

Every Picture Tells A Story – Rural Women Gathering Together

Author: Evelyn Clark MA - Leadership  
Employment Affiliation: Community Futures of Mount Waddington  
Contact Address: 230 12<sup>th</sup> Ave., Box 426, Sointula, BC V0N 3E0  
Fax Number: 250-956-2220  
Phone Number: 250-973-6401  
Email Address: [evelyn@recn.ca](mailto:evelyn@recn.ca)  
Language: English

In 2004, I completed a Master's thesis in Leadership that was focussed on rural women's leadership, volunteerism and the impacts of story telling in a small North Vancouver Island community. What surfaced from that exploration was a greater understanding of rural women's passion for community, their personal resilience and how rural women's solidarity developed during tough economic times.

### *North Vancouver Island – Some History*

This story takes place in the tiny remote town of Sointula, British Columbia, on Malcolm Island. Sointula is 500 kilometres from the nearest large centre, Victoria, BC. It is a small town of 800 people, which lies just south of Port Hardy and between the mainland of British Columbia and Vancouver Island. North Vancouver Island is known by outsiders for its preponderance of First Nation's culture and history and as the home of vast wild areas for ocean recreation such as fishing, whale watching and diving. For a population of just under 14,000 it is home.

North Vancouver Island is comprised of 17,000 square kilometres of remote country dotted with small settlements that mostly sit between mountains and the ocean.

Europeans permanently settled in this region beginning in the 1800s. Making a living required catching fish, logging, or mining. Almost all of North Vancouver Island towns are located close to rich commercial fishing grounds and thousands of hectares of valuable timber. The economy of the North Island has relied on these resources and communities have formed around an economy dependent on removal of local raw resources to larger centres for processing and value addition.

The late 1990s found fishing and logging jobs becoming fewer and fewer. Changes to Federal Department of Fisheries policy lead to a downturn in the salmon fishery and

provincial legislative changes combined with industry mechanisation threw many loggers out of work. About that time the only active mine in the area closed permanently.

Once independent North Island people, the vast majority of them male, saw their livelihoods disappear. They found themselves with the choices of scaling back their employment expectations, relocating to another community that offered them sustainable employment or becoming routinely “underemployed”. Some tried to shift their employment focus by being retrained, or diversifying into seasonal employment such as the tourist industry.

An interesting phenomenon that I witnessed, and continue to see, is the amount of women throughout the North Island, formerly stay at home parents and home workers, who are taking advantage of government re-training programs, self-employment options and educational upgrades. While some of the men seem to be waiting for the return of the lucrative salmon fishing opportunities or the logging camp jobs, women seem to be mobilizing to help support their families and in turn their communities.

As well, women are becoming involved in regional planning strategies, volunteering for non-profit organizations, and helping out with community projects. They gather together in informal groups to discuss important issues and act as mentors to one another and then organize themselves to act. These types of solidarity-building activities have positive ramifications for themselves, but also for their neighbours. These actions keep up the spirit of the Sointula community and remind all community members of the value of their town and the positive aspects of remaining tenacious. As well, I believe this type of leadership shores up potential future small business and the economic matrix of rural and remote communities.

### *Sointula – Malcolm Island*

Malcolm Island is a medium-sized island that lies just south of Port Hardy between northern Vancouver Island and the mainland of British Columbia. Since 1901 Sointula has been home to an immigrant Finnish population. These were hard working community-minded people who made their living close to the sea. Although many of Sointula's community members are not now of Finnish decent, the Finnish language is still commonly spoken and the values of those early immigrants can be seen in the structure of the community.

Sointula began as a socialist commune that promoted cooperation in all aspects of daily life, free political debate and feminine equality. (Wild, 1995) Today those values are reflected in the number of existing cooperatives, the resistance to government decision-making and the role of women as leaders in community life.

