Poems by Aboriginal students from School District #22, Vernon and
Cultural Immersion School, Okanagan Indian Band

Together with the Children
THE ELDER PROJECT
Together with the Children

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Together with the Children — The Elder Project

**Answer your phone!** It could lead to a September afternoon filled with cups of jasmine tea, an offer to write a book with renowned poet Wendy Morton and an Olympic performance with a world champion hoop dancer! I’m glad I picked up and said, “Hello…”

**Open your invitation!** We invited Aboriginal students from Grades 4–12. We invited elders, families, anyone who wanted to become a published author. Alexis Park hosted us in the Okanagan language class, Seaton and Charles Bloom secondary schools hosted afternoon workshops. We felt welcomed.

**Invite your family!** We held four sessions and with each new session we grew in numbers. Students, Elders, and community members came not only to share their stories but to share a good cup of tea, and warm, fresh bannock served with a side of poetry.

**Write a poem!** We had a lot of fun. We shared a lot of frustrations. Some of us cried. Some of us laughed. There were memories of our families, our farm life, our work and school experiences.

**Touch a heart!** One vice-principal shared that the event was powerful. He overheard a grandmother sharing her residential school experience with her grandchildren. The power of her story impacted his understanding: he is forever changed.

**Open this book!** You will hear the desire, wishes, dreams, and love swelling within the words of many nations speaking, as written by the daughters, sons, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, neighbours, and friends of their communities.

**Read these poems!** You’ll ride in a canoe. You’ll see turpentine poured on a head. You’ll eat hard tack cookies. Smell a box of crayons. As you turn each page, you’ll meet us and learn more about who we are.

All my relations,
Sandra Lynn Lynxleg / Ojibwe, Scottish, Irish
District Principal, Aboriginal Education
SD 22 Vernon, British Columbia
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Nana Carol

I was 5 when I had to go to residential school. My mother took me. When she had to leave, I cried. I grabbed her. I hollered, “Don’t leave me, I want to go home with you!”

When we first came to residential school, they put turpentine on our hair for lice. We had to scrub our skins to get the colour off. We all dressed alike.

I got punished for speaking my language, Ojibwe. They hit me with the strap, on my hands, on my legs.

We tried to run away. The police picked us up. I was strapped again.

I missed a year and half. I had tuberculosis. I went back. I was there for 10 years.

I still speak some Ojibwe. I have 2 children, 4 grandchildren.

I want to see my grandchildren graduate and live without pain.
Grandpa Richard

I was born in Vernon in 1941. One of my memories of school was making new friends, then getting the strap for speaking Okanagan. My favourite memory of school is sports day. I came in first in quite a lot of things. My favourite hobbies: hockey, canoeing, baking, baseball. Best of all, the rodeo. I logged for a while, then I got into rodeoing. What is important: respecting the Elders, the land. My happiest memories: driving down the road to a rodeo or paddling just alone in a canoe.
TOGETHER WITH THE CHILDREN
Julie
We grew up in Ontario.
I had many siblings.
I was poor, but I wasn’t poor,
because the medicine man knew something
and that was we would get ours back
in the 7th generation.
I know this because my mother told me.

I believe in respect
for the land and body.
One day we will find ourselves
and get what we deserve.

ELI DIXON  
Cree  
Grade 8  
Charles Bloom Secondary

JULIE WILDING  
Cree
Kokum

I was born in Manitoba in 1947.
My childhood memories:
fresh hot bread, winter nights,
frost on the windows,
hot fire in the stove.

My memories of school:
ink wells, braids, hard tack cookies,
lunch pails made from lard cans,
outdoor toilets,
getting strapped.

I can speak Ojibwe, which I learned in my 50s.
When my sister and my daangwe would phone
I'd ask them to speak only in our language.

I want to learn how to bead, and speak Spanish.

My jobs: waitress, nanny, housekeeper, clerk, secretary,
executive assistant, legal secretary, academic assistant,
a good wife.

