[kee/chi - nee/wesk] • *noun*

THE GREAT SPIRIT OF THE FEMALE SIDE OF LIFE OF ALL THINGS

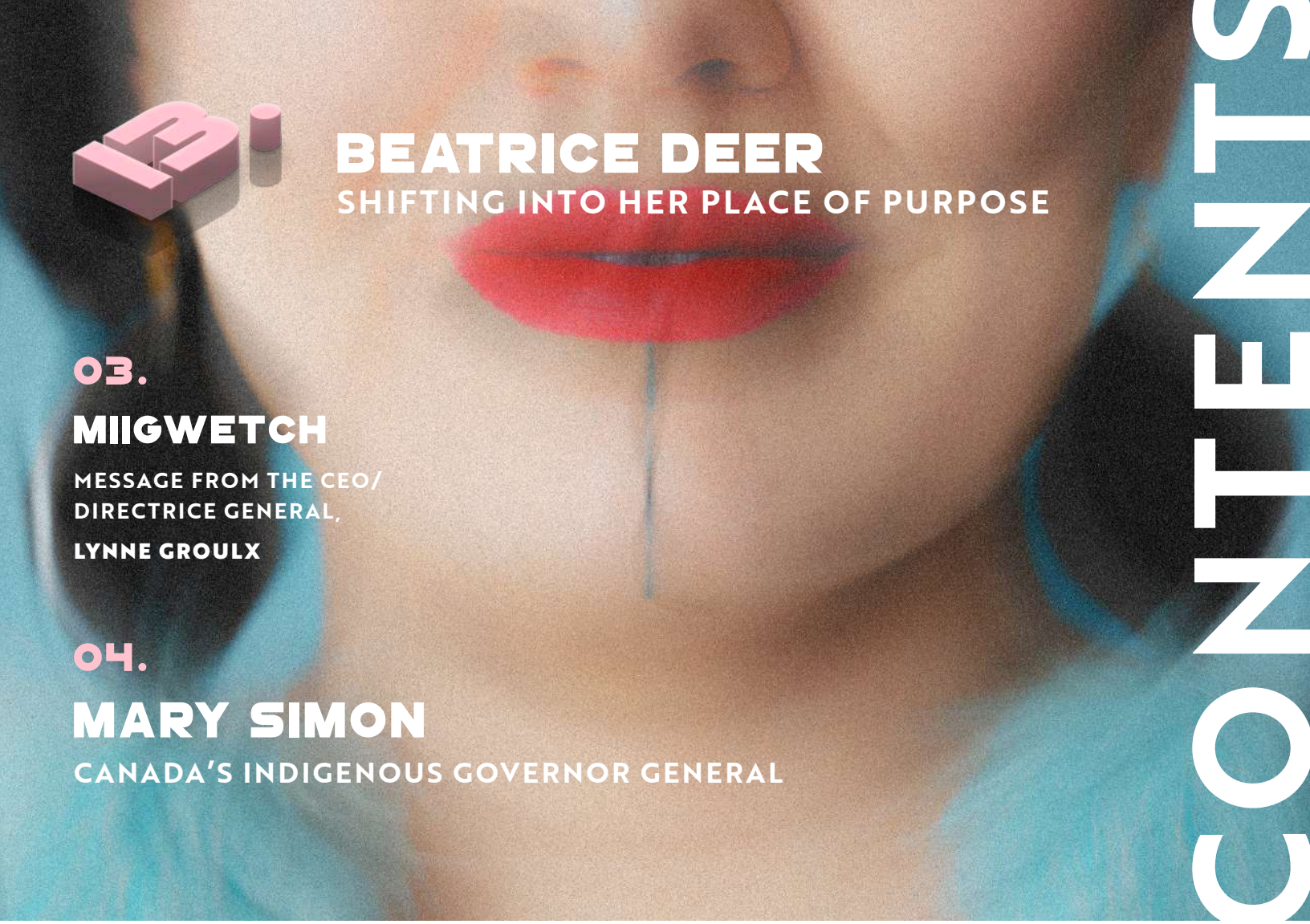
KCI-NIWESQ

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA MAGAZINE

WOMEN & the NORTH

ISSUE 11

CONTENTS



03.

MIIGWETCH

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO/ DIRECTRICE GENERAL,

LYNNE GROULX

04.

MARY SIMON

CANADA'S INDIGENOUS GOVERNOR GENERAL

07.

SUSAN AGLUKARK

THE ARCTIC ROSE FOUNDATION

10.

KASKA DENA DESIGN:

BEAUTY BORN FROM DARKNESS

16.

NUNAVUT'S COMMISSIONER:

FOR THE LOVE OF INUKTUT

18. **THE PIRURSIIVIK PROJECT**

EMPOWERING INUIT YOUTH

23.

LISA KOPERQUALUK

BRINGING THE ARCTIC'S ISSUES TO THE WORLD CLIMATE STAGE

A MESSAGE FROM NWAC'S CEO

LYNNE GROULX LL.L., J.D. | CEO
NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

WELCOME TO THE ELEVENTH EDITION OF KCI-NIWESQ, THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA.

IN THIS ISSUE WE EXPLORE THE LIVES OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN THE NORTH.

We begin with an interview with Mary Simon, the veteran Inuit leader who is now head of state in Canada. Ms Simon talks to us about living in two worlds—the one of her people, many of whom still have homes in the village of Kuujjuaq near Ungava Bay, and the southern world where she lives in the regal milieu of Governor General.

Simon says she plans to help drive the ongoing process of reconciliation by facilitating communication between Indigenous Peoples and the rest of Canada.

We talk to Eva Aariak, the former premier of Nunavut who is now the territorial commissioner (which is like lieutenant governor) and who has made it a lifelong mission to preserve her native Inuktut language.

We hear from Lisa Koperqualuk who has witnessed the effects of global warming in her own community of Puvirnituq, on the shores of Hudson Bay. As vice-president for international affairs of the Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, Ms Koperqualuk is telling world leaders that climate change is an existential problem for her people, and that the Inuit must be part of the solution.

We learn about the Arctic Rose Foundation established by famed Inuit singer and songwriter Susan Aglukark, who will receive a humanitarian award in May at Canada's Juno Awards. Ms Aglukark says she is trying to create the safe spaces that will give young Inuit and First Nations people the kind of confidence that would have helped her as she was starting her career.

We learn how art is teaching the tiny community of Inukjuak the importance of healthy food and water and giving the people a place to grow, both literally and figuratively.

And we hear from Natasha Peter, a member of Kaska Nation in Yukon, who has overcome addiction to fulfill her dream of becoming a designer of fashions and jewellery. Ms Peter tells us that getting back into Indigenous culture has helped heal her body, mind, and soul.

The North is such an important part of this country, and it is hugely important to NWAC, where our Inuit sisters are making essential contributions to the advancement of Indigenous women. We are proud to have the opportunity to tell you some of their stories.

So, thank you once again for opening the pages that follow. Thank you for reading the eleventh edition of *Kci-Niwesq*. Please drop us a line and let us know what you think at reception@nwac.ca.

MIIGWETCH.

MONTHLY MAGAZINE TO TELL OUR STORIES

MARY SIMON

CANADA'S INDIGENOUS GOVERNOR GENERAL

RECONCILIATION IS A WAY OF LIFE, THE GOVERNOR GENERAL SAID IN AN INTERVIEW WITH KCI-NIWESQ.

Photo Credit: Rideau Hall Press Office

"There's no end to it."

- MARY SIMON

MARY SIMON accepted her appointment to the highest office in Canada knowing the work she will do for Indigenous Peoples in this country—her people—will never be completed.

Reconciliation is a way of life, the Governor General said in an interview with *Kci-Niwesq*. "There's no end to it."