I have the honour of being born on North Vancouver Island and am privileged to currently be able to make a living in community economic development. As a young adult, wanting a different experience, I fled this area for the big city and all that its lifestyle had to offer. However, as soon as it was clear that I was ready raise a family, my partner and I headed from Toronto back to the West Coast. I had been away for fifteen years but slipped back into small town life relatively easily. I have now been back on Malcolm Island for seventeen years and have created a life full of community involvement, family activities and work in the community development sector.

### *Setting the Stage*

In order to expand my employment skills and remain up to date in my profession, I pursued a Master's degree in 2002. Informed by the recent economic changes and

heartened by local women's resilience, I chose to study how Sointula women's lives were impacted by economic change and what they were doing about those changes. What began as an exploration of how to positively impact the local rural economy became an account of how these women appreciate their community and how female solidarity is built through the use of art and story.

### *Methodology -Photovoice*

The collaborative inquiry model that I chose was photography. I believed it was a useful option for participants to express themselves creatively, display their values to one another, and then explore both the group's similarities and differences. Wang (1998) has worked with a variety of community groups, indigenous women and policy makers since 1988 to use photographic imaging to encourage communities to explore the nature of their communities, display what is important to them as community members and discover common threads of community understanding. She called this application Photovoice.

Photovoice is a methodology to reach, inform, and organize community members, enabling them to prioritize their concerns and discuss problems and solutions. Photovoice goes beyond the conventional role of community assessment by inviting people to promote their own and their community's well-being. (Wang, 1998, ¶.5)

The Photovoice methodology had been practiced by researchers in indigenous populations in North and South America. It is way for rural, disempowered people to express their daily realities. It is used to both sensitize community members to their own understanding of community, but to also communicate with people in policy-making

positions that affect these communities. “Photovoice blends a grassroots approach to photography and social action” (Wang, 1998, ¶ 1).

Photovoice has been used successfully as a method of building understanding between community group members, but is also an excellent vehicle for self-exploration and discovery. It is a method of creating communication between rural citizens and policy makers in the position of making decisions for rural communities (Wang, 1998).

Using photography as a medium of expression is not a brand new idea and it is well documented in economic development literature. It was a creative option that I chose in order to reach into women’s value systems and personal reflections. It was also a way in. That is: If I was to directly ask women to verbalize their values, it may have been intimidating and even impossible. By asking them to show me what they loved about living in our community, they unconsciously revealed their values to me.

#### *Why Women?*

This project is an opportunity to explore women’s response to an economic downturn in a remote area of the world. Women’s work to date has been understated, relegated to the background and to a certain extent undervalued. In this instance, Malcolm Island women have somehow filled the leadership gap in a supportive role. This is not to say that men do not volunteer for the community. They do, and their work is noted as well. This project simply was an opportunity to shine the light on work that is being done in the shadows.

Feminist scholars portray the history of social change and development as focused on the experience of men (Palys, 1997) and there is a move afoot to rectify the imbalances of that reportage. This project is an opportunity to take part in that movement.

### *Malcolm Island Women*

I have a personal connection with each of the five participants. I know each of them and to a greater or lesser degree have both a community and social connection with each of the women who agreed to be part of this project. Because of those connections, I felt I began the project with trusting relationships between participants and myself.

The women ranged from 33 to 54 years old. Although none were born in Sointula, all have lived on Malcolm Island for over 10 years and as many as 35 years. Each is in relationship with a partner and all have had children. The majority of the women had worked in the fishing industry and 2 women still gain income directly from fishing. Each woman is employed either for a separate organization or for her own home-based business. A criterion for inclusion in this study was that each woman volunteered for one or more Malcolm Island organization. These women volunteer in many capacities in Sointula. Many have years of volunteer experience.

### *The Photo Shoot*

Each person in the participant group was offered her own disposable cameras and given a timeframe in which to complete her personal photo shoot. Participants were asked to keep four questions in mind while taking the photos.

- 1) What is important to me?
- 2) How do I contribute to my community and family?
- 3) What keeps me on the North Island?
- 4) What aspects of my life gives me hope?