What makes me happy: my grandchildren, a good cup of tea,
a sunny day, a sewing machine.

Kokum Rosine Ryan-LeWIs
Ojibwe
Grade 9
Kalamalka Secondary

Brendan Ryan-LeWIs
Ojibwe
Grade 5
Coldstream Elementary

Colton Ryan-LeWIs
Ojibwe
Grade 5
Coldstream Elementary
Denise

I was born in Hamilton, Montana. I was raised as a white kid. When I was 12 my great grandmother said she was a Cherokee princess. Then I started asking questions. Who am I? What am I? Where am I from? I’m still trying to learn. I found the wedding picture of my great grandmother Esalla Lucinda Berry. I found her wedding license. Who am I?
Vicky
I was born in Lytton. The youngest of 12. Five went to residential school. My brother, he can’t talk about it. I know a little Nlaka’pamux, the Thompson language. I wish my mom and dad were alive to teach me. I’ve been a waitress, cook, clerk, cashier, production line worker, student, now a certified teacher. My favorite memory is salmon fishing with my dad on the Fraser. I wish I had learned to make a dip net.
Grandma Martha

I was born in 1931 in Summerland.  
My parents were migrant workers.  
I still live in the house my parents built.  
We spoke Okanagan at home. I understand it.  
I speak a few words.

I remember my cousins and me going to the mountain,  
picking a stick, using it as a horse. We’d gallop up deer trails.  
I went to school at Six Mile Creek Day School.

My jobs: army camp kitchen supervisor and cook,  
Round Lake Treatment Centre cook for 22 years.  
What makes me happiest: to sit at a family dinner  
with everyone present.

What I wish: to have learned more in my schooling.  
I only made it to Grade 7. I love to read.  
Even though school wasn’t there for me,  
it is now there for the children.

SARINA TORRES
Okanagan/Mayan
Grade 9
Clarence Fulton Secondary

GRANDMA MARTHA LOUIS
Okanagan
TOGETHER WITH THE CHILDREN

[Image of three people smiling and wearing cultural attire]
Sandra

I didn’t go to residential school.
I had my own residential school at home.
I was locked in closets,
put in the basement for hours,
not allowed friends.
I was abused physically, sexually, emotionally.
I was kicked out of Grade 1
for writing with my left hand.
They called left-handed people freaks.
I was raised by my Scottish side of the family,
I couldn’t acknowledge my Cree heritage.
When I was ten I ran away from home,
slept on the school ground in Calgary
because I thought it was safe.
The principal called my mom. I was sent back.
For 10 years I was addicted to heroin.
I was on East Hastings in Vancouver.
For 14 years, I’ve been a counselor
for sexual abuse and addictions.
I learned to hoop dance.
Today I teach children to hoop dance
in a traditional way.
I am happiest when I see young people
finding their culture, healing.

KAIDEN ROSS
Sta:lə
Grade 7
Alexis Park Elementary

SANDRA MILLAR
Cree
Grandpa Art

I was born in Val d’Or, Abitibi, Quebec. I have 3 brothers, 2 sisters. I remember the farm work: feed horses, chickens, milk cows, clean the barn.
Mom cooked, made clothes, worked in the garden. Looked after us. Dad was a sawmill boss.
Our school was small. One teacher.

Oooh. I was bad. Very bad. Did things. I cut a girl’s braid with my pocket knife.
The girl cried. I felt sorry for the girl, her hair all lopsided. Covered the toilet with clear wrap.
They came out screaming.

Oooh. I was bad. Very bad.
At a school reunion, the girl said, I remember you. You cut my braid.
I’ve lived in Silvercan, Punzie, Lees Corner.
Worked in the bush. I cut off the top of my finger.
My granddaughter told me that was karma.
Our Family

We are brother and sister.
We have different fathers.
Jareth's dad is a carver.
Cheyenne's dad is a chef.
We do not think of each other in halves.
We are brother and sister and we love each other.
Our mom worked hard to take care of us.
She is disabled from working.
Our mom's parents are nana and nano.
Our nano passed away. He was a good man.
Our grandma Ta'a was Jareth's dad's mom. She passed too.
We remember her. She smelled like crayons.

