

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, February 2012

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Fred a kind man who “doesn't think highly of himself”

I am in Toronto and I've just come in from a long walk. For those of you who are familiar with the city you will know that on the corner of Carlton and Church Street stands the old Maple Leaf Gardens, home of the NHL and Hockey Night in Canada.

I know that Hockey Night in Canada is CBC but for many little kids in the bush in the 1940s and '50s it was all one and the same. Maple Leaf Gardens is now the flag ship store for Loblaws, a grocery store chain. Times do change.

Once and not all that long ago, this was the place where young people of my generation dreamed of visiting and for some, of coming here to play hockey and becoming stars although we didn't use words like star, at least not in my community.

But to be a hockey player in the NHL and to play in Maple Leaf Gardens and have Foster Hewitt yell into the radio "he shoots and he scores" amid the yelling and screaming fans was just about as good as life could get for little boys.

I thought about all that as I stood on the street looking at the now renovated arena and I remembered Fred Sasakamoose. Freddy, we called him, and still do. He was our hero and his rise to hockey fame meant that perhaps the rest of us could also aspire to be whatever we wanted to be, something not many of us did in those days.

Most kids didn't know him personally as he lived in another community but many of us knew his family and some were related to them or at least bragged that they were.

As I walked back to my room I thought about Freddy and about Loretta, his life partner and remembered the big news of their wedding. All us little girls wanted to go and see them get married. For us that was the equivalent of any famous wedding you hear about today. He was “our star” and he was coming home to marry his home girl.

When I arrived back in my room and turned on the television there he was on the evening news speaking about the horrific sexual abuse he was not only subjected to as a child, but also had to watch as it was forced on his little friend. Later that evening I went for another walk and tried to rid my heart of the anger I felt and tried instead to think of the good man that came out of that painful, lonely place and I marveled at the strength of not only Fred, but of all our people who in spite of—and I won't go there—have been able to not only face life in a noble way but also to give so much to their people and community.

My late husband, Shannon Two Feathers, went to residential school from the age of five to 16. However, it was only days before his death that I learned of the sexual and physical abuse he had endured as a child and by then it was too late to do anything. I could only mourn the broken child and tormented man.

Shannon was a beautiful man, a kind and gentle husband and father and an incredibly talented artist, singer and songwriter but he just couldn't continue to stuff or

medicate the pain away. He died of a massive heart attack brought on by the traumatic events and memories of his childhood.

Fred, if you're reading this, myself, and I'm sure many others remember a small log house, heated with wood and lit by a coal oil lamp. Children and adults were crowded around an old radio and you are playing at the Maple Leaf Gardens. All of us hold our breath to hear better, smacking the radio when it sounds like it is going to die, shushing everybody every time your name was mentioned on air.

When the game was over the adults rehashing it all over cups of tea while the kids raced out to play hockey on a slough that had been shoveled clean, the boys arguing over who was going to be you.

I remember also when you and Loretta were spotted in Debden and people said you had a new car and that you stopped to talk to them. "Miyotaw Ana," they said. "Moya keechameisew. He is kind and he does not think highly of himself."

That was a great compliment to you and a lesson to those of us who heard. When I started to write this, I googled you and read things reports and writers had written about you. Among the many clippings I found there was one with a quote from you that read: "I let my people down."

Fred, you never let anybody down. Rather you set an example for the rest of us just as you did today. Everything you have ever done from hockey, working with youth, developing sports programs, to the leadership you give community has mirrored for all of us a good way to live and reminds us of our obligations and responsibilities to family and community.

The last thing I want to tell you is I have just come back from Ottawa where I attended a national conference on Motherhood and Mothering, where Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers from across Canada, including the Arctic, talked about old teachings around motherhood, told strong women stories and talked about the importance of role models for their sons and heroes for their children. They were talking about people like you, Freddie.

We don't compliment each other enough us Aboriginal people on the good work we do. We are told that is not our way but I don't believe that. My old chapan was Mariah Mususkaypo Vandal and she was an old, old lady when she passed over.

She always bragged us up when we did good things and that made us feel good and strong inside so I am bragging you up today to send good energy, to you and all the people who have been hurt by the horrors of residential school.

The Hall of Fame will be a better place because your name will be there for our future generations. Hiy hiy ki nanaskomtin.