

2024

Indigenous Nurses Day

The value of patience and an open ear: Monique Pat

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Monique Pat: Submitted Photo

On April 10th, 2024 we recognize all Indigenous Nurses who have accomplished significant feats in their field. Monique Pat is one such nurse who strengthened Indigenous healthcare in her liaison role

Patience, listening and outreach have been central to Monique Pat's approach since she began her healthcare career in 1997.

Pat, an Indigenous Liason Nurse for Island Health was raised in the T'sou-ke First Nation where she is a Band member. As she grew up, Pat's father spent time working as an LPN in Victoria. This, along with a relative in nursing, provided her with glimpses into that path.

"When I was a little girl, [my Dad] used to take me to visit with the elderly at the Gorge Road Hospital," Pat said. "My Dad felt... bad for them not having visitors so he'd bring me and I'd get to be a granddaughter to all the elderly people."

She didn't realize then, but these experiences would set the stage for her future.

Entering healthcare

In her mid-twenties, Pat took advantage of an opportunity from both the 'Namgis and Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations to train as a healthcare aid. She started her schooling in 1997.

"I thought 'Wow, what a great career,' and I applied to the course," Pat recalled. "We got to also work with the elders... that was really where my first training was."

Throughout the early 2000s, Pat's journey as a care-aid led her to diabetic outreach work through local friendship centres.

"We did a lot of community work... Initially, nobody really wanted to talk about [diabetes], but by the end of it I had 200 people attending my luncheons," Pat said.

Using luncheons and food as an opportunity to share health knowledge, Pat was able to make her messaging more engaging and understandable.

"We were doing healthy lunches every week and then it had to go to once a month because they were so popular. We were trying to have more healthy traditional and modern foods together," Pat said.

In addition to the mouthwatering salmon and traditional oven-baked bread, she took to hosting cedar weaving circles for outreach.

There she encountered Darlene Martin, an Indigenous Nurse who would constantly encourage Pat to pursue nursing. Martin was the only Indigenous Liason Nurse on the Island at the time — according to Pat this number has significantly increased in the years since.

"She was a really strong mentor, a really strong influence and [she] really believed in me always... She supported us no matter what," Pat said.

An Indigenous Nurse Liason

In 2006, Pat acted on Martin's advice. Through an accelerated two-year program, she became a psychiatric nurse in 2008. Pat took well to this field as she places importance on listening to and being present with patients.

"It's kind of a sacred space to me, to be with someone during their healing," Pat said. "[It's] more listening than talking, and making sure you're seeing them."

Again encouraged by Martin, she moved seamlessly into an Indigenous Liaison Nurse role. From there she was able to pursue various initiatives that mattered to her.

One such initiative was embracing the Orange Shirt Day and Every Child Matters movements in their early days.

“I educated and promoted [those days] from the very beginning... “I wouldn’t let go...severe racism was done to these survivors and I wanted the survivors to feel supported,” Pat said

This allowed Pat to connect and befriend Phyllis Webstad, the creator of the Orange Shirt Society. As the daughter, niece and granddaughter of residential school survivors, these movements resonated personally with Pat.

Another important aspect of her career is related to where she provided care. During her time with Victoria’s Royal Jubilee Hospital, Pat became a frequent user, and advocate of its All Nations Healing Room.

“It’s a room where they can smudge, or do ceremonies,” Pat explained. “I’d take clients from the sobering centre and we’d just sit there for awhile, smudge, listen and talk.”

Additionally, she helped institute change in the charting system that allowed Indigenous languages to be recognized in Vancouver Island hospitals. This was inspired by experiences from her past.

“My Granny had told me once that during the census, she was told that her language was not considered a language... and that annoyed me,” Pat said. “I was able to put ‘Do you speak a First Nations language?’ in the [new charts]... for me, it was a big deal.”

These changes and initiatives were significant moments for Pat, but they would not have been possible without the grounded approach she takes in her work.

“Taking your time, realizing that you have two ears and one mouth for a reason,” Pat said on how she approached every day. “Respect goes a long way and knowing we don’t know everything [is important]... each encounter is a new one to learn from.”

Although Pat has made an undeniable difference in Indigenous healthcare, she says work still needs to be done to be culturally considerate when caring for Indigenous patients.

“It’s going to take generations,” Pat said. “The diversity of us in Canada is challenging...we have so many different languages to learn, so many different beliefs.”

She said there “isn’t just one real solution” to instantly improve Indigenous healthcare, but through her work and the work of others, change is occurring.

As of April 2024, Pat has taken a leave of absence from her liaison role carefully considering her next career decision. One thing is certain, regardless of what she does next, she will be approaching it with patience and competence.

“I feel like I’m reinventing myself. The sky’s the limit, the door is open,” Pat said on what her future holds. “I want to be engaged somehow with traditional art and continuing this hard work we have to do to make change.”

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