We are writers. We're each writing a book.
Jareth published a short story.
Cheyenne has published books.
Our mom supports our writing.

CHEYENNE LEO
Ojibwe
2009 Graduate
Charles Bloom Secondary

JARETH LEO
Chehalis
Grade 6
Cherryville Elementary
Janet

I have 5 grandchildren.
I raised 2 since they were babies.
I’ve lived in Vernon for 45 years.
I used to know everyone. It’s changed.
Now, they’ve taken away my mountain.
It was my playground.
They chased away my bears, my deer, my coyotes, even my snakes.
They’ve filled it with houses.
All the Elders in my family are gone.
So many jobs: waitress, cashier, payroll clerk, bartender, ticket seller, Aboriginal Support Worker, treasurer.
I am proud to be Métis, Iroquois, Cree, French.
Together with the children
David

I was born in Vernon, BC.
I grew up on the reservation.
Spent a lot of time with my grandparents on the lakefront.
I grew up following the seasonal harvest with my parents, my sisters.
I remember my crib, an empty apple bin.
I quit school after grade 8, went back for my GED at 19.
I worked construction.
Now I’m an artist. My true calling.
I wish I could have learned Okanagan language, it’s part of our culture. It shows who we are.

JODI-RAE BOBB
Nlaka’pamux
Grade 11
W.L. Seaton Secondary

DAVID WILSON
Okanagan
Auntie Sarah

As I child, we moved around a lot.
I’ve lived in Surrey, Langley, Coquitlam, Mission,
Aldergrove, Abbotsford, New Westminster, Maple Ridge,
Pitt Meadows, the Queen Charlotte Islands, Panama City, Vernon.
I’ve worked at McDonald’s and Zellers.
I wish I would have learned earlier
to have more confidence in myself.
I am happiest being around family and friends
who love me, who are there for me.
TOGETHER WITH THE CHILDREN
My Granny, Marie

lived six miles from Sugar Lake, down by the Fraser River in a log cabin surrounded by cedar trees shading the sheep, dog, horse, and cow.

She walked with her brothers three miles to school.
In the winter, it was so cold she'd need to make a fire along the way.
She gathered sticks to keep herself warm so she could keep walking.
When she met black bears, she'd bang things and the bears ran away.

One day her mother went to the hospital. She never came home again.

Granny left home when she was 12 to live with her Aunty and Uncle.
Later she became a practical nurse, worked in hospitals, worked in an alcohol and drug treatment centre for 14 years.

Her happiest memories: playing with her brothers and sisters.
They'd run around wild, racing through the fields and woods.
Later on, her children and her grandchildren living in her house created new, happy memories. She wishes she could have learned Okanagan but no one talked to her.
Wayne

I was born in Lytton, BC, raised by my parents, Johnny Green and Julia Raphael. I’ve lived in Kamloops, Rocky Mountain House, Salmon Arm, Prince George, Vernon. I have 11 siblings. Raised on a farm, we did chores, fed cows and horses before and after school. Wintertime: we’d cut, haul, chop wood, pack water half a mile from a frozen creek. Summertime: we’d plant gardens, fish, hunt gather berries.

We swam in the Fraser, climbed mountains. I have bad memories of residential school. I was home only in the summer. I went to public school in Lytton. I’ve worked on the railroad, construction, mining. I’ve worked on oil rigs, road building, I’d like to learn to sing, play guitar, carve wood.

KENDRA SAMPSON
Nlaka’pamux
Grade 5
Okanagan Landing Elementary

WAYNE RAPHAEL
Nlaka’pamux
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Wilke

I was born in Westbank.
I was raised at the Head of the Lake, nkmaplqs.
I remember the Chinese gardens. We planted rows of tomatoes, weeded them by hand.
I was ten years old.