Participants were asked to take 10-12 photos inspired by these questions, some of which could be removed from the group's discussion and kept private if the participant chose to

do so. I then offered to have the films developed and return the pictures to participants in time for an evening of group discussion and picture display.

### *Gathering Together – An Evening of Story-telling*

Once the group of women had taken their allotted roll of film and I had developed them, I called them together for an evening of photo display and story telling. Working in pairs, they told the tale of their lives to one another using their stack of pictures as a conversation medium. Conversations covered areas such as family, work and the greater environment. Conversations were animated and almost intimate. Observing the room I saw women leaning into one another, and lowering their voices as if sharing secrets. Hands were touched, smiles were shared and some tears were shed.

### *Photos*

Keeping in mind that photo choices were limited to twelve (the number of a roll of film) it is assumed that the participants had to go through a selection process for their subject matter and decide beforehand which pictures would carry the most import to them. The pictures that were taken showed many interesting similarities.

All women included a family picture, and an ocean picture. When talking of these photos they spoke of their relations and how they were sustained by these relationships and how their families were of paramount importance to them. The ocean also seemed to play a large presence in their lives because of its anchoring nature to place but as well as its ability to supply work and sustenance to Sointula families.

The ocean theme was extended as many included photos were of fishing boats and the local harbour. The theme of nature and the importance of history were strongly expressed in many of the photos with beautiful sunsets, marine mammals and ancient trees featuring

prominently..

### *Photo Display*

After the initial discussion each participant was asked to create a photo display using Bristol board and glue. Under each photo, participants were invited to write a short sentence describing the photo and how it aligned with their values. When asked to describe these photos with a word or sentence the women underscored their discoveries with words such as, “*pristine nature*”, “*serenity*”, “*cooperation*” and “*connection*”. These Bristol board displays were then shown to each of the other participants. The participants had a chance to view one another’s work and also to further discuss the displays.

### *Sharing Circle*

After the photo display was complete I brought the group together in a circle and each woman had the opportunity to present the one photo that captured the greatest overall meaning for them. Each woman was encouraged to tell her personal story about how her community impacted her, why she responded with involvement and generosity, and what that meant to her in terms of leadership. While women were talking, the other participants listened, usually encouraging the speaker and added to the speaker’s presentation with thoughts of their own.

As Pyrch and Castillo (2001) explained in *The Sights and Sounds of Indigenous Knowledge*, “Seeking out and sharing the stories around us helps restore life’s meaning” (p.384). I contend that sharing stories clarifies and sustains the purpose for volunteering time to emerging opportunities. In the sharing of their stories, I believe that these women recognized their common values, were able to celebrate their successes, and energized

one another to continue to be supportive in times where they might be expected to withdraw.

As the evening wore on, it became clear that the conversation had tapped into some source of these women's strength. Again and again the themes of sense of place, love of the geography and relationships were revealed. As these themes repeated themselves, women started to see their common values and the strength of one another. Despite differences in age, philosophies and hometowns, each and every woman revealed their deep connection to this area of the world and the lifestyle that accompanied living here.

#### *Common Themes*

The entire project findings have been categorized into some major themes. These are: a sense of place, cooperation, volunteerism, and leadership.

I believe this opportunity to share life stories became a jumping off point for personal discovery and development of common ground. Women who only knew one another in passing, started to converse at a very different level. Seeing the commonalities in their values and life experiences assisted these women in better understanding their peers, but more importantly, better understanding themselves.

#### *A Sense of Place*

A sense of place is a common term that is used to come to an understanding of how one is bound to a geographical area, a community or even a time in history. It reflects the deep attachments that people have to an area of the world or a sense of value that people might have about their surroundings (Haas & Nachitgal, 1998).

The concept of a sense of place springs from participant's personal history, attachments and individual experiences of living on the North Island. As Stokowski (2002) explained

in *Languages of Place and Discourses of Power: Constructing New Sense of Place*, “Places are more than simply geographical sites with definitive physical and textual characteristics---places are also fluid, changeable, dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory” (p. 368).

