

Sharon (née Conway) Parenteau (b. 1966)

Métis educator Sharon Conway is the daughter of Lawrence “Lorne” Conway (b. 1934) and Mary Unrau (b. 1941) who farmed near Deloraine, Manitoba. Mary has been quite active with the Turtle Mountain Souris Plains Heritage Association. Mary and Lorne make Métis sashes and hatbands which Mary weaves on Inkle looms. They participate in heritage events in Manitoba’s southwest region and at “Back to Batoche” with displays pertaining to Métis heritage.

Sharon graduated with a B. Ed. from the University of Manitoba and is working on her Masters degree. She has worked with Winnipeg School Division #1 on Aboriginal curriculum development. She later took a secondment to the Manitoba Métis Federation as Provincial Education Consultant and implemented the “Standing Tall” program. Standing Tall is based on Tu Tangata, a successful educational intervention program developed in New Zealand in 1985 by the Maori people to support children in their early school years. The program is hosted in Niji Mahkwa and William White schools in Winnipeg.

For the past few years Sharon has worked as the General Manager of the Louis Riel Institute, the educational authority for the Métis people of Manitoba. She has represented the Métis Nation on numerous provincial committees, including the Premier’s Advisory Council on Education (PAC), the Lieutenant Governor’s Youth Experience Program (LGYEP), ANCR, the Oversight Committee for Children and Youth with Mental Health Issues (OCCYMH), Aboriginal Education Research Forum (AERF) and MERN. She is chair of a Métislocal in Winnipeg, and a proud resident of Winnipeg’s North End.

Sharon is also an elected member of the Council of the Manitoba Historical Society. On March 30, 2012, she has received the Distinguished Leader in Education from the MMF, the Research and Curriculum Development Award from ACE and most recently the Diamond Jubilee Award from the Lieutenant Governor for her work in the community.

From Profiles in Aboriginal Education

http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/educators/educator_sept.html

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- **Home Community:**
*Turtle Mountains,
Deloraine, Manitoba*

- **Cultural Identity:**
Métis
- **Current Position:**
Provincial Education Consultant with the Manitoba Métis Federation
- **Education/Training:** *Bachelor of Education, Master of Education Candidate*
- **Roles/ Responsibility:** *Support the Standing Tall Expansion Plan, collaborate with Louis Riel Institute and develop Métis Education Policy*

“When opportunities knock and doors open, we must have the courage to walk through those doors and embrace these once in a lifetime chances.”

I have made some very life-changing decisions that have taken me where I am today. I grew up in the Turtle Mountains surrounded by my family. We were the poor bush kids who went to the school where everyone else was white. We, as a Métis community were looked down on and made to feel ashamed of who we were. Most of my cousins struggled in school and ended up dropping out to find work. I was an A student but in grade twelve, like those before me, I couldn't wait to leave and at the first opportunity I dropped out and moved to the city.

After a few years I found myself on my own as a young single mother, working as a waitress. I knew that I didn't want to be a waitress my whole life and I had always wanted to go to university. My mother had always made me believe that I could do anything I wanted, so with the encouragement and support of my parents, I decided to pursue university. I worked full time, studied for my GED, enrolled in a few grade twelve courses and then applied to the University of Winnipeg as a mature student. During these three years my son, Robert stayed with my mom and dad so I could work part time and attend school full time. It was very difficult to be so far away from my baby, but I also became closer to my family.

For my final year, I attended the University of Manitoba and decided to specialize in the Early Years Program. I was very fortunate to have incredible mentors such as Wayne Serebrin and Katy Dawson who helped me develop a sound Early Years philosophy that made me see that school should be an extension of life where teachers provided practical real experiences that were relevant to students.

During each practicum, I asked to be placed in an inner city classroom, because I knew I wanted to teach Aboriginal students. Unfortunately the year I graduated there were only 16 teaching positions available across the entire province, but fortunately, I received one of them, a half-time term contract at Mulvey School, which soon turned into a permanent contract. I taught at Mulvey for eight years, in a variety of capacities including Nursery-Kindergarten, Grade 1 and the Multi-Age 1,2,3 Program. During this time, I worked with excellent teachers such as Eileen Bergman and Val McDougall, who helped realize my theories and ideas. During my first few years of teaching I felt very isolated. I was often alone in my thinking but attended many workshops and sat on many committees to learn and be part of a group.

Since my first year of teaching, I presented numerous workshops for organizations, as I shared my love of teaching and my expertise in a variety of subject areas. I worked with the Province as a part of a team of teachers who reviewed learning resources in the area of Language Arts and Social Studies. Professionally, I was an expert teacher and

educational leader, but personally I struggled because I still didn't really know who I was. I knew I was Métis but I didn't really know what that meant.

Slowly I started making connections with the Métis community in the city. I put my son in square dance classes and started attending Aboriginal functions, such as pow wows. Unsure of my cultural knowledge, I began to seek guidance from other Aboriginal educators, such as Louise McQuade, Donna Beach and Darlene Beauchamp. I was encouraged to apply for the Winnipeg School Division's (WSD) Aboriginal Education Curriculum Support Teacher position. In this capacity over the next few years, I worked with numerous teachers in the division developing units and lessons at every grade level. My experience as a support teacher has led to additional curriculum opportunities for the Department of Education. As the primary writer for K-4 Social Studies curriculum, I worked with teachers to develop ideas and incorporate an Aboriginal perspective for students across Manitoba. In the next project I used my linguistic knowledge and Early Years experience to develop the K-4 Aboriginal Culture and Language curriculum. Soon I was helping other specialists, such as the Department of Education's Math consultant, incorporate an Aboriginal perspective in core subject areas and supporting other Aboriginal leaders to develop teaching and assessment tools.

In 2004, while working full time for the WSD helping teachers develop Aboriginal units and writing curriculum part time for the province, I was asked to consider going to the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) to develop a pilot project, Standing Tall, a community-driven initiative to keep middle years students in school. I didn't have any experience in program development but with encouragement and support from my mentors, Pauline Clarke and Myra Laramee, I was seconded by the MMF to be the Provincial Coordinator.

As part of the three-year pilot, I used my curriculum knowledge and teaching experience to develop the program to help support students and connect with families. I used my leadership abilities and facilitating experiences to train project staff on the importance of self-identity through culture and how to become positive Aboriginal role models. As a pilot project, however, research became a significant component and my only experience was as a classroom teacher. I needed help but it was difficult to find a qualified Métis educator, however I was able to work with an expert with a PhD in the health field. This experience led to a quest for additional knowledge of academic research.

I was asked to join a couple of other Aboriginal women in a small cohort group to work on our Masters of Education at the University of Manitoba. We attended the same classes specializing in adult education with an Aboriginal focus. This was a beneficial approach, as we often found ourselves experiencing racism or were considered the experts on Aboriginal issues. Thankfully, we had each other as support. Although we are Aboriginal, we each have unique research interests and are different stages of working on that research. As the only Métis student, I struggle and look for support from my First Nation sisters, Myra Laramee, Mary Young and Laara Fitznor.

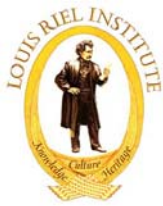
The Métis perspective on lifelong learning spans from birth to death and is interwoven in many aspects of life, making it a complex issue. Last year I was asked to take on a broader role, supporting Provincial Education and working with many departments and initiatives, including the expansion of the Standing Tall program, supporting Louis Riel Institute and representing the MMF in the education community.

At the end of June 2010, I decided to resign from the WSD to work full time at the MMF. It was a very hard decision but I feel as though I have found my niche, working for my own people. Although my role is still being defined and my direction is not always as clear as I would like it, I am a leader in the building and part of the senior management team as well as the expert in education. We are working on a Métis Education Policy as well as building capacity for additional education support.

Coming to the MMF has been both a blessing and a challenge. I have left the comfort of being in a classroom and as a support teacher to develop programs and departments. I have been given this challenge and see it as an opportunity to affect change for Métis people in Manitoba. My inspiration is my grandchildren. I want the school system to be better for them than it was for me. When I was a classroom teacher, I had the opportunity to affect a small group of people. As a support teacher the possibility was larger, then as a curriculum writer the possibility even larger. But as a leader in education, working for the Manitoba Métis Federation I feel I can have the greatest opportunity to affect change for my grandchildren and other Métis people.

Message of Encouragement:

I believe we are presented with opportunities in life, doors open and doors close. When opportunities knock and doors open, we must have the courage to walk through those doors and embrace these once in a lifetime chances.



Edited and Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
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