

2024

Indigenous Nurses Day

Overcoming the odds: Doreen Peter

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On April 10th, 2024 we recognize all Indigenous Nurses who have accomplished significant feats in their field. With three decades of experience in community health and home care, Peter surpassed her own expectations and inspired others.

An elder and retired healthcare professional with three decades of experience with Cowichan Tribes as a community health representative (CHR) and home support worker, Doreen Peter is well-versed in overcoming the odds. Throughout her life, she has helped instill her resilience into countless others.

“My mother was a very cultural person and that’s how she raised me, so I have that knowledge to share,” Peter said.

In her formative years, Peter already knew her helping nature could translate to a career she dreamt of.

“In early grade school, they always used to ask you ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ And I knew I wanted to be a nurse when I grew up,” Peter said.

However, her road to healthcare had its potholes and speed bumps. In 1957 she was sent to the Kuper Island Residential School where she would spend a large portion of her youth.

This left her with a lot of trauma and anxiety to work through as a young woman.

The turning point

“Everything more or less stems from the residential schools,” Peter said on some struggles she had in early adulthood. “The fear... of strangers and the whole nine-yards. So I was in my own little world.”

Around this period she spent time in a variety of job roles through the Cowichan Tribes. From working with the language program to acting as a receptionist. However, none of these paths appealed to her long-term. The turning point for her was a life skills course she enrolled in and excelled at.

“That [course] kind of opened me up to be more social,” Peter said. “[I was] not afraid to be around people like I used to be”

With newfound confidence, Peter decided to pursue a field more suitable to her strengths and she eventually aced the resident care attendant course.

Now, she could move into a role providing home care for residents. She did this for over a decade.

“The physically and mentally challenged were most of the community members that I worked with,” Peter recalled. “I enjoyed working in that area.”

Peter fit into the position perfectly and she seemed to have all the right qualities.

“It felt natural doing what I was doing so I stayed,” Peter said. “You had to have heart for the job... I like to help people and they always seemed like they were the ones that needed the help the most. So I guess I thought that’s where I needed to be.”

At times, she received calls from patients in the dead of night — with her caring nature she was always able to lend a hand.

Constantly learning, Peter attended university in Kelowna to learn about community health.

Once again, she was a top student. This consistent achievement helped her confidence grow.

“I was on top of the world when I realized what I could do, and where I could go with my life,” Peter said on her academic success.

After fourteen years as a resident care attendant she moved into a new role as a community health representative.

Paying it forward

Finally, she was able to help organize programs and create opportunities like the ones provided to her. These programs and workshops were aimed at strengthening the community and improving collective health. Oftentimes, these would evolve to suit the needs of participants.

“The one program we had developed started off as a cooking program. We had people come and cook and share. And [they] learned how to make healthier meals at home,” Peter said.

Peter and her team organized a range of events related to food, all the way to cedar-weaving, wool working and moccasin-making workshops.

Similar to educational success in her younger days, Peter felt these events provided an opportunity for people to break out of their shells and learn new skills.

“People come from a home life where they’re more secluded and then they come out and start participating,” Peter said on what the programs provided for participants. “[Each participant was] like a flower to me that blooms into a pretty flower after. They gained so much skill and their self-esteem was built up.”

Peter said one of her main focuses as a community health rep was to “encourage more people to come to the healthcare field” which allowed her to accomplish her own goals.

In addition to having a “heart for the job” and encouraging others to join, Peter also has a core philosophy that she applied throughout her career.

“We had opportunities to be the ears for our people. Through those times I felt that companionship was a lot of what our people needed,” Peter said about her approach to healthcare. “Somebody to listen.”

After three decades in health for Cowichan Tribes, Peter has been officially retired for the past three years. However, she still makes good use of her time.

Peter remains involved as an elder and mentor for multiple university committees related to Indigenous healthcare. Additionally, she has been helping to develop an Indigenous Masters of Nursing program.

Although this may seem like a large workload, Peter wouldn’t have it any other way.

“That’s what keeps me going,” Peter said. “Being able to help others.”

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