

In Memoriam: Elder Morris Neyelle, Délı̨nę

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Elder Morris Neyelle, attending Hotii ts'eeda Elèts'ehdèe, in 2019. Photo: Amos Scott.

Born near Tulita in 1951, fluent in his Délı̨nę Got'ine dialect, Elder Morris Neyelle was a hunter and fisher as well as a talented photographer, artist and drum maker, a published author, and an esteemed cultural knowledge holder. He survived residential school. He attended the Hotii ts'eeda Elèts'ehdèe each year, sharing his cultural knowledge and kindness with participants from across Canada, continuing his longstanding generosity to researchers. Morris and his wife Bernice frequently welcomed researchers and students into their home. Morris would often take the newly arrived, often new-to-the-North, under his wing and orient them to the culture and beauty of his home community.

Morris had an insatiable curiosity and a wealth of knowledge of the land and the history of his family and community. As the keeper, translator, and transcriber of his father Johnny Neyelle's journals, he realized a long-held determination to publish these as the book, *The Man Who Lived With a Giant (Fletcher and Neyelle, 2019)*. The book's chronicles reflect grounding insights and understandings valuable to future generations of Délı̨nę Got'ine and researchers. Morris would often draw on his father's journals in our conversations over the years, whether about tanning hides or the self government agreement negotiations. The last time I spoke with him in person was at an author signing event at the Book Cellar in Yellowknife in late 2019, a few months before the Covid-19 pandemic. It was wonderful to congratulate him on his latest achievement, and ask after Bernice and his family. Before parting, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a bone pipe he had carved. "This is for you" he said, the gift bestowing us with a shared quiet moment of joy and contemplative appreciation, followed by a discussion of the craft of its making.

At each year's Èlèt's'ehdèe, Hotìì ts'eeda brings together researchers and cultural knowledge holders from across Canada to share best practices and provide direction to Hotìì ts'eeda for the coming year. Held on the land near Yellowknife (and virtually during the pandemic) the gathering includes tipi sessions, which provide health researchers and cultural knowledge holders the opportunity to share space, research results, and cultural knowledge with participants, creating a rich intercultural knowledge exchange and relationship building experience. Morris participated each year, and during the last two years included videos made on the land near Délìñę to demonstrate land-based knowledge and teachings to augment live virtual knowledge sharing sessions.

Knowledgeable and generous, Morris' contributions helped to build a community of health researchers, practitioners, and Indigenous knowledge holders dedicated to thinking about the land and environment, language, Indigenous health, and health education in ways rooted in Indigenous strengths, land, language, and culture. He had a gift for bringing non-Indigenous researchers and policy makers into relationship with his community, opening up pathways for creating dialogue and understanding to help further Indigenous self-determination, and orient health research and decision makers to the realities of Indigenous peoples in Délìñę, as a basis for thinking about issues and barriers facing Indigenous peoples across the NWT and Canada. He traveled across Canada contributing to a wide variety of research projects and representing his community in a variety of forums, sought after by researchers for his ability to articulate concepts from his own culture and link them to academic concerns in ways that expanded researchers' understandings of the importance of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology to enhance their own research methods and findings.

Ultimately, Morris was failed by the very institutions and people he had worked to educate and welcome. In Délìñę, health care is provided through a health centre plagued by staffing that is inconsistent and often overworked and under-resourced, within a system that struggles to provide culturally safe care and continuity of care. After several years seeking treatment for ongoing stomach pain, Morris flew himself to Yellowknife in early March 2022, where he sought treatment at the Stanton Hospital emergency room, and was immediately diagnosed with late stage colon cancer, undergoing surgery the next day. He passed away within weeks.

Refusing painful cancer treatments in the south, Morris chose to return to Délìñę soon after his surgery, to spend the time left to him with his wife Bernice, their children, extended family, and community. In an interview with CBC North radio about his situation, Morris sought to raise awareness about the importance of early cancer detection, and struggled to make sense of how his advanced case was undetected: "Why have I been treated this way? Is it because I'm an Aboriginal person? That's the question I ask myself." (CBC News, 2022)

Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox, PhD, is the Scientific Director for Hotìì ts'eeda. Getting to know Morris was one of the highlights during the two decades she worked with the community of Délìñę's self government negotiating team, and then as the implementation director who led the technical team that established the Délìñę Got'ìne Government.

REFERENCES

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