The Elders went to shoot deer, some people went fishing.
We went to town to buy pots, pans, needles, salt.

I went to residential school; I was 8, left at 13.
Wasn’t learning anything.

I went horse logging; we skidded logs out of the bush.

Our language is coming back. I teach Okanagan.
My students can speak now.
I can’t read or write Okanagan that good.
I wish I could have learned.

LINDSY OPPENHEIMER
Grade 7
nkmaplqs i snmamaymt n kl sqilxw tet
Cultural Immersion School

YETKO BROOKE BEARSHIRT-ROBINS
Grade 7
nkmaplqs i snmamaymt n kl sqilxw tet
Cultural Immersion School

JOHN (WILKIE) LOUIS
Okanagan
Half Breed

I lived with my grandmother all my childhood. She was born in 1909. She believed the “half breeds” took my mother away. Anything my mother did was wrong because of the natives she associated with.

I remember this life: the drinking, the laughing, the fighting, the playing of guitars.

At school I was beat up, threatened, scared. I skipped school to help my grandmother. I was a cook.

I have four children. I understand my grandmother’s bias more now. The alcohol poisoned my grandmother’s view. Alcohol poisoned my mother in another way. So much to understand.
TOGETHER WITH THE CHILDREN
My Grandpa

I was born at Whiteman Creek.
I lived at Brown’s Creek.
I’ve lived in the Okanagan 62 years.
School was difficult for me because of the white society.

I did some ranch work, worked at sawmills, logged, taught native crafts, operated machines.
I remember breaking horses, chasing wild horses, watching my dad, George Tronson, train them.

I know some Okanagan language. Not enough.
I wish I could learn.
I would like to teach the native system of how to honour our Elders, and have the public school system respect our way of teaching our culture without the need of a diploma.

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JOSEPH TRONSON  VERN TRONSON
Okanagan       Okanagan
Grade 6        Okanagan
Alexis Park Elementary
Memories

I was born in 1950. There wasn’t much money. There was little food. My parents only spoke Okanagan when they were going somewhere. They worked in the orchards. Brought home food for us. When we went to school, the schools were not as equal for the natives as they were for white people. At school sometimes, for entertainment, the boys would see who could pee the farthest.

Darcy Clough
Okanagan
Grade 7
Alexis Park Elementary

Gary Bonneau
Okanagan
TOGETHER WITH THE CHILDREN
Grandma Maggie

I was born in Alliston, Ontario.
I loved the rowboat, the cove, the water lilies, the sunfish, the sheepheads – jewels behind their eyes.
I went to Catholic school. Remember nuns.
At public school, I lost all interest.
Moved many times. Had many careers.
Much education.
We were a family together.
Happiness to me is a loving honest family.
Respect means love well live well.

JENIKA KING
Mohawk
Grade 4
École Beairsto Elementary

MAGGIE KING
Mohawk
Queen
I was a New Year’s baby of 1961.
Q’wen to some. Gwen to most.
I live at Six Mile on Royal Road.
Born in the Okanagan Valley.
I’ve lived in small towns, big cities, villages.
Westlock, Vancouver, Desa Bayan.
I was with Canada World Youth.
I’ve been to Russia, Mexico, Guatemala.
I married a Chapin.
Habla español and some nsyilx̑ən.
His family calls me Wendy.
I’ve been a kindergarten teacher, a labourer, federal employee, secretary. I like to work.
I like money.
The Okanagan Valley has changed, but attitudes towards native people have not.
My summer memories are of water and stars.
I don’t know my language. I wish I could learn.
Someday I will.
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Auntie Lauretta

I grew up in the old house.
I lived there for 20 years.
We’d ride the old work horse to the lake,
then we’d rush back to throw food on the table.
We’d cook in big pots: tomatoes, corn, potatoes;
fill the pot right up. That’s how we did things.
We cooked right from the dirt.
We celebrated everything. We even celebrated Labour Day.
Everything got decorated.

