

JOAN RYAN (1932–2005)

On October 29, 2005, Joan Ryan died at the Agape Hospice in Calgary, Alberta. Her death due to major organ shutdown, occasioned by her own decision to withdraw from the dialysis treatments she had been receiving three times per week, involved a matter-of-fact courage that never failed her in life. “I don’t want to go on living like this!” was her final battle cry. Surrounded by close friends in a loving “fictive” (her term) family, Joan ended a life dedicated to aboriginal empowerment and the achievement of social justice. Simply put, she desired a better Canada for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit.

Born into a stressed and dysfunctional Irish-Canadian family in a poor neighbourhood in Montreal, in 1932, Joan had a difficult start. Her parents William and Winnifred had seven children, of whom two died in infancy. Her mother died in 1934 in childbirth, and her older sister Margaret played a major role in raising Joan until Margaret went into religious training with S.S.-Éléonore-de-Jésus Congregation de Notre-Dame. In her late teens, Joan met the loving Birchard family of Ottawa. Her initial contact was with Charlotte (Char) Birchard, who directed the YMCA Camp Oolawhan. Char’s husband Carl and children Janet and Kris played a key role in forming Joan’s sense of family and service to community. The Birchards nurtured her inquisitive intellect, and these “fictive parents” encouraged her interest in social activism. Joan was fond of recalling her driving of an ambulance during the asbestos workers’ strike during this period of her life, and her visceral hatred of Duplessis-era Quebec politics. She thrived at Camp Oolawhan over several years as a counselor, and entered college to achieve her Quebec Permanent Teacher’s Certificate in 1952. Joan completed a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Carleton University in 1957, having had to interrupt her studies from time to time to pay her way. She taught ballroom dancing and swimming and did whatever was necessary to make ends meet. BA in hand, Joan decided to travel to Fairbanks, Alaska, and study for a Master of Education in Psychology. She completed the degree in 1959 and also formed a close and loving friendship with a married man, who was the chief love in her young life. Joan and her friend eventually parted company, but continued to stay in touch until he died of cancer many years later.

In Alaska, Joan honed her career-long interest in aboriginal peoples, their coming to grips with modernity, and their need for resident community development teachers who could unlock young minds and talent. She also honed a visceral anger for those people and institutions that sought to unilaterally impose doctrine, order, or misguided patronage from above. Joan’s passion fed on the need for social justice, and it found expression in research and training to help local communities in the realms of land claims, local economic development, preservation and use of aboriginal languages, and promotion of the use of traditional knowledge in the local delivery of medicine,



Joan Ryan

education, and justice. When others were content to talk and to posture, Joan was often the first to act—always in concert with the community in which she lived and served. This applied and practiced passion for service arched over the course of her entire life, and interestingly, paralleled the career of her sister, Sister Margaret, who rose to the highest levels possible for a woman in the Catholic Church in Canada. In 1999, Sister Margaret Ryan received the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Medal (the highest medal awarded in the church) at the Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Cache Creek, British Columbia. Both sisters worked closely with aboriginal people, albeit from different sides of the fence of faith.

Upon her graduation in 1959 in Fairbanks, Joan went to work in the Canadian North, focusing her energies as a Northern Service Officer and teacher with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in George River and Ungava Bay, Quebec, and Lac La Martre, Northwest Territories. Learning Inuktitut from Dr. Robert Williamson, and working alongside educational innovators such as Keith Crowe and Moose Kerr, Joan continued to press for devolution of authority from Ottawa and Yellowknife to the local level. She saw her work as preparing Inuit and Dene communities for self-government, after settled comprehensive land claims had been achieved.

In 1964, full of antipathy for continued government service, Joan quit and enrolled as a PhD student in the fledgling

Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of British Columbia. It was typical of Joan that she had not taken one course in anthropology, but she harboured a complete determination to enter the discipline. Professor Harry B. Hawthorn, the legendary founding head of the department, waived the entrance requirements in view of Joan's evident intellect and ethic of service. He became her principal mentor, and under his guidance, she became one of the main authors of Part 2 of *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies—The Hawthorn Report*, published by the federal government in 1967.