Overall the sense of place for these participants was expressed in their photo displays and less so in their conversations.

The participants also found sustenance in their sense of place. Each woman displayed a picture of a place that they termed their sanity, their sanctuary, or their special place. Creativity was clearly an outlet for these participants. They seemed to recognize how important having a place that buoys the spirit. As well, their sanctuaries supported participants in continuing the hard work of maintaining family and community. These sanctuaries seemed very private, and not shared with others. They appeared to be places to regain energy and balance.

### *Cooperation*

The history of Sointula is entwined with the idea of cooperation. From its inception this small town has been built on utopian ideals and interdependence. The fledgling Kaleva Kansa Organization of 1901, the initial cooperative experiment created by immigrant Finns, was built upon the understanding that everyone lived communally and helped one another to create a community from the wilderness. (Wild, 1995) Although the Kaleva Kansa Organization has long been disbanded, Sointula has existed since then upon the idea of cooperation.

It is then no surprise that the concept of cooperation and cooperative organizations would be a part of these conversations. Malcolm Island cooperatives were historically created

by community members to support and sustain advancement of innovative ideas and try to foster viable business development. Therefore, an extension of that would be creation of a volunteer culture that believed in and supported cooperative ideals. Many of the pictures and stories reflected those historic principles.

Sointula has been informally called the cooperative capital of Canada. There are currently two active cooperatives. They are: the Sointula Cooperative Store (the oldest cooperative west of Saskatchewan) and Wild Island Foods, a small restaurant. At the time of this project another cooperative was active. Malcolm Island Shellfish Cooperative, an abalone-farming venture, has since failed but featured prominently in the women's discussion. As well, one of two financial institutions on Malcolm Island is a Credit Union. The picture displays held many photos of these cooperatives indicating that the participants valued these cooperatives very much.

Cooperation is an important theme that weaves its way throughout this project.

Cooperation is almost a given on Malcolm Island. It is a cultural product of the island. Community members, both youth and adult, have learned about cooperation at meetings, during sporting events and when pulling together to solve community problems. People are both proud and focused about collaborative teamwork. Perhaps because the history of cooperation has become so ingrained in resident's minds, it has almost become understated. High community turn-out for town meetings, resident involvement in town activities and conversations about collaboration indicate that cooperation is highly valued on Malcolm Island. Although the initial participant conversations did not highlight cooperation, it was present in the photos, and was at the forefront of the women's story telling.

### *Volunteerism*

When the discussion turned to volunteerism it became clear that each participant took community involvement seriously and saw it as way to assist an ailing community. It was clear that these people did not volunteer to fulfill something within themselves, they did the work because there was a need to be filled and the work just had to be done. If a fundraiser had to be coordinated, or a shift filled at the local cooperative, these women gave their time to those efforts. It was clear to me that this group of women was committed to continuing to stay on in their community and invest both time and effort to assist the community in continuing to survive.

Volunteer time is often given with out expectation of personal return. The model of cooperation was reflected in the understanding that the cooperative entity is strengthened by the offerings of those willing to step up.

### *Leadership*

I suggested to the evening's discussions that this type of volunteerism was a form of leadership. I challenged the group by asking them if they saw themselves as community leaders. Many of the women initially rejected this label. But with more discussion and reflection it became clear that they were all leading in their own way.

Women initially alluded to leadership in the description of the photos, but it grew as a topic of conversations the longer the discussions went on. I still have animated leadership discussions with these participants while waiting for a ferry, during breaks at meetings and even informally over coffee. It is as if the seed of leadership planted itself into the story evening and continues to grow today.

Leadership development was recognized by all participants as an important part of continuing a viable, active cooperative society on Malcolm Island. Ironically, although some women did not see their own leadership abilities, they were able to clearly describe how to develop and maintain leaders in the community. The ideas of mentorship, opportunity, and collaboration arose as very important elements for rural leadership development.

