I still found myself struggling at times with the question, 'Who am I?'"

A COMMON PAST

Francine and Ernie's stories share another difficult thread—the knowledge that their relatives were forcibly separated from their families and sent to residential schools.

“Losing my biological family meant that I lost my culture and identity. I disappeared.”

Residential school survivors faced severe psychological trauma, usually also resulting in physiological trauma. These effects can still be felt today. "Survivors were taken away from their families and loved ones and not shown any parenting or teaching skills," says Ernie. "Most troubling, there wasn't any love. You can see why they turned to things like drugs and alcohol—they had no idea how to cope. It continues to affect our youth today. It is truly intergenerational."

Francine feels this trauma cycle viscerally. "Losing my biological family meant that I lost my culture and identity," she says. "I disappeared."

GROWTH AND HEALING

Francine says her relationship with Katie was a major turning point in her life. "Katie was so persistent," recalls Francine. "I didn't want to see her, but she kept coming back." For Katie, what Francine needed was obvious. "She just needed someone to have her back, to see her and to listen to her," she says. As Katie showed up for her, it built Francine's confidence. "Katie became peace for me," she says. "She was just so consistent."

Ernie found herself drawn to this same environment of care and consistency when she learned about Youth Unlimited at a town hall meeting for at-risk youth in Mission. While there, she met YU youth worker Barry Mcleod, they formed an immediate friendship. When Youth Unlimited's partnership program, MY House, was created in 2015, Ernie became its first volunteer.



LEARNING HER VOICE

For Francine, change continues, but it's now trending in the right direction. After aging out of the foster care system, Francine moved back to the Capilano Reserve where she now lives with her brother in her grandmother's house. She works part time with the Squamish Nation's Food Distribution Program, and has taken up painting. "Art is a medium for healing," Francine says. "It's helped me begin to find who I am."

Katie couldn't be more proud. "Francine has so much potential," she says. "I'm excited to keep watching her grow."

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Now a full-time support worker in Mission, Ernie believes that the work Barry and the MY House team do is integral in the lives of Indigenous youth in Mission. "These youth just need someone to care, and [the YU staff] are the most wonderful, loving people," Ernie says. "They changed my life; they change the life of every kid that walks through the MY House doors."

Both Ernie and Francine continue to advocate for Indigenous youth, hoping each young person will get the space to share their story and find much-needed support. "Indigenous kids need to be heard," Francine says. "We have a lot to offer, and I'm excited to see what happens with new opportunities for Indigenous youth. We're survivors."