Again, typically, with no partner or spouse, little money, and fierce determination, she adopted two young aboriginal daughters, Sandra and Tanis. Upon graduation with her PhD, Joan applied for a tenure-track position at the new University of Calgary in 1967. Joan got the job, and progressively bore down on her career, rising to full professorship in 1988. She became the first female department head (1978–83) and all the while participated in cultivating the careers of a generation of Canadian applied anthropology students by serving on numerous MA and PhD committees. On a sabbatical in Montreal, she wrote her first major work, *Wall of Words: The Betrayal of the Urban Indian* (1978), and began contributing peer-reviewed papers to her discipline. She also was instrumental in the founding of the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) and of its journal, *Anthropologica* (formerly *Culture*). Sandra and Tanis grew up with a dynamic and sometimes taxing, academic mother, but one who always knew her love for her children was at the core of her being. Today Sandra is a top hair stylist at a high-end salon in Vancouver, and Tanis's children Dawn and Ricky Williston and Jesse Belcourt continue their love for the Kokum (Cree for grandmother) they knew so well.

At age 55 in 1987, Joan elected early retirement from the University and switched her affiliation to the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA)—just across the campus quadrangle in the MacKimmie Library Tower. As executive director of AINA, I was only too glad to make Joan a senior research associate. And so continued a friendship and applied work partnership that lasted until her death, some 18 years later. Together we pioneered northern participatory action research (PAR) projects in Fort McPherson and Lac La Martre, and worked on numerous consulting assignments with provincial mid-North and urban aboriginal communities and organizations. Notably active with Joan during this period of her work were Joanne Barnaby, then executive director of the Dene Cultural Institute, and Allice Legat and Martha Johnson of the Arctic Institute. In addition, Joan found time to work on PAR projects in Nicaragua and maintained a long-term career relationship with the Lubicon Cree in Alberta. Perhaps the keystone publication of this period in Joan's life was *Doing Things the Right Way: Dene Traditional Justice in Lac La Martre, N.W.T.* (1995), published jointly by the Arctic Institute and the University of Calgary Press. This book is the final report of the Dene Traditional Justice Project in Lac La

Martre and is now widely in use as a “how to” text on conceptualizing, funding, and operating PAR projects. It is certainly worth noting that Joan's commitment to PAR never wavered or waned: at the age of 70, she was still applying her skills in Déline, NWT, as the Coordinator of the Field Workers Training Program in Traditional Knowledge Research on the Déline Uranium Team.

During her Arctic Institute years, Joan maintained Ryan's Cottage in Bragg Creek, Alberta. Here she hosted supper after supper for old and new friends, constantly amazing dinner guests with tourtière québécoise, baked wild salmon, Oka cheese and cracker plates, home-baked pies and cakes, and an endless stream of red wine and gin and tonics. Joan was the centre point of a social network that grew to include hundreds of kindred spirits from all over the world. Bragg Creek elders soon came to realize that a special kind of senior activist had arrived in their midst, one who brooked no “crap” whatsoever from aggressive developers, wayward MLAs, or misguided social workers.

Her seventieth birthday, held at Ryan's Cottage, was attended by over 100 lifelong and recent friends. Keith Crowe played the guitar, evoking campfire singsongs of 40 years before in Nouveau Québec, and David Lertzman and Julian Norris sang a song composed specially for the event. Joan sat back on a big wicker chair, nursing a glass of wine, and smiled her joy at the world. Her decline in health, dating almost from this event, was not pleasant to witness, but at no time up to the end did her critical processes of thought weaken or dull.

Looking back over Joan's life, her loyal friends note that Joan never varied in either the good fight for her chosen causes or her gift of friendship. She was as constant as the North and as tough an adversary as you could hope for. She also had a very soft and gentle core to her spirit—a core not evident to all. Here she nurtured her love of Sandra and Tanis and the grandchildren and her hope for a better Canada for aboriginal people. For me—I have never had a more loyal friend or a more constant supporter. I am not alone in these comments. Many of us knew her unvarying love as a friend for all seasons.

In recognition of her lifelong efforts, Joan received the Prix Weaver-Tremblay Prize for exceptional contributions to Canadian Applied Anthropology, as well as the Chief David Crowchild Memorial Award of the City of Calgary. A nomination for the Order of Canada was circulating at the time of her death.

To have known Joan was a gift now shared by those who continue on in the causes of cultural diversity, social justice for the oppressed, and friendship for all fellow-travellers. Joan—you were a life force for good, and you still are not spent.

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