### *Female Leadership*

Some participants in this study were adamant that Sointula had many more female leaders than male. Others were in disagreement. But each woman agreed that women lead in ways that differed from men. All participants were quick to say that there were no value judgments to the statement, that it was not better to be a woman leader, but that female leadership styles were different from male leadership styles.

An important aspect of female leadership, according to participants, was the idea of care taking. Some participants saw care taking as traditional and positive, others saw it as an essential part of leadership, perhaps in the context of small town living.

Participants also defined female leadership as different from male leadership in that it was less in the forefront of activity and did not draw attention to the leader. There seemed to be a tacit understanding that female leadership was not as tied to attention-seeking as male leadership. There is also an aspect of pride about pitching in and asking for no reward that wove throughout the following comments.

What becomes clear though, is that these women do lead. They may not call it leadership and they may not wait for the acknowledgment, but they are there when things need to be done. Without much fanfare, women move into empty spaces and cover what needs to be

covered. Collaborating together, women roll up their sleeves and as one woman stated“...the only way to do it is go in there, do it and get it over with...it’s just something that needs doing, so go to it” (Marie, personal communication, 2003).

### *Discussion of the findings*

Why do women continue to put their faith and energy into rural cooperative ventures when there is no guarantee in its future? Why do they stay in a struggling community when they could very well have left? What keeps their spirits up and their resolve alive? Each woman in this study has demonstrated that they share common motivations and values yet carry out this important undertaking as individuals.

These five women are motivated by a strong sense of place, which helped to shore up their own interior support mechanisms. They are also deeply connected to the history of a fishing community and the occupation that came from that world. These women demonstrate qualities of resilience and toughness during economic challenge. Their connections to place, relations and ideals both define them and anchor them to this place. Committed to community, invested in long-standing relationships, and valuing cooperation, these five participants add huge value to their community.

Their sense of place is intertwined with the world around them, how they create an economic livelihood and their deeply held faith in a positive future. With these tools, the participants are able to find the resolve to keep working when things look bleak and remember the history that helped to form a community from the wilds of the North Island. This world is “worth fighting for” (Bessie, personal communication, 2003) and a place to invest in for the future. Vitek and Jackson (1998) outlined the ideals of a sense of place when they stated

The connection between human communities and place is not unique to rural areas, but here one can be certain that the land is not mere scenery and hiking trail, or resources in need of extraction. Here the land becomes part of people's lives, intermingling with buying and selling, working and playing, living and dying. It is both history and future. In rural communities it is an opportunity for the land's rhythms to become part of everyday life, an immediate linkage between the land's fertility and the community's prosperity....Here the wisdom of limitations accrues incrementally but forcefully in daily routines and practices informed by communal labour and natural rhythms (as cited in Haas & Nachtigal, p.5)

The strong sense of connection that was expressed throughout this project was a resource for supporting the participants in the work they have chosen to accomplish. They have a tacit understanding of their role in the community and appear to view themselves as integral players in the future of the community. When there is need, these women know who to reach out to and in turn respond promptly to others' requirements. They rely upon family and friends to help them maintain their focus and give them enthusiasm for their struggles.

The participants valued cooperation. They were well versed in the local history of cooperatives and supported the idea of pulling together to create a greater whole. But more than that, they knew that it makes pragmatic sense to cooperate with one another. Women's communication styles, according to some analysts, tend toward collaboration and inclusivity. Gilligan (1982) wrote in *In a Different Voice*:

Women's deference is rooted not only in their social subordination, but also in the

substance of their moral concern, sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment, other's points of view (p.16)

It stands to reason that this communication style would extrapolate into active cooperation on the part of these study participants.

None of these participants had taken a leadership course. They were not formally trained to act as leaders in their community. Yet they seemed to understand many important aspects of leadership. Sparks (2003) wrote about how informal leaders “emerge based on skills of risk-taking, being able to articulate clearly and exhibiting solidarity with others” (p.387). These participants were clearly collaborative in nature, unafraid of supporting a risk-filled venture and displaying a great deal of camaraderie when gathered together.

