



## Davis Inlet, Labrador - a Moment in Time

Submitted by Anne Campbell, School Principal, 1991-1992

The school year 1991-92 was a seminal moment in the life of the community of Davis Inlet, for the people who lived there and for me personally.

The community, situated on the coast of northern Labrador, was growing with a young population and a bursting school enrolment, but there were many social issues plaguing the community and the capable Innu leaders at that time were struggling to deal with myriad issues and concerns.



*Davis Inlet, Labrador, Hilltop view ...*

The Mushuau Innu people—the Naskapi Innu had been hunters and gathers on their vast territory of Labrador for thousands of years. In the early 1960s they had been forced to move to this ‘new Davis’ by provincial and church authorities in order to provide school and health care for these nomadic peoples. The government threatened to stop funding baby bonuses and social programs unless they moved into Davis Inlet. From living on the land summer and winter, they were now forced by circumstances to settle on a small island chosen by white authorities.

In 2022 through the lens of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and hearing the voices of leadership of Indigenous communities, we know now how these colonial decisions were deeply harmful to the Innu people, their culture, and their social and family bonds.

By having control over their own lives wrested from them, the Innu, as many other Indigenous peoples, experienced terrible intergenerational consequences that have scarred many.

Davis Inlet was a community of substandard and over-crowded housing without household plumbing and no sanitation, which contributed to many health issues. There was no safe running water except from a single community tap where folks would be forced to carry heavy containers in the coldest of winter weather to bring enough clean water into their homes for drinking and bathing.

Added to all these inadequacies, the sky-high costs for food, fuel and other essentials brought in by air or coastal boats all contributed to family stresses, exacerbating the alarming social problems especially evident among the youngest in the community.



*LEFT: Anne Campbell with residence in background*



*RIGHT: Sr Noberta, Sr Betty Rae Lee & Anne Campbell in front of school building*

In the spring of 1991, I was accepted as the incoming principal of Nukun Mani Shan all-grade school and as a member of the Presentation sisters, I would share my community life with Sister Norberta Ryan who had been in Labrador and Davis Inlet for a number of years and knew the community well. Norberta was very well respected and loved by all.

Nothing really prepared me for the immensity and grandeur of Labrador as we flew by air to Davis Inlet in August. Flying up the north coast of Labrador and stopping in the communities of Rigolet, Makkovik and Hopedale was an amazing experience, the views were incredible, the scenery awesome.

Preparing to live and work in northern coastal communities for teachers, nurses, social workers from the south required a lot of gathering up stuff and ordering food for the last shipment of the coastal boats and getting oneself kitted out with arctic winter gear at the local Army surplus store in St John's. All this expense and effort were certainly part of the settler privilege. However, once in the community the shock of actually living in the midst of such social disparity and the evident suffering and struggles of the Innu people to find their balance was certainly life changing.

The school was a microcosm of the whole community. Working with the Innu leaders that year, among them, Prote Poker, Katie Rich, John Nui & Nympha Byrne, was a way to find a path forward for the community in order to take leadership for their own lives and community. However, it was extremely difficult to narrow one's focus to school matters when everything in such a small community was clearly troubled. We provided for hungry kids and tried to help children whose parents were unable to appropriately care for them. But the rampant gas-sniffing, especially among the smallest kids, was becoming overwhelming to all concerned. The critical resources to deal with and heal these systemic problems were far beyond our capacity to provide at that time. Everyone, including the local leaders, were in despair as to how the community could help address the social disarray of Davis Inlet.



A cruel catalyst came on the night of February 14, 1992 —In the searing words of Gregory Rich:

*...“February 14th, 1992. That’s when it hit me. That’s when I lost my children,” said Rich. Rich was the father of five children who died in a house fire in the Innu community of Davis Inlet. Rich and his wife, Agathe, were out drinking at the time. Their five children and a friend died alone. ‘I can still picture it in my mind, I see smoke, flames, flames, a lot of flames, a lot of flames,’ recalled Rich.”*

The tragedy brought international attention to the grim conditions and social problems in Davis Inlet and eventually led to the relocation of that community to Natuashish in 2002. With this tragedy and the following inquiry the elders and people of Davis Inlet began to reclaim their voices and find renewed life and hope in Natuashish.

***“That’s the vision I have for my people, is to get better.” Said Gregory Rich***

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This reflection of mine focuses on *a moment in time*, albeit a critical one that I witnessed and experienced in Davis Inlet that year. Because of the fire and tragedy, an Inquiry was called: — “Gathering Voices “In that profound and healing process, the elders’ voices and wisdom led the people of the community to find ways to heal and take agency of their own lives, move from the damaged Davis Inlet and begin to rebuild the Mushuau Innu community in Natuashish.



*Students and staff playing in a snowbank at School.*

Over the past decades, a number of other Presentation women as well shared their lives, energy, talents, goodwill and friendship with many of the people of Davis Inlet and lifelong friendships were sustained. These human encounters inspired by empathy and a sense of solidarity, and our common humanity have hopefully encouraged and supported the Mushuau Innu People.

~ Anne shared her reflection looking back from May 2022, from her home in Bay Roberts, NL. She had been a member of our Presentation NL Community from 1977 – 1994.

Along with her reflection, Anne provided a link to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s ***Calls to Action***, intended to address the systemic socio-economic issues of communities like Davis Inlet. Read more **[HERE](#)**.