



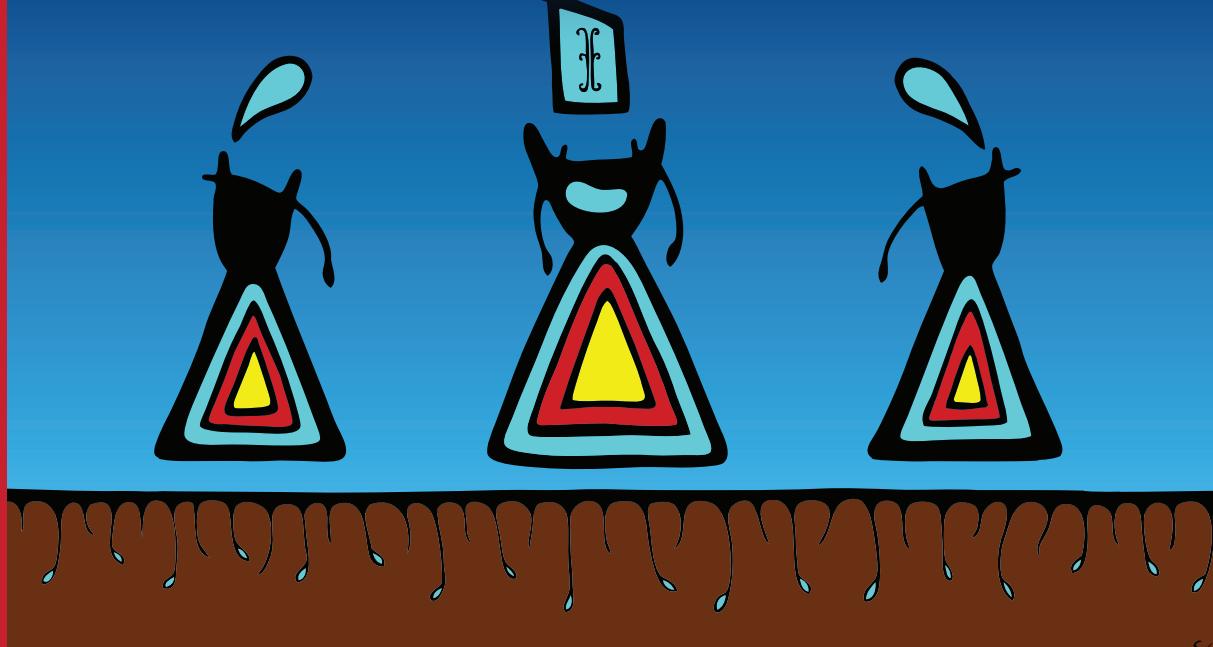
# INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

## The Women of Membertou

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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP  
COADY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE  
ST. FRANCIS XAVIER UNIVERSITY

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### **About the Indigenous Women in Community Leadership program logo (front cover illustration)**

Painting by Melissa S. Labrador, Mi'kmaw artist

This painting, named *The Teachings*, represents three generations of women standing on Mother Earth beneath the blue hues of our universe. One of the most important teachings is survival and the ability to understand connections on earth. If you were to remove the soil and look beneath it, you would find that all life above ground is protected and held together by the roots of trees. Those roots intermingle to create strength in the forest community. If each of us, regardless of background, would hold hands and unite, we too could grow strong communities.

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# **INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **The Women of Membertou**

**Gabrielle Donnelly**

Thank you to Coady Institute staff and associates  
who have provided editorial comments and changes.

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All quotations in this case study, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from a video documentary, *The Women of Membertou* (2011), by Catherine Martin.

# The Women of Membertou

## Introduction

Sharon Bernard was deeply saddened by circumstances in her growing up, and resolved to steer her life in a direction that would create change not only for herself but also for her community. Living in Membertou, Nova Scotia, she continually witnessed the ways in which Mi'kmaq culture – its traditions and language – was being diminished and lost. Through her own personal experiences and in observing others, she keenly felt the impact that this was having on generations of Mi'kmaq youth. Without a shared cultural history and communal identity, including language, Sharon saw that young people in Membertou had a reduced sense of self, thus lacking a solid base for personal growth.

This story of Sharon and the Membertou Elementary School – the Women of Membertou case study – is just one example of how women are weaving and strengthening the social fabric of Membertou alongside its amazing recent economic growth (see the separate Membertou case study in this series). Specifically, this case study illustrates how innovative approaches to education can be securely tethered to the richness of the past, providing a platform for children's well-being and educational achievement. Further, the case demonstrates how what is missing in one generation is often abundant in another, and how two worldviews can be held simultaneously. It offers an example of how a community can move forward while cultivating the wisdom of tradition within contemporary realities.

Membertou is an urban First Nation community consisting of more than 1,260 people that belong to the greater tribal group of the Mi'kmaw Nation. It is situated three kilometres from the heart of the City of Sydney, Nova Scotia, within the tribal district of Unama'ki (Cape Breton). It is one of five Mi'kmaw communities in Cape Breton, and one of 13 in the Province of Nova Scotia. (Membertou Community website).

While the amazing story of Membertou's renewal credits male leadership for the community's economic turnaround, strong female leadership within the community has provided a much-needed balance. Women in Membertou have worked to ensure that the community does not forget its cultural heritage – both language and traditions – and that the Mi'kmaq of Membertou can have a sense of identity. In many ways, the women are the foundation of this thriving community.

## Themes

### *Women as the Heart of the Community*

Women's traditional role as elders will be central to the preservation of the culture of Membertou as it develops and grows. The Mi'kmaq of Membertou who were interviewed – both men and women – agree that as their community continues to expand, the cultural knowledge held by clan mothers will be needed more and more to avoid the loss of traditions and language that can accompany accelerated development.

Jane Meader, a teacher in Membertou Elementary School, says women are “the backbone” of Mi'kmaq communities, giving strength to the chiefs and councils. Dan Christmas, Membertou chief advisor, describes the way in which he sees women elders as “the heart of the community”:

They tell us who we are as people, as family and as a community. [Women] elders play a critical role....When we need to hit our reset button we go back to our elders and ask, why are we doing this? [They remind us] that it is all about taking care of our home, community and loved ones.

Whenever a tragedy occurs in the community, Jane remarks, “It’s the women who come together, it’s the women who pray together, it’s the women who raise their pipes, it’s the women who enter the sweat lodge, it’s the women who bring families together and it’s the women who bring ceremony into the community.”

As such, Jane Meader, Dan Christmas and others express that women elders are the bearers of culture and its traditions, creating a sense of shared history and identity. Further, grounded in wisdom that is respected by the community, they can often clearly articulate the way forward and provide answers to new questions. As women, they cultivate the social bonds, the glue that holds the community together, in times of both celebration and sadness.

### *A Stranger in Her Own Home*

Sharon Bernard, principal of Membertou Elementary School, had a deep desire to strengthen the cultural heritage, and in particular the language, of the Mi'kmaq in Membertou. She saw an opportunity to realize this vision through reshaping the educational programs in the reserve school.

However, Sharon was aware of her challenges in achieving this goal, as she had never learned her native language. In her early years the opportunities for learning Mi'kmaq were intentionally absent, and painfully so: she went to a school where Mi'kmaq language was absent, and in her own home, her parents did not speak in Mi'kmaq to her. The older generation had been actively discouraged from speaking their native language when they were growing up, so although they continued to speak Mi'kmaq to one another, and with visitors, they chose to speak English to their children. This made Sharon feel like a stranger in her own home, separated from her roots and cultural heritage. Sharon does not want the children of today to feel such an estrangement from their own home and community: “I grew up without language which is why it is my passion today. I didn’t feel good about who I was, and I want the children of today to not feel the same way.” In fact, it was in hav-

ing her own children that Sharon realized how much she longed for this sense of belonging for the children and youth of Membertou.

For much of her early working life, Sharon worked at the Membertou daycare while raising her four children. When her children gained independence, she refocused on her own education, and completed a Bachelor of Arts immediately followed by a Bachelor of Education. Upon completing her second degree in 2008, she was hired as the principal of Membertou Elementary School.

## ***Culture-Based Education***

Today, if you are in Membertou and travel past the gas station, a white clapboard church, the community centre and the Band office, you will arrive at Membertou Elementary School. Here, you will often find a room of elders in rocking chairs mixing their voices in Mi'kmaq song with a group of playful four-year-olds.

During her first two years as principal of Membertou Elementary School, the enrolment numbers doubled, and by 2010, 50 percent of Membertou children attended the school. By 2012, this number has risen to a phenomenal 70 percent. With a smile, Sharon says they hope to capture all of the eligible students within the next couple of years. Today there are 125 students.

Much of the school's success can be attributed to a new emphasis on culture-based education. While recognizing her own limitations with regard to language, Sharon realized that what she lacked was alive and well in the elders around her, and she brought them into the school. And not only did they revitalize the use of the Mi'kmaq language in the school, but other aspects of the cultural heritage as well.

A new body of research is beginning to demonstrate that Aboriginal students' self-esteem is a key factor in their school success (Kanu, 2002). An educational environment that honours culture, language and worldview – that respects and celebrates who the students are and where they have come from – is critical. At Membertou Elementary School, there are now Mi'kmaq teachers who incorporate cultural activities into the educational program. Elders are a regular fixture in teaching language and basket weaving, and the children are encouraged to spend time outside connecting with the land. This is all carried out in addition to a strict adherence to the curriculum guidelines set out by the Nova Scotia Department of Education.

Moreover, Sharon is working hard to create a space where staff members and parents feel empowered to contribute in a meaningful way. She hosts staff meetings with a gentle touch and lots of room for contribution and participation. Following her monthly report, each staff person is given the opportunity to express concerns and ask questions. Going around the table in a clockwise direction, each person takes a turn. In addition, Sharon encourages staff to contact her between meetings on any issues that might arise. The relationship between parents and the school is also being transformed and "the door is always open and they can come in."

While it is still too early to measure significant outcomes in students, Sharon remarks that they are starting to see the kids as more confident and accomplished. This is translating into increased knowledge of Mi'kmaq language and culture, improved numeracy and literacy, and higher rates of success in secondary school. Studies elsewhere have shown that such strategies nurture self-esteem through a positive interconnection between the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual realms, and that students will do better in school – and life – over the long term (Antone, 2003).

## ***Connecting to Source***

Sharon speaks of a number of women in her life who provide support and inspiration, such as the elders who spend time at the Membertou Elementary School. Sharon also belongs to a drumming group with the elders, and they travel and perform together serving their own and other communities with offerings of song and drum.

Sharon's faith is strong and she feels that the Creator gave her the purpose and ambition to spark the living language and culture in Membertou. In her own words she says: "The Creator put me here to do this." Other women in the community have remarked on how she manages to hold two spiritual worldviews at once – seamlessly weaving them together. In her family she has baptized her children, prepared them for first Holy Communion and later Confirmation in the Catholic faith, while simultaneously nurturing her family with timeless songs to the Creator. As with her educational programs, Sharon is able to draw on traditional and contemporary sources to build an integrated whole.

Finally, her husband, Darrell, is also a source of support. With a shared background and beliefs, and his experience as a band councillor, Darrell is able to offer meaningful feedback. Whenever she experiences doubt around her direction, he reassures her with his unwavering faith in her abilities.

## **Challenges**

A key challenge that Sharon has encountered is in convincing the parents of students that Membertou Elementary School can provide a sound education. Sharon states that "we can do as good a job as others, but reassuring parents can be hard." Parents often believe that if their children are going to get the best education, they must leave the reserve in order to do so. At Membertou Elementary School, Sharon tells us that "they need to work twice as hard to prove that they are better." It has been a struggle but the school population, as described above, is increasing as their perceptions are changed.

The most worrying challenge that Sharon faces is that the elders – who hold the traditions and language – are starting to age and die. Therefore, she firmly believes that the present holds a crucial and time-sensitive opportunity to steep the children in the ways of the past.

Personal growth is also a critical challenge for Sharon and the community. Sharon explains that perseverance is a quality that is much needed, and she works to develop it in herself and her staff and students on a daily basis. Further, she knows that working on her own self-esteem alongside the children is important if they are to succeed. Oftentimes, she feels impatient, however her husband reminds her that it is going to take a long time to move past the impacts of colonization. Right now the best thing that they can offer is "not to be afraid of who they are."

## Conclusion

In the entrance of the Membertou Trade and Convention Centre, a large and graceful dream catcher welcomes all who walk through the doors. Each year, children leaving grade six at Membertou School are taken out into the woods to gather the materials needed to make a small dream catcher that later finds its home hanging from the larger one in the Convention Centre. As the children make the dream catchers they are instructed to infuse them with their dreams for the future – for the possibilities within themselves and their community. Dan Christmas finds solace in these reminders that each person has a role in protecting and cultivating their dreams and the dreams of the community. His vision is clear: “I hope and pray that our children will still have a lot of opportunities, that a lot of their dreams that are hanging up overhead here will become real.” As Jane Meader says “Dreams and visions are really important, and those are gifts our Creator gave us and the sacred fire. Those are the gifts that were given to connect back with our ancestors, to connect to our Creator, to connect to that knowledge, and if we use them, we will connect back.”

As the future of Membertou continues to unfold, many believe that the words of Jane Meader can be the guide for balanced growth and a sense of self: “Look to your elders and culture. All the answers are in our culture, are with our ancestors, the Creator and Mother Earth. Everything we need is there.”

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Membertou Community Website <http://www.membertou.ca/main-page.asp>

## Additional Resources

Membertou Elementary School <http://www.membertouschool.ca/>

Membertou Heritage Park <http://www.membertouheritagepark.com/>

Lifetime Achievement Awards Caroline Marshall, Basket-Maker [http://www.ulnooweg.ca/media/fly/2010/Caroline%20Marshall\\_512k.flv](http://www.ulnooweg.ca/media/fly/2010/Caroline%20Marshall_512k.flv) <http://www.ulnooweg.ca/awards2010.php>

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