The level of their comfort with one another and myself was both gratifying to witness and refreshing to be around. Although not all of these women were social friends, it was as if they spoke a common language when detailing their passion for Sointula. That enthusiasm bridged many boundaries and opened each participant up to fully engage in the group conversations.

As well, participants spoke expressively about how to define a leader. They seemed to have a tacit understanding of how to develop leadership in community and had taken advantage of the leadership opportunities that were offered to them. They in turn had mentored others to come forward and lead.

All of these things worked together to build a unique type of leadership that was not organizationally defined, but instead defined by community. This local leadership looks to the future while fully anchored in past experience. It does not abandon what seems to

be finished, but builds a future based on the positive aspects of that history. In that way it teaches each woman to mentor the other, to provide opportunities for the development of leadership skills and ultimately the ownership of the term “leader”. These women appeared to bring an alternative understanding of leadership to their efforts. With no formal training and no obvious guidelines, except from what they ascribe as a male-centric view, the participants created their own understanding of leadership practices and applied these practices in their own community.

This study must be experienced as a fabric of the whole which in this case includes the understanding of rural women, their motivations for fighting for their community’s future and the things that both give them sustenance for the fight and inform the daily practice of volunteering their valuable time. Like each of these women, the facts may exist in isolation, but taken together they weave a stronger fabric and support each thought toward a greater understanding of rural communities and the people who live there.

### *Conclusion*

Sointula is a town under duress. Economic and social factors have added to the burden of rural living to the point where unemployment is very high, families are responding by moving out of the community and the face of Sointula is changing.

Although under huge outside pressure, not all is bleak. Sointula has a few bright prospects. The greatest prospects are the engaged community members who are willing to embrace change and learn the skills necessary to help this town thrive. Sointula is known for its “sisu”, a Finnish word denoting a combination of self-reliance and fortitude. (Martin, 2003) Sisu also implies a strength of character that encourages people to keep struggling regardless of how difficult the situation or how large the task. There is

the capacity to endure.

When women take advantage of the opportunity to talk to each other, they have an opportunity to learn. They have an opportunity to support. They have an opportunity to recognize themselves reflected in a strong woman's eyes. These are some of the keys to a positive future in a small town.

This project started out as an exploration of the cooperative culture on North Vancouver Island and turned into an in-depth exploration of women's lives. Those women will continue to work toward a brighter future in this area. They will still gather together, support what they think needs being supported and help other to do the same. For the most part the roles they fill will go unnoticed and perhaps unrecognized. They continue in spite of this.

A deep sense of place, a positive outlook, and the willingness to keep moving forward will ultimately serve the women of Sointula well. Regardless of the outcome for the future, Malcolm Island will benefit from the leadership skills at play in this community.

With some capacity building and the opportunity to get together for informal conversations, Sointula women can help bring along another generation of solid community citizens prepared to offer their small bit of weaving to Sointula's historical tapestry.

## References

- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Haas, T.& Nachtigal, P. (1998). *Place Value*. Charleston, West Virginia: Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.
- Martin, S. (2003). After word. *Sisu report*. December, 2003. p.20.
- Palys, T. (1997). *Research Decisions: Qualitative and quantitative perspectives*. Toronto: Harcourt.
- Pyrch, T. & Castillo, M. (2001). The sights and sounds of indigenous knowledge. In P. Sparks, B. (2003). Women, class and leadership: Geographical knowledge for political action. *Proceedings of the 44<sup>th</sup> Adult Education Research Conference*. (pp. 387-392). San Francisco: San Francisco State University.
- Stokowski, P.A. (2002) Languages of place and discourse of power: Constructing new senses of place. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 34. (4). 368-381
- Wang, C. (1998). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health & Gender-Based Medicine*. 8.(2). 185.
- Wild, P. (1995). *Sointula: Island utopia*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour.