

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, December 2011

This article is copyrighted by the author Maria Campbell and can only be used for reference purposes.

Isadore and Joan, a beautiful love story

Seventy-five-year old elder, healer and community champion Isadore Pelletier, passed away on Wednesday, Nov. 30 at the Pasqua Hospital in Regina.

He was followed by his wife Joan on Friday, Dec. 2. The joint wake and funeral held at First Nations University was filled to capacity and the love and respect people had for the “gentle giant” as he was known, and for his tiny wife, was evident in the memories and stories shared by students and friends.

Young people in particular talked about their kindness, generosity and inclusiveness.

"They never made us feel lesser because we don't know our language or culture," one of them said. "They were just really kind with lots of room in their hearts for everyone."

"They were inseparable," another man said. "They reminded me of my grandma and grandpa. If Isadore was around you always knew Joan was nearby so it was no surprise that when it was time to go home they went together. Isadore just went ahead to make camp," the man laughed and that made sense to all of us.

I met Isadore in the early 1980s when we shared a table at a conference where we were both speaking. I was feeling very nervous and trying not to show it but I guessed he sensed it because he leaned over and whispered words of support.

I never forgot that because he made me feel like I had something useful to say and his kindness gave me courage to do my work.

Our friendship developed around the things we were passionate about. The ceremonies and teachings that helped us come home, our shared road allowance history and our work with the community.

Both Joan and Isadore believed that the key to a good life was education, a good grounding in the cultural knowledge and history of our people and the ability to give unconditional love and support, all of which was reflected in the way they lived their lives. I feel blessed to have known them.

Isadore was born in 1937 on the Lestock Road Allowance in the Qu'Appelle Valley. In an interview he did for an upcoming documentary film, he talked about the good times of childhood. He also spoke about the grinding poverty and the feeling of powerlessness he felt as a child when Lestock became one of several road allowance communities to be burned down and the people forced to leave in the late 1940s.

"I remember all of us getting on the train. We couldn't take very much, our blankets, some clothes, a few horses, and some chickens, that was about all. It was pretty darn sad. I remember my mom crying as the train pulled out and we saw some men running around with torches setting fire to our houses."

It was this memory of powerlessness that was the motivation in his work for change and in particular his work with young people.

"I never wanted anyone else to feel as powerless as I did that day," he said.

Joan was born and raised on the Starblanket First Nation. She worked for so many years as a nurse at the Pasqua Hospital and retired from there as a social worker.

She and Isadore met and fell in love.

He always said she was "as pretty as a new penny." They were married for 52 years and raised four children.

At the time of their death they had 13 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren whom they loved and were very proud of.

Last night in a coffee shop working on this column, I became distracted by a couple in their mid-seventies who sat down across from me and immediately began texting on their cell phones. Except for occasional chuckles and the ordering of their lattes not a word was spoken between them in an hour and a half.

I couldn't help but think about Isadore and Joan, who after 50 years of marriage still laughed, talked and flirted with each other and who, in fact, held hands in their shared hospital room until Isadore left.

Now, I don't want to be the old lady who does not believe in technology while typing on a computer, but this couple could have learned a thing or two about love from Isadore and Joan. But mind you, that couple could have been texting sweet nothings to each other.

Can death be romantic? Of course it can. The story of the two of them sharing a hospital room and holding hands is beautiful. In this day and age a 52-year marriage is almost unheard of. To hold hands and plan the trip to the other world together is inspiring. We will miss them and I am sure I speak for all of us when I say to their family, hiy, hiy, marci and thank you for sharing your parents with us. They were very special and our prayers and love are with you during this Christmas and the many more to come.