Reconciliation, she says, "means being able to live peacefully among different cultures and to respect cultures other than your own, and to have a relationship that allows everyone, whether you're Indigenous or a member of another culture, to have space to determine the future that you think is right for your people."

So, while reconciliation will never be fully "accomplished," achieving that peaceful co-existence is "very doable," says Ms Simon. "And I can support and assist that process by being that person, at the highest level, to bring a conversation to this country that will allow us to be frank and open with one another, and to be able to build a new relationship."

Ms Simon, now 74, is the second oldest child in a family of eight children. She was born in Kangiqsualujjuaq, Quebec, a tiny community on the Ungava coast. Her father was an English fur trader who arrived in the Arctic when he was 19 and never left. Her mother, an Inuk, spoke no English when they met.

When she was young, Ms Simon's family moved southwest to Kuujjuaq, a larger village that was the site of the region's only federal day school. When school was not in session, many nights were spent living on the land in tents.

"I would find my grandmother stoking the wood stove, and we would sit there quietly while she told us different things that were happening in our lives," says Ms Simon.

"She would also tell us the legends that were told many, many moons ago, when she was growing up. And I still remember those stories—not all of them, probably, but many of them," she says. "I found it so grounding and important to be able to listen to someone like my grandmother telling these

stories of our history in parts of the Arctic where Inuit were still living very nomadic lifestyles."

That has set a template for some of her ambitions as Governor General. She wants to tell the stories of her own people and to hear the stories of others.

"I WANT TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT FIRST NATIONS. I FEEL I KNOW A LOT, BUT I STILL NEED TO LEARN A LOT MORE ABOUT THE DIFFERENT NATIONS IN CANADA, AS WELL AS HOW WOMEN ARE WITHIN THE COUNTRY … ONE OF THE GOOD WAYS OF DOING THAT WOULD BE TO BE ABLE TO CREATE SAFE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE CAN TELL THEIR STORIES AND LEARN FROM THEM."

Throughout her adult life, Ms Simon says she has lived in two worlds—the world of the Inuit and the world of the settlers. It is a situation that was amplified with her installation as Governor General last summer, the move to stately Rideau Hall, and her immersion in the pomp and ceremony of her office.

Her family is still mostly in Kuujjuaq. "I live my Inuit culture when I go North and I practise it," says Ms Simon.

It is a culture she has been explaining and protecting since the early 1970s when she was a producer and announcer with CBC's Northern Service. She has also served as president of the Northern Quebec Inuit Association, president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, Canada's ambassador for circumpolar affairs, chair of the Arctic Council, and president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK).

In her six years as leader of ITK, which represents Canada's 64,000 Inuit, she witnessed the settling of the last major Inuit land claim, she saw recognition of the Inuit title to the vast resources of Canada's North, and she heard then Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologize for the damage caused to the First Peoples of this country by residential schools.

Ms Simon did not attend a residential school herself. She was not permitted because her father was not Indigenous. So she and her siblings were home-schooled.

"I lived in a small community of about 600 people. And all my friends left for school. They were all sent away," says Ms Simon. "My brother and my sisters and I were the only kids in the community. It was lonely."

For years, especially after church on Sunday, her grandmother would take her and her siblings to visit other people who had children who were away at school. "The women, especially, would hug us and they would be crying," says Ms Simon. "I never really understood that until later in my life … they were missing their children."

When her friends returned for the summer, they were changed. "They didn't connect with their families in the same way I remember them connecting," she says. "They were more distant and some of them didn't even want to speak Inuktitut anymore because of the influence that these schools had on them."

Ms Simon has maintained her native tongue and relies on Inuktitut to shape her approach to her new role.

The Inuktitut word that comes closest to capturing the meaning of reconciliation is *ajuinnata*. It means to be committed and trustworthy and to never give up.

"That's one of the words that I started using in my work here. When I got installed, one of the big messages that I got from Canadians is that they want things to change. They want a better relationship built with Indigenous Peoples," says Ms Simon. "When the unmarked graves were found in Kelowna and other places, there was a very big outcry on how terrible this

| **Photo Credit:** Rideau Hall Press Office

"RECONCILIATION MEANS BEING ABLE TO LIVE PEACEFULLY AMONG DIFFERENT CULTURES, AND TO RESPECT CULTURES OTHER THAN YOUR OWN. WHILE RECONCILIATION WILL NEVER BE FULLY ACCOMPLISHED, ACHIEVING THAT PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IS VERY DOABLE."

- Mary Simon

history is, and that it needs to be rectified and things need to change. So my role is to help build that new relationship."

Other priorities include improving mental health supports, taking action on climate change, providing opportunities for youth, and being an ambassador for Indigenous communities.

In the North, she says, there has been a resurgence of young women learning the traditional arts and ways of making clothing, and then creating businesses to sell their work. Many have become experts in beadwork and Ms Simon wears their pieces while on official duties.

"I felt that it was one of the things that tied us together—Inuit, Métis, and First Nations—and also Canadians in general," she says. "All the beadwork that we do in different cultures, and in different ways, binds us together. And I wanted to wear something that would show I am sensitive to the fact that I am not just a Governor General for Indigenous Peoples. I am a Governor General for Canadians, and I am Indigenous."

Ms Simon's appointment comes at a delicate time in the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples—a time when Indigenous communities are beginning to assert their independence from European colonizers after 400 years of oppression.

But she says she is honoured to be the first Indigenous person appointed to represent the Crown in Canada, and believes she will be able to bridge some of the discussions that must take place in the coming years.

"One of the things that I remember growing up, before we started to negotiate self-government and other institutions that are now in place in our region, is that the older folks—I remember my grandmother especially—they almost revered the Queen," says Ms Simon. "I always had great respect for the Queen, even though there was a lot of discussion about how the colonization process had had such a severe impact on us as Indigenous Peoples."

Now that she is the Queen's representative in Canada, she says, she can facilitate conversations about the ways in which the relationship between the government and Indigenous Peoples can be improved, and the ways that Indigenous Peoples can move further toward self-determination.

"I decided that this was a position where, as an apolitical person, I could help and support people who are trying to make things better between Indigenous Canadians and other Canadians."

Photo Credit: Rideau Hall Press Office

Pictured: **Susan Aglukark**

ARCTIC ROSE FOUNDATION:

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR INUIT AND NORTHERN INDIGENOUS YOUTH TO GROW

It was a decade ago that **SUSAN AGLUKARK**, the acclaimed Inuk singer and songwriter, received an email from a woman who had purchased dried foods and goods to send to people in Arctic Canada.

The woman, who lived in Montreal, realized it was going to cost as much to ship the food North as it did to purchase it in the first place.

"She asked what I could do to help her. I had started, at that point, doing expressive arts. I was trying to paint and do other things. And I thought, well, I can auction off a painting," Ms Aglukark said in an interview with Kci-Niwesq.

The revenue from the painting covered the cost of the food shipment, which prompted Ms Aglukark to think about other ways she could help her Inuit people, especially the youth. That was the start of the Arctic Rose Project, which grew to become the Arctic Rose Foundation a few years later.

In May of this year, at Canada's annual Juno Awards, Ms Aglukark will receive the humanitarian award presented by Music Canada from the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. She is receiving the award for the after-school program that gives students in Arctic communities outlets for expression while creating confidence and coping strategies.

Ms Aglukark rose to the top of the music industry in Canada in 1995 when her album *This Child* and the hit song "O Siem" dominated both country and adult contemporary charts. She blends Inuk folk music with a popular vibe ,which has garnered fans across the country. But she remains dedicated to the people of the North.

"I had so much anxiety in the early part of my career, and I lost so much emotionally by constantly making the choice to stay in this career. It cost me personally, it cost me in a lot of ways. But the benefits outweigh the costs, and I want to share that with as many people as possible. Because anything worth doing is worth fighting for," says Ms Aglukark.

"We really need to share those bits and pieces that were lessons and became stepping stones in the pursuit of our dreams and our careers. And that's really the purpose of the Arctic Rose Room—it's to keep dreams alive, to keep that hope alive."

After raising the money for that first shipment of food, Ms Aglukark and her husband thought about other things they could do.

They started with an essay-writing contest for Northern youth. Then there was a drive to collect gently used graduation gowns so that girls in Inuit communities who could not afford to travel south to buy a dress could still feel beautiful at their high school graduations. That was followed by a suicide prevention campaign. And then, leading up to Christmas,

Pictured: **Susan Aglukark**

there was a push to stock Northern food banks.

It was an overwhelming amount of work for the couple to take on by themselves, so they pursued charitable status and the Arctic Rose Foundation was born. It aims to create safe spaces for Inuit and Northern Indigenous youth to grow through Indigenous-led, arts-based, and culturally grounded after-school programs in their communities.

"It's essentially an expressive arts program," says Ms Aglukark. "We use stories and artists and professionals in the arts as a connection with the participants."

Through the Arctic Rose Foundation's after-school Messy Book Program, these mentors connect Inuit youth with their traditional and cultural backgrounds. The program combines art, writing, movement, music, digital technology, and drama to encourage creative cultural and historical exploration.

Basically, it offers emotional, cultural, spiritual, and physical safe places, says Ms Aglukark. "They're getting mentoring. They're getting guidance. They're getting healthy language. They're getting expressive arts while playing with art, while just playing in their space. These are the things, when I think about myself in the early years of my career and the things I now know that would have helped me."

These are all things, she says, that would have helped her to stay more calm. "The goal is to become more comfortable with themselves as students and also to become more comfortable with each other in healthier relationships and friendships."

There is so much colonization-related trauma in Indigenous communities, much of it associated with the residential schools. The artists and mentors have grown up in those environments, so they understand what the youth are dealing with, says Ms Aglukark.

"I was brought up by second-generation, third-generation traumatized parents and grandparents," she says. "I can sit in that Arctic Rose Room when we have a guest artist telling their story. As an Inuit person there in that community, I understand emotionally all the pieces that they are talking about—the trauma, the healing, the art—why all these pieces are important, and why it's so important that we as Indigenous people are creating these programs for us, by us, because we get those communities."

Until the pandemic hit, the Messy Book Program was offered in Rankin Inlet, Arctic Bay, and Cambridge Bay. COVID-19 forced a temporary hiatus, but there are plans to resume this fall, and to add two more Inuit communities and a First Nation in northern Manitoba and another in northern Ontario.

Students in Grades 11 and 12 are hired to help out, and they themselves have talked about the benefits.

One of them told Ms Aglukark about a day when she had an anxiety attack during school. "She said she remembered that she had the Arctic Rose Room to go to at the end of the day, and it really helped her calm down. It's about having that one consistent space that they know they will have access to; knowing they have some place to go at the end of the day and that place is always there for them."

The foundation has received some funding from the Jordan's Principle Program, the Arctic Inspiration Prize, and the federal government, but it is now looking for an outside donor so it can expand.

As for the humanitarian award, Ms Aglukark says she is grateful to be receiving an honour from her fellow musicians.

"It puts the work of the Arctic Rose team on the map at the national level among artists in the company of like-minded people. But it's also proof of how reconciling and healing are so important, and we have a lot of this healing to do before we can really truly begin to move forward as Canadians."

"WE REALLY NEED TO SHARE THOSE BITS AND PIECES THAT WERE LESSONS AND BECAME STEPPING STONES IN THE PURSUIT OF OUR DREAMS AND OUR CAREERS. AND THAT'S REALLY THE PURPOSE OF THE ARCTIC ROSE ROOM—IT'S TO KEEP DREAMS ALIVE, TO KEEP THAT HOPE ALIVE."

- SUSAN AGLUKARK

Pictured: **Susan Aglukark**

NATASHA PETER

KASKA DENA DESIGN: BEAUTY BORN FROM DARKNESS

FOR SOME, CREATIVITY IS AN ESCAPE FROM EVERYDAY LIFE. FOR NATASHA PETER, CREATIVITY IS WHAT SAVED HER LIFE.

"I just felt deep down that I needed something to change. I didn't want to be doing what I was doing anymore. If I did, I would have probably died a long time ago," says Ms Peter, owner of Kaska Dena Designs. She currently lives in Whitehorse but grew up in the few-hundred-population community of Ross River, about 500 kilometres north of the Yukon capital.

After working in northern mines for years, and falling into bad habits, Ms Peter found herself in a dark place. She turned to her culture and creativity as a form of "therapy" to set herself on the right path, and began making brightly coloured footwear, jewellery, and clothing.

"Having this creativity kind of put the addictions at ease. Now, I'm putting more of my effort into what I create, so it's going into something healthier. And it's showing my daughter that I'm a role model for her," she says. "I was going through really bad addictions, and I didn't think I was able to get out of it. But I really believe that getting back into your culture helps you with your mind, soul, and heart."

As she worked on her designs, her addictions gradually subsided, while her creativity flourished.

"I noticed that there was a big change with my artwork. It improved a lot. I could see things differently; I could feel, hear, and understand things differently," says Ms Peter. "And I'm really proud of how far I've come and where I'm at right now."

She gives credit for her artistic abilities to several matriarchal influences: her grandmother, her mother, her aunties, and her Elders.

Kaska Dena Designs is reflective of nature—the colours, textures, materials. Before innovations in technology, Indigenous Peoples relied on nature to guide their creativity. Ms Peter says her concepts come to her the same way.

One recent nature-inspired creation was her Harvesting Bumblebee, a statement neck piece signifying harvest season. Ms Peter often takes to the outdoors to connect with nature until finally, "it just comes to me." And at that point, "anything that comes to mind, I have to do it."

Each carefully hand-crafted piece Ms Peter creates carries a unique story. Many are connected to her past. These stories—or visions—are what make each piece of Kaska Dena Designs fashion one-of-a-kind.

"It's kind of meditating. I just try to remember all of the things that I was taught growing up and the experiences … sometimes things come to me in waves," says Ms Peter.

"Once I finish it, I kind of make up a name for the piece based on what I was thinking at the time. Then I tell the story. I always share a story of it."

One story, and piece, that meant much to Ms Peter is a guardian angel, which took her five years to complete.

"I had the vision in my head for four years. It would not leave my thoughts," she says. The piece was inspired by owl wings her father brought to her on one of his late-evening travels from Ross River to Whitehorse, to pick up supplies for the community.

Pictured **Natasha Peter**

"HAVING THIS CREATIVITY KIND OF PUT THE ADDICTIONS AT EASE. NOW, I'M PUTTING MY EFFORT MORE INTO WHAT I CREATE, SO IT'S GOING INTO SOMETHING HEALTHIER. AND IT'S SHOWING MY DAUGHTER THAT I'M A ROLE MODEL FOR HER. I REALLY BELIEVE THAT GETTING BACK INTO YOUR CULTURE HELPS YOU WITH YOUR MIND, SOUL, AND HEART."

- NATASHA PETER

He noticed a dead owl on the side of the road and brought the wings to Ms Peter.

"He brought the wings to me and as soon as he gave it to me, I opened it up and it was like [I could visualize] this huge angel." She placed the wings on cardboard to ensure they would be safe. "I still had the owl wings four years later and decided to make it an actual piece."

To Ms Peter, the angel is symbolic of her own personal growth. When she first laid her hands on the owl wings, she was at the brim of her own rebirth through creativity. Once she achieved success, both in her business and in her sobriety, she was able to finish the piece.

"That piece had really stuck to my heart," she says. "I made that angel because I believe that everybody—every human being—has an angel watching them," she says.

A judge in Alberta shared similar beliefs on guardian angels and purchased the piece. "Her mom, who isn't around anymore, taught her about angels and how she believed everybody has angels too."

Ms Peters says she had many near-death experiences throughout her battles with addictions, and says the inspiration provided by those owl wings, her Kaska Dena culture, and her creativity helped her get to where she is today.

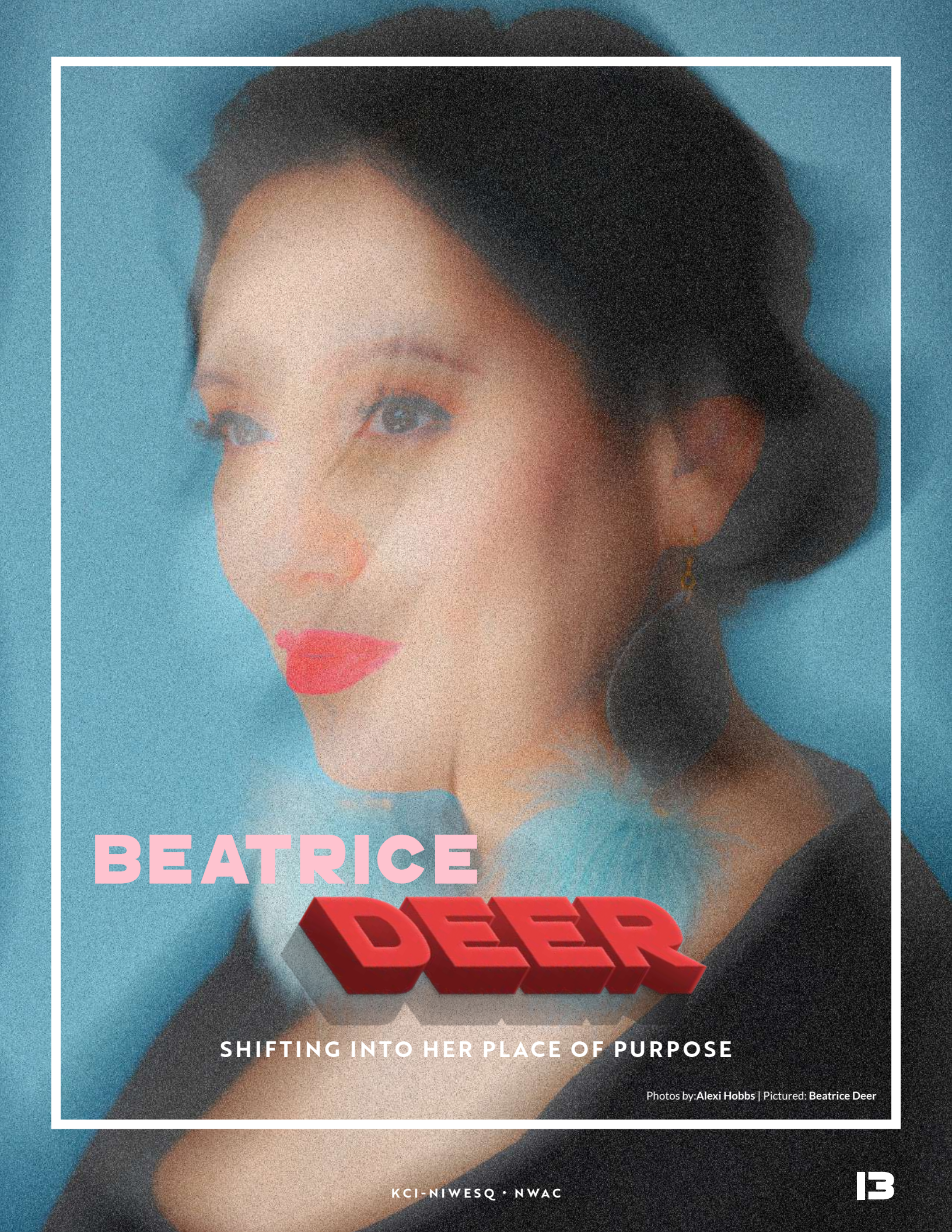
"I'm carrying on what they (grandmother and Elders) have taught me and I'm teaching it to my daughter," says Ms Peter. "I'm slowly teaching her tradition so hopefully if one day this business of mine becomes something, she can take it over and carry on the tradition that's been taught from our Elders."

If the past five years of growth is any indication of where Kaska Dena Designs is headed in the future, then Ms Peter and her daughter will have a long and successful business rooted in Traditional Knowledge and culture.

"When I first started five years ago, I started making small earrings. I thought, 'one of these days I'm going to have my things in a gallery and I'm going to be famous," she says with a laugh. "Now, in the past six months, all of those things have come true: my things are in galleries. I am working toward fashion shows. My business is licensed. I have been in magazines. I have been doing interviews and won awards."

Natasha Ms Peter has not yet launched a business website, but more information on Kaska Dena Designs can be found on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok under the business name.

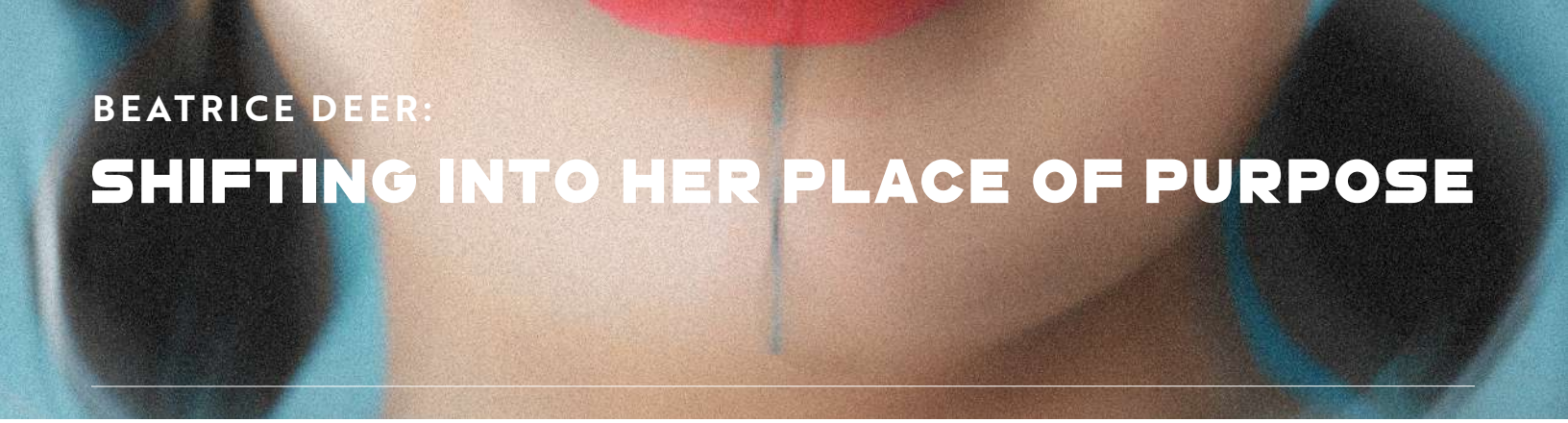
Pictured **Natasha Peter & Daughter**



BEATRICE DEER

SHIFTING INTO HER PLACE OF PURPOSE

Photos by:**Alexi Hobbs** | Pictured: **Beatrice Deer**



BEATRICE DEER:

SHIFTING INTO HER PLACE OF PURPOSE

BEATRICE DEER'S LIFE, LIKE HER MUSIC, EXISTS AT THE INTERSECTION OF HER INUIT CULTURE AND THE WORLD AT LARGE.

She is an Inuk from the village of Quaqtaq on the Hudson Strait but has lived in Montreal for the past 15 years. She is of the North but also of the urban South.

While the songs she writes and sings have a southern Canadian folk-rock vibe, many of the lyrics are written in Inuktitut and draw on the Northern experience.

Although her fan base is largely Inuit, at the age of 39, she is breaking through to non-Indigenous audiences with shows in places like Toronto's famed El Mocambo.

Ms Deer's sixth album, which was released late last year, is called *Shifting*.

"[The album] is about getting closer to a place where we're destined to be," she says. "Because I believe in growing in our inner selves and I believe in purpose. The album is about shifting into the place of our purpose."

Ms Deer is the mother of three children—two in their early 20s and one just under a year old.

She moved to Montreal in 2007 because she decided to get serious about her music and realized the South is the place to make that happen. She also wanted to pursue a higher education and to ensure that her children did likewise. And, she wanted to start therapy to find ways to heal her inner self.

"It's about reconciliation with your self—which is the hardest thing to do," she says on her website. "And I mean that on a personal level as well as a national level."

Ms Deer comes from a musical family. Her mother plays accordion and piano and her father, who is Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), plays guitar and bass.

"Music has always been around. I have cousins who are musicians as well, so I've been very interested in music ever since I can remember," she says.

She did not grow up throat singing.

"THERE WERE NOT MANY THROAT SINGERS IN MY HOMETOWN DUE TO COLONIZATION," SAYS MS DEER. IT WAS PROHIBITED BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY.

But "there were friends who knew how to throat sing and I really wanted to learn so I asked them to teach me, and I started practising on my own by listening to throat singing songs, either on the radio or on TV or from memory," says Ms Deer. "Every time I got a chance to be around someone who throat sings, I would practise with them and that's what I just kept doing."

Today, she incorporates throat singing into many of her songs.

Ms Deer is trilingual in English, French, and Inuktitut. But Inuktitut is her mother tongue and it is still the language she is most comfortable speaking.

Most of her songs are written in Inuktitut, which has led to significant success in the Indigenous music market. Her first album, *Just Bea*, which was in 2005, won

All Photos by: **Alexi Hobbs** | Pictured: **Beatrice Deer**

a Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Best Inuit/Cultural Album. By 2021, she was a Canadian Indigenous Music Awards laureate.

As for the future, says Ms Deer, "the plan is, of course, to expand our audience performing and in places that we've never performed in before and to grow our non-Indigenous audience."

But Ms Deer will remain an ambassador for her Inuit culture.

"It would be great to go to more places around the world to expand our audience," she says. "It's an honour and a privilege to be able to use music to educate and to decolonize. So I don't take it lightly."

> "THE ALBUM *SHIFTING* IS ABOUT GETTING CLOSER TO A PLACE WHERE WE'RE DESTINED TO BE. I BELIEVE IN GROWING IN OUR INNER SELVES AND I BELIEVE IN PURPOSE. THE ALBUM IS ABOUT SHIFTING INTO THE PLACE OF OUR PURPOSE."
>
> - Beatrice Deer

EVA AARIAK

EVA AARIAK spends many of her free hours listening to Inuktut radio stations. When she hears a new word, or one she does not quite understand, she finds out what it means and then scrawls the definition onto a piece of scrap paper.

Today, Ms Aariak, the 67-year-old Commissioner of Nunavut (akin to lieutenant governor), who is also a former premier and languages commissioner of Canada's newest territory, has a box of those little notes that have accumulated over the years. She intends, one day, to input them into her computer.

It is a project that is part of Ms Aariak's lifelong effort to keep the language of her ancestors alive. And she advises others, especially members of younger generations who are trying to become fluent in Inuktut or to maintain their fluency, to take similar small steps.

"In order for us to have Inuktitut language within our environment, we have to hear it, see it, speak it, and use it everywhere we go," Ms. Aariak said in an interview with *Kci-Niwesq*. "Inuktut language and culture is our identity."

Ms Aariak uses the word Inuktut, rather than Inuktitut, to describe her mother tongue. Inuktitut is the language spoken by Inuit people. But there are many different dialects of Inuktitut ranging from Russia to Greenland to Canada to Alaska. Inuktut refers to all the dialects spoken in Inuit Nunangat—Inuit communities all across the circumpolar Arctic region.

It is the language that Ms Aariak learned as a child growing up in the tiny community of Arctic Bay on the northern shore of Baffin Island. Here, the only people who could speak English were the lone teacher and the two employees of the Hudson's Bay Company.

"The beauty of learning your mother tongue, right from home and growing up, is that you have it," says Ms Aariak. "I didn't leave my community until I was 14 years old. So my language, my mother tongue, Inuktut, was very much entrenched."

When she did leave Arctic Bay in the 1970s, it was to attend residential school in Churchill, Manitoba. At that point, her learning of new words essentially stalled.

She was fortunate, however, to have had a teacher named Jose Kusugak, who eventually served as the leader of both the Kivalliq Inuit Association and the Inuit Tapiirit Kanatami, and who was very much an advocate for the Inuit language. He taught Ms Aariak and her classmates how to write in Inuktut in both syllabics and Roman orthography.

"Inuktut is a very phonetic language. That's the beauty of it," she says. "You write it exactly the way you speak it. So, if you know how to speak it properly, there's no such thing as a spelling mistake."

It is also a language that is tailored for describing life in the Arctic.

"The language was developed within the environment that we live," says Ms Aariak. "So, our language is very scientific and very sophisticated."

Most people have heard that the Inuit have many words for snow. And indeed, the Inuit developed terminology to describe each type of snow, from the first flakes in the autumn to the last melt in the spring. Their words describe the hardness and the softness of the snowfall, and the patterns that the wind creates.

There are words to describe the different stages in the lives of Arctic animals, from birth to old age, and to refer to them in different seasons because they make better clothing when hunted at different times of year.

"And the same thing with flowers and plants and everything," says Ms Aariak. "They all have very useful terminology in depicting where we are and where we live. Our culture

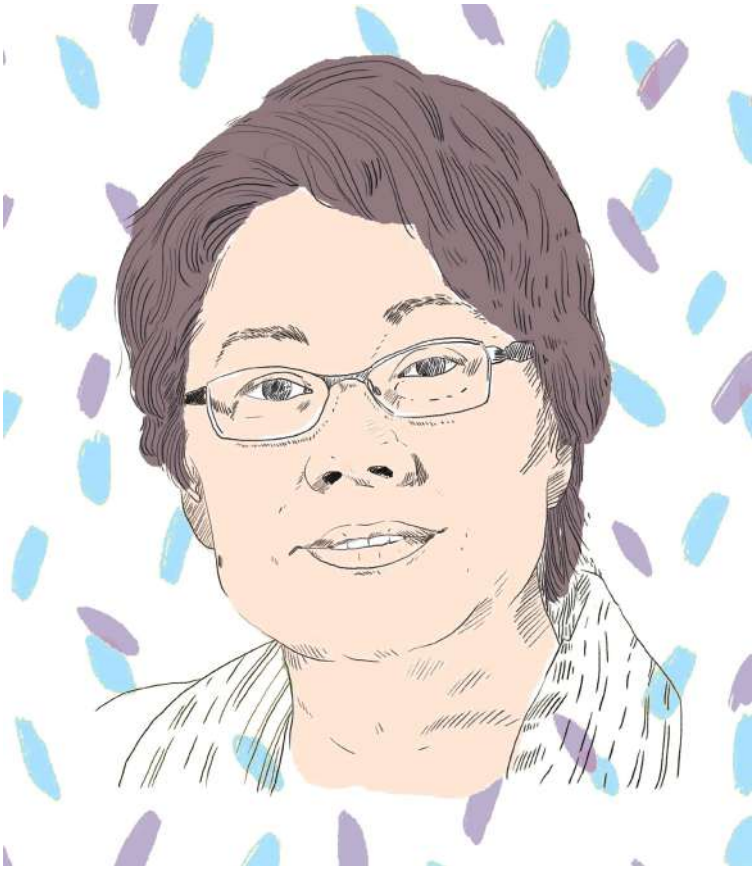


Illustration by **Madison van Rijn** | Source **https://thekit.ca/living/living-career/eva-aariak/**

is so very much connected to the environment in a lifecycle, in a circle. And knowledge of the terminology enriches that."

She and her classmates at the residential school in Manitoba would speak Inuktut to each other. But then she went to Ottawa for another few years of school and her opportunities to use her mother tongue diminished.

It was when she went home in the summertime that she knew her ability to speak Inuktut was fading.

"I started to realize, hey, I'm not enriching my language. I'm not learning new words. I'm not as comfortable as I was speaking my language before I left," says Ms Aariak, "So it became very important to me. I love my language. My parents, my siblings, and my community, that's a language they speak."

She made it a mission to keep working on her own skills, and also to help other Inuit retain and enhance theirs.

Since the early '70s, schools in what is now Nunavut have been teaching Inuktut in kindergarten to grade three, and then enhancing it at the high school level.

"It was so amazing and very good to see, the fact that language was being taught in the schools. And the Elders would be invited to the school to talk about the culture, because culture and language, for me and a lot of other people I know, are very much connected to one another," says Ms Aariak.

But there are still large numbers of Inuit in the territory who are not fluent.

"We have young Inuit who are very much cognizant and practising their own culture, but they do not have the opportunity to learn the language as much as they should," says Ms Aariak. "They are so hungry to learn their language and culture."

Fortunately, some resources for learning Inuktut have become available in recent years.

There is a private business in Iqaluit called the Pirurvik Centre, which teaches the Inuktut language. There are also Inuktut language apps and online interpreted language courses. There are dictionaries that are being developed to translate Inuit to English and other languages. There are grammar books. There are Inuktut syllabics on computer Word programs.

And a special body has been established to officially adopt words of the Western world, like fork, cup, computer or paperclip, into Inuktut.

"Young people are taking it upon themselves to learn their language and culture," says Ms Aariak. "There's a young lady who uses Twitter to teach the language, and there's another young man who is living in the South who also uses technology to help share what he knows and what he is learning about enriching culture. There are these pockets of wonderful initiatives happening out there. But we need a lot more."

Nunavut needs about 300 additional trained Inuktut teachers to serve schools across the territory.

"That is a huge problem," says Ms Aariak. As a result of the teacher shortage, Inuktut grammar is very much in danger, she says. "I am so proud of our young people speaking Inuktut but they're not learning the grammar as much as they should … they sound as if they were still in the very young stages of learning Inuktut."

It can be an uphill battle to become fluent in the language when so much of the media in the North, and especially the televised entertainment geared to young people, is in English.

Ms Aariak and her husband have four children.

"We made a rule in the house that every time we have Inuktut-speaking visitors our children will have to communicate with everybody, including us, in Inuktut so that our visitors can understand what they're saying," she says. "And we speak Inuktut at home on Saturdays and Sundays. That really helped to harness the retainment of their language."

But it is a journey, even for Ms Aariak herself– thus the box with the scraps of paper for the words she must learn. "It was entirely up to me as a young person to ensure that I enhanced my knowledge of Inuktut," she says. "And it still is today."

"FOR ME AND A LOT OF OTHER PEOPLE I KNOW, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE ARE VERY MUCH CONNECTED TO ONE ANOTHER."

- Eva Aariak

the PIRURSIIVIK PROJECT

EMPOWERING INUIT YOUTH TO BECOME AGENTS OF CHANGE

Photos by: **Danielle Bouchard** | Pictured: **Minnie Ningiuruvik**

THE PIRURSIIVIK PROJECT:

EMPOWERING INUIT YOUTH TO BECOME AGENTS OF CHANGE

THE PEOPLE OF INUKJUAK ARE CREATING SPACE FOR GROWTH.

They are growing vegetables in a community that lies north of the tree line. And they are growing personally with a social art program designed to promote healthy habits around water and nutrition.

It is all part of what is called the Pirursiivik Project. Pirursiivik means "a place to grow" in Inuktitut, and it is empowering young people to become agents of change.

The project in Inukjuak, on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay, has many aspects. There is a hydroponic growing container for growing vegetables. There are on-the-land activities that have included drumming, cooking classes, and nature trips to identify different species of flora.

Elders have shared with youth their knowledge about plants and traditional medicines as well as hunting and sewing.

And there is performance art including a circus show. It was created by Tupiq A.C.T., the first Inuit circus troupe from Nunavik, with the support and technical assistance from the One Drop Foundation, which focuses on the power of art to address water-related challenges and sustainability.

"These activities, inspired by Inuit culture and art, were not only fun and entertaining, but also created spaces for shared learning and exchange on traditional foods, nutrition, and the importance of clean water," says Lauren Alcorn, the Director of Strategic Partnerships at the One Drop Foundation.

The circus performance was built around the theme of water and vegetable growing, and the characters explained how clean water and vegetables are essential to good health.

Rooted in Traditional Knowledge, the performance told the story of a grandmother and granddaughter who go camping. During the night, the grandmother goes out to get some water and doesn't come back. So, her granddaughter goes looking for her on the land and comes across