SOPHIA TORRES
Okanagan/Mayan
Grade 11
Clarence Fulton Secondary

LAURETTA LOUIS
Okanagan/Shuswap

I went to school up to Grade 6.
I finished when I was older.
I have worked canning, as a waitress.
Worked at the bus depot. For many years,
I volunteered at a corrections institute.
Those young men told me a lot.
I am a Mohawk Indian
from Viking, Alberta.
I’ve been removed from my Mohawk roots.
I’m sad I don’t know that side.
I’ve lived in Vernon 31 years.
The church is now a strip mall.
I was smart,
counselors said so.
I’ve worked at Sun Auto
Safeway
Save-On, Sobeys
Superstore.
I’ve written poems about my life.
They’re helping me move on from my past mistakes.
My Great Gramma

is Gladys Bonneau.
She is 88 years old.
She wakes up before the sun.
She went to residential school in Kamloops.
Boys on one side. Girls on the other.
If she spoke Okanagan, she got strapped.
She likes to bead necklaces, bracelets, and speak Okanagan to me.

SABRINA LOUIS  
Okanagan  
Grade 6  
Alexis Park Elementary

GLADYS BONNEAU  
Okanagan
Michelle

17 kids in my dad’s family:
8 pairs of shoes was all we had.
Whoever woke up first wore them.
If you woke up late, they would wrap your feet
in burlap in bread pans, whatever was handy,
and you would walk to school in the snow.
My dad’s mom was Cree,
but he denied being Métis.
In residential school, my dad said he had to
kneel and pray and ask for forgiveness
because he was Indian.

My dad spoke French. So in French class,
I told the teacher *that’s not how you say it.*
I didn’t know that my dad spoke Michif.

In Grade 1, my teacher picked me to read.
I took the chance even though I didn’t know how.
I still remember that.

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KRISTYN SCHOENKNECHT
Cree
Grade 10
Clarence Fulton Secondary

MICHELLE PETRUK
Cree/Métis
Mom

Lived in the valley of the Okanagan amongst the Navajo. All languages loved but not learned. Jobs of teaching tolerance to the young and forlorn. Today and tomorrow: my only wish is unity and a celebration of diversity.

MARIA HERMAN
Okanagan
age 6
with help from Mom

CHARLENE SMITH
Okanagan
Acknowledgments

One day, while in Vernon, I came across a brochure for the Aboriginal Education Department of the Vernon School District, prepared by District Principal, Sandra Lynxleg. I was charmed by the poetry of her name. I called her up. Told her I was working with Aboriginal children and their Elders in the Cowichan School District on *The Elder Project*. The Elders would tell the students their stories, and the students would turn the stories into poems. Sandra said, “I’d love to learn more; let’s meet. I’ve got half an hour.” So we met.

In June, we began the project *Together with the Children—The Elder Project*. I worked with students and their Elders as they wrote poems. The workshops were well publicized. People wandered in and found students eager to hear their stories and turn them into poems. Often the Elders came with the children. There was magic. And this book is the result.

I would like to thank Sandra Lynxleg for her marvelous organization of these workshops and her enthusiasm for the project. I would also like to thank Gwen Louis Torres, Vicky Raphael, Janet Gagne, Ashley Plant, and Kathi Shields for all their help on this project. As well, I would like to thank Ken Gatzke, principal of Charles Bloom Secondary in Lumby, Mike Bell, principal of Seaton, and Jennifer Gardner, principal of Alexis Park, for their time and assistance to host the workshops. Special thanks to Ben Louis, Okanagan language teacher for the Aboriginal Education Department, for making time for us to participate with his students, and a special thank you to the nk’umaxw lis qilxʷtst (Cultural Immersion School, Okanagan Indian Band) for allowing us to participate in their classroom.

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WENDY MORTON
Together with the Children
THE ELDER PROJECT