Minnie as a giant
Crédit photo: **Marc-André Rocheleau**

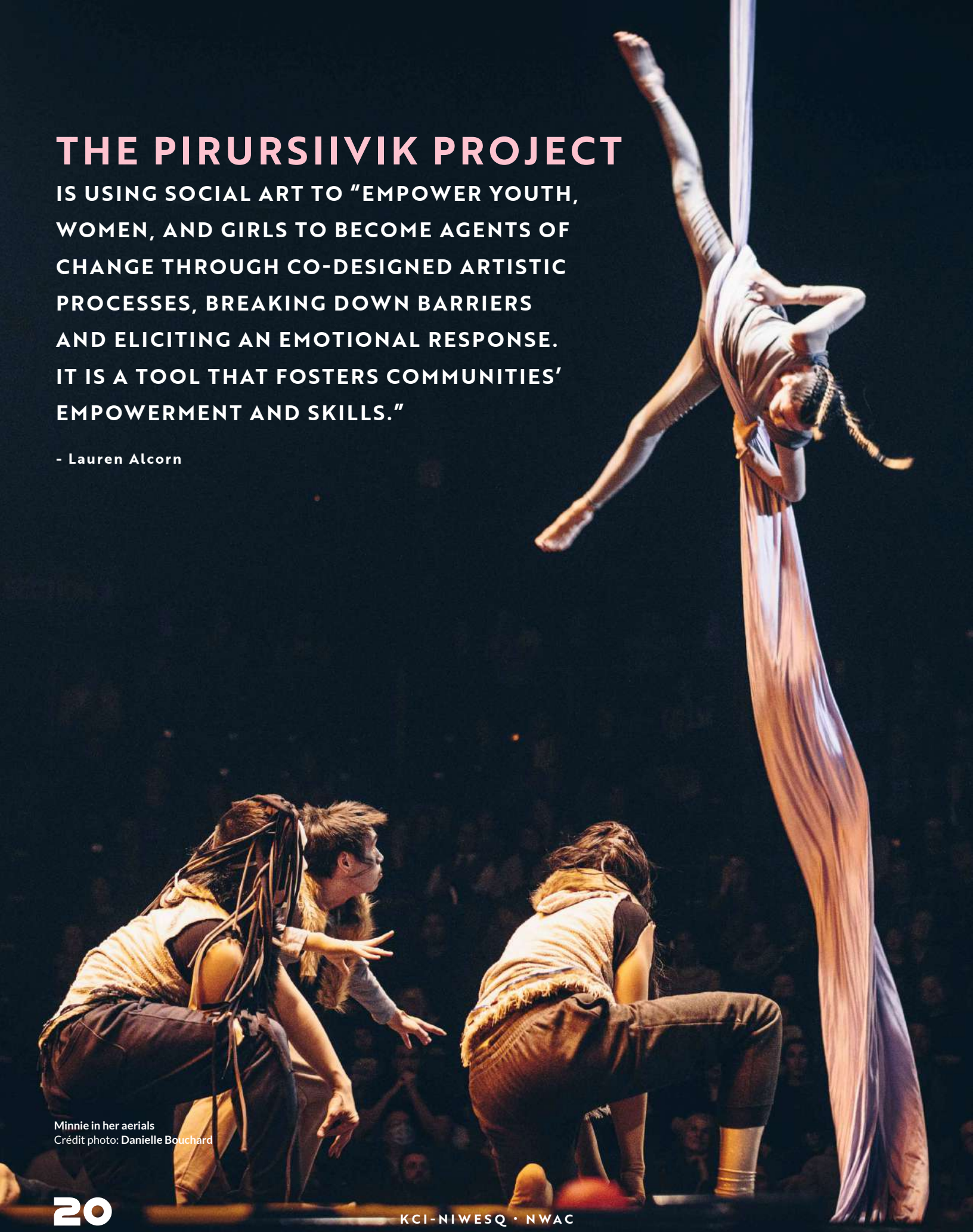
"SOCIAL ART EMPOWERS YOUTH, WOMEN, AND GIRLS TO BECOME AGENTS OF CHANGE."

- Lauren Alcorn

THE PIRURSIIVIK PROJECT

IS USING SOCIAL ART TO "EMPOWER YOUTH, WOMEN, AND GIRLS TO BECOME AGENTS OF CHANGE THROUGH CO-DESIGNED ARTISTIC PROCESSES, BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS AND ELICITING AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE. IT IS A TOOL THAT FOSTERS COMMUNITIES' EMPOWERMENT AND SKILLS."

- Lauren Alcorn



Minnie in her aerials
Crédit photo: **Danielle Bouchard**

three creatures from Inuit legends. One of them gives the granddaughter a magic pot of water that never runs out, which she uses to grow vegetables like potatoes, tomatoes, and carrots.

A young local artist named Minnie performed in that show.

"The whole play, except for the vegetables (which are, of course, not naturally found in the Arctic) was rooted in Inuit culture," says Minnie. "We had traditional clothing, and the creatures from the stories were inspired by the stories our grandmothers and grandfathers told us when we were kids."

Minnie says social art has an impact on people.

"Art is a feeling that comes when you are moving, creating something, painting, sewing," she says. "I can feel it when people talk to me after watching a show. You can feel a lot with arts, whether it's a good feeling or a bad one. And I think it also helps explain ideas to others."

Minnie says the circus aspects of her performance came naturally to her, and the circus world is a very friendly, open, family place.

"I would encourage (younger girls) to participate in artistic activities," she says. "Art doesn't have to be perfect. As long as you do something you like or love, go ahead and do it."

The Pirursiivik Project emerged in 2017 as a collaboration between Société Makivik, the RBC Foundation, and the One Drop Foundation.

From the start, the community of Inukjuak was eager to grow and eat produce for the greenhouse and played a central role in the design and approach. In June of last year, the container began operations.

Hydroponic containers, rather than soil, are used to produce leafy greens and fresh produce, which are available to community members. Through social art and community engagement activities, they have learned new ways to use vegetables that were unknown to them, such as kale and bok choy. And they have learned about healthy habits around water and nutrition.

They have grown kale, lettuce, chives, radish, beets, rhubarb, cilantro, parsley, carrots, green star lettuce, qunguliit, and spinach. A significant portion of the produce has been donated to Elders, teachers, social workers, health clinic staff, the public, and community members who were in isolation due to COVID-19. Sharing food around the community is part of Inuit culture.

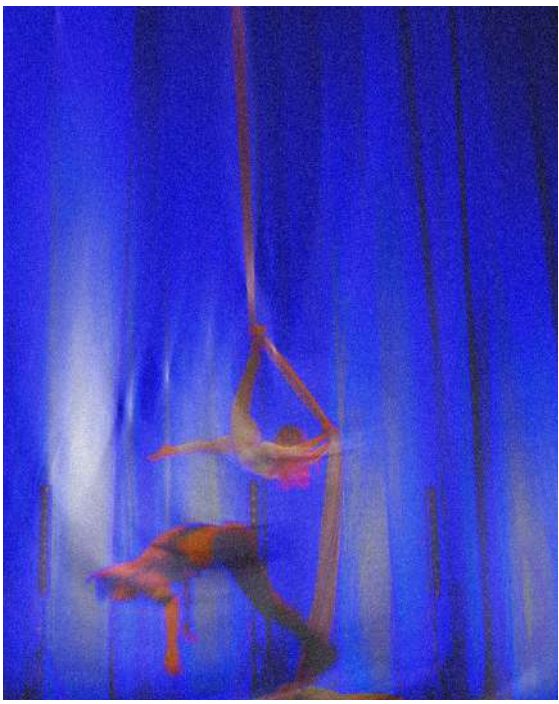
A wide range of resource materials has also been created to promote healthy living through fresh produce and clean water. They include colouring books and booklets about traditional plants, an educational package for students, and five short films. A Pirursiiniq Nunavimmi Digital App will be launched in June 2022.

As a result of the Pirursiivik Project's success in Inukjuak, the One Drop Foundation is talking to the leaders of other Indigenous communities with a view to expanding its impact and work of water access, climate resilience, and youth leadership across the country.

"Social art empowers youth, women, and girls to become agents of change through co-designed artistic processes, breaking down barriers and eliciting an emotional response," says Ms Alcorn. "It is a tool that fosters communities' empowerment and skills."

"ART IS A FEELING THAT COMES WHEN YOU ARE MOVING, CREATING SOMETHING, PAINTING, SEWING," SHE SAYS. "I CAN FEEL IT WHEN PEOPLE TALK TO ME AFTER WATCHING A SHOW. YOU CAN FEEL A LOT WITH ARTS, WHETHER IT'S A GOOD FEELING OR A BAD ONE. AND I THINK IT ALSO HELPS EXPLAIN IDEAS TO OTHERS."

- MINNIE NINGIURUVIK



Atsaniu Tarninga, Turbo Fest 2019
Crédit Photo: **Sébastien Girard**

LISA KOPERQUALUK

IT WAS NOT LONG AGO THAT THE INUIT OF PUVIRNITUQ, ON THE EASTERN COAST OF HUDSON BAY, WOULD BE HUNTING ON THE FROZEN POVUNGNITUK RIVER BY EARLY AUTUMN.

Now they must wait until late October, or even November, before the ice is solid enough to support their weight. And, in some years, it is December before they risk taking their snowmobiles beyond the safety of the shoreline.

Global warming has brought many changes to the lives of the people of the North. It has altered the seasons that informed the way their ancestors sustained themselves and their families.

That is the message that Lisa Koperqualuk is bringing to the world stage as vice-president for international affairs of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Canada.

"Everything is interconnected," she said in an interview with *Kci-Niwesq*. "Climate action is connected to our culture."

Ms Koperqualuk was one of the Inuit leaders who attended the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland, last autumn. "The international fora, the United Nations, the COP26, all these huge international events and decision-making bodies are not close enough to Inuit communities for the Inuit to say 'Hey, do something about this'," says Ms Koperqualuk. "So they rely on the Inuit Circumpolar Council to be that voice."

The message she delivered to world leaders is that climate change is an urgent matter for the Inuit.

"We're seeing a lot of change in the Arctic," she says. "There are new species that are encroaching on other species. There are killer whales that are now more present than before, and they will be impacting whale populations. There are fishing areas that are being encroached by salmon where they wouldn't have been in prior years."

That is something that Ms Koperqualuk has seen near Puvirnituq where she was born and spent her early childhood.

"Normally there wouldn't have been salmon, but there are now some salmon. And then there are types of birds that are starting to come up north," she says. "And certain insects are being seen. The animal life is changing."

That is a critical issue for people who are so connected to the land.

"Our homeland is where we founded our culture. That's where we experience our lives, through the expression of our culture … the way our hunters provide food for their families. It's food security, it's mental health as well, it's education, the transmission of culture to our children," says Ms Koperqualuk. If a hunter doesn't have much opportunity to bring his children out on the land, doing harvesting activities and teaching survival skills or Arctic survival skills to his children or other children, then that knowledge could be lost."

Many members of Ms Koperqualuk's family still live in Puvirnituq. Travelling back every year, she has seen the environment change.

"There's a way that the ice forms that assures the hunter when it's really solid," she says. "But right now, there's no way of telling whether, at a certain distance from the sea, how the ice has formed and whether it's yet solid enough to go on. So there's a high risk. And there are more and more hunters, even experienced hunters, whose snowmobiles are falling through."

Things have changed in the summertime as well.

"Normally, we would have cloudberries, but last summer was very cool, windy, dry. So we didn't get any berries in Puvirnituq," says Ms Koperqualuk, adding that temperatures may have been affected by the forest fires in western Canada. "I got my berries from Kuujjuaq but not from Puvirnituq. None of the communities all along the Hudson Bay Coast had the liberty to pick their berries last year as they normally would have."

In the North, where a jar of ketchup costs $15, a standard bag of grapes can retail for $30, and a four-litre jug of orange juice can be priced at $35, "country food" is a large part of the diet. It costs time rather than money, and it is healthy.

"Every time I go up North, I always bring myself back some fish, whether it's trout or char or white fish. Or I bring back caribou meat," says Ms Koperqualuk. "I grew up on it. I have to have it regularly and it's healthy food."

So, when climate change reduces or prevents the harvests of animals, fish or berries, that is a serious issue for the Inuit. And they are concerned, says Ms Koperqualuk.

"We all need to be very concerned about the things that are going on in the outside world, to make sure that industrial developers do take responsibility for what they are doing to the Arctic," she says. "And I think COP26 was a place where the Arctic gained attention and countries learned that, while they're making their economies grow, some of their actions have very important consequences."

Pictured **Lisa Koperqualuk** | Photo credit **Courtesy CCI Archive**

> **"CLIMATE ISSUES THREATEN INDIGENOUS RIGHTS, OUR RIGHTS, INUIT RIGHTS, AND HUMAN RIGHTS."**
>
> **- LISA KOPERQUALUK**

The ICC has made three main environmental demands of the world's nations: reduce carbon emissions, include Indigenous knowledge in climate decisions, and protect Arctic waters.

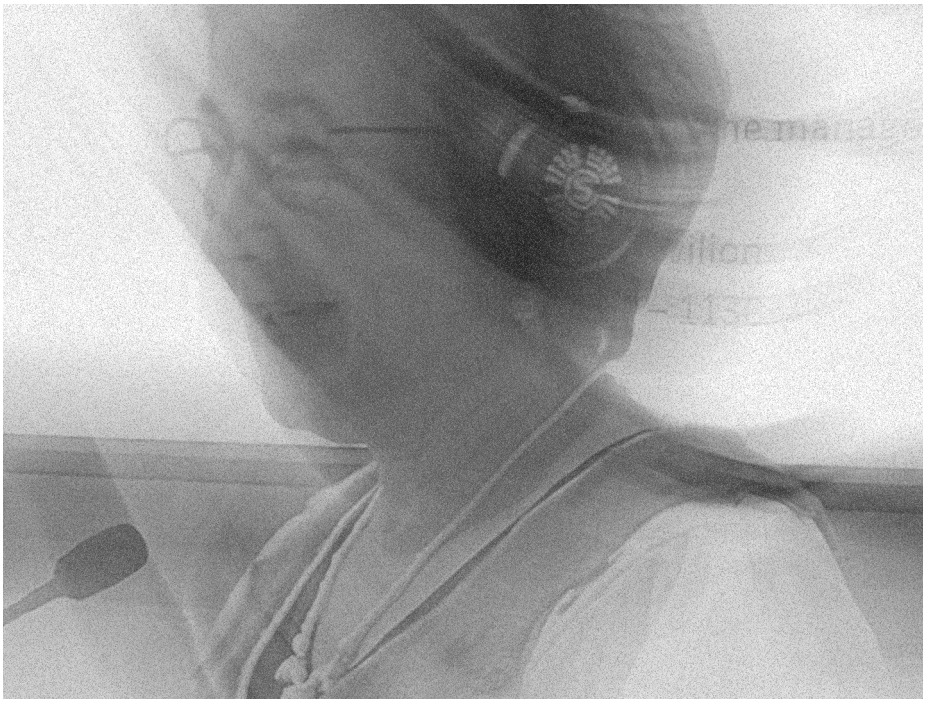
"Those who do not live in the Arctic, those who are developing things, those who are exploiting natural resources, those who are using fuel that's carbon-based—petroleum and heavy fuel oil—those states or countries are not really paying attention to the need to reduce emissions," she says. "We want them to know that their actions are impacting our way of life. They are challenging our land, our environment, our homeland, our culture, and all of the interconnected parts of our land."

It's also important to remember that protecting the Arctic means protecting the planet, says Ms Koperqualuk.

When COP26 ended, the Inuit delegation "came out with a sense that we had been heard because the term 'Indigenous people' has been cited in the negotiation documents. So we were pretty happy about that," she says. "For a long time, we didn't really have much space there to take part in decision-making. And we still don't take part in the decision-making. But we've made headway."

Some of the youth are saying the Inuit must adapt to the changes in the climate, even as they demand action to stop global warming, says Ms Koperqualuk. "So that's something we need to talk about within our communities."

But it is also critical that the countries that now resist the imposition of the measures necessary to stop climate change are made to listen to the voices of the Arctic, she says, because climate issues threaten "Indigenous rights, our rights, Inuit rights, and human rights."



Pictured **Lisa Koperqualuk** | Photo credit **Courtesy CCI Archive**

PUBLISHED by NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

ISSUE 11

KCI-NIWESQ

is a monthly magazine of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). Its objective is to highlight the work of the organization and to tell the stories of the Indigenous women of Canada.

NWAC, which was founded in 1974, is a national Indigenous organization representing First Nations (on and off reserve, with status and without), Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse people in Canada. Its goal is to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Indigenous women within their respective communities and Canadian society.

PUBLISHER

LYNNE GROULX
NWAC Chief Executive Officer

EDITOR

JOAN WEINMAN

SENIOR WRITER

GLORIA GALLOWAY

WRITER

ASHLEY ESPINOZA

DESIGNER

KYLA ELISABETH

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA MAGAZINE

KCI-NIWESQ

nwac.ca