

Roberts first band member to complete Ph.D.

For Dr. Rose Roberts, becoming the Lac La Ronge Indian Band's first-ever Ph.D. is an accomplishment that's not just important for herself and the band, but for the woman who helped shape her career: her mother.

Roberts, who completed her Ph.D. in December, is now an assistant professor (and the sole aboriginal faculty member) with the University of Saskatchewan's College of Nursing. She dedicated her doctoral dissertation to her mother, Elizabeth, who not only inspired Roberts' choice of research topic – Woodland Cree people's experience with cancer – with her reaction to recent bout with cervical cancer, but also had a deep impact on Roberts' passion for education.

"Because she was Metis, she never had the chance to go to school, and so she never had the opportunity to learn how to read or write, or even how to speak English. And for her it always seemed that it (formal education) was something lacking in her life," Roberts said.

"So when she started having children, she was bound and determined that they would not suffer the same way as she had. So even though by the time we were old enough it was not longer required to send your children to residential school, she signed us up."

That early grounding in the importance of education set Roberts on a path – albeit a long, twisting and often very complicated one – toward her Ph.D., including experiments with working as a chem lab technician at Key Lake, being a stay-at-home mom, and false starts in teacher training and pre-med studies. "One of the things about me is, once I've learned everything there is to learn about a job, I get bored, so I have to move on," Roberts laughed.

It was after her pre-med studies and the births of her two children, Jerilyn and John, that Roberts was encouraged to look into the nursing profession – an option she hadn't previously considered. She ended up choosing a four-year degree program at the U of S, but three years into her studies, she had a startling realization: "I don't like working with sick people!" Fortunately, however, nursing is a diverse enough career that Roberts was able to re-direct her thoughts toward working as a public health nurse instead.

Once finished, however – she graduated with her Bachelor of Nursing degree in 1996 – Roberts immediately went down another path, becoming the co-ordinator for the university's Native Access Program to Nursing (NAPN). "Within a couple of months (of graduation) I went from student to colleague with all my professors, which was quite a shift," she said. At the urging of fellow nursing professionals, she also got some clinical experience at an inner-city clinic in Saskatoon.

While doing these two jobs, Roberts had another realization – that the part of nursing she really enjoyed was the teaching. "I was coming back full-circle," she said, surprising even herself, considering how much lesson planning and the idea of actually going in front of a class (even of her peers) to speak had caused her to panic a few years earlier. Never one to shy away from a career change, Roberts signed up for master's degree studies in the College of Nursing's Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, which she had first encountered as the NAPN co-ordinator. She completed her master's degree in nursing in two-and-a-half years, doing her thesis work on

the connection between pesticide exposure and breast cancer. In the midst of this, she was also going through a divorce, and six months before she finished, her mother was diagnosed with cancer.

In the meantime, the number of aboriginal nursing students coming into the College of Nursing was increasing, and the dean felt that an aboriginal faculty member was needed. Roberts was offered the job, provided she begin studies toward a Ph.D. The college was willing to provide her with a three-year educational leave and funding, and the new Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre offered a substantial scholarship, so it was back to school time for Roberts – another year of courses, and then two more for research and completion of her doctoral research.

So it was that as Roberts was on the last phase of her journey toward the title of "doctor" that her mother Elizabeth, newly diagnosed with cancer, was refusing to have anything to do with anyone with that title – at least of the M.D. variety. "We as a family had a tough time getting her to the doctor, and we had a tough

She also found geographical differences in reactions to traditional medicine and healing practices, with people in Little Red being the most comfortable with it, and traditional pre-Christian spirituality was never brought up. As well, "when it came to cancer treatment, the first point of contact was always the western doctor... (and) everybody went for the western treatment, whether it was surgery, chemotherapy, radiation or all of the above." Still, some cancer patients combined both traditional medicine and western-style treatment, turning to the herbal remedies when their medication was no longer working or using them to keep the cancer from spreading or to regain energy pre- and post-op.

Once her research was completed, Roberts was reluctant to let it just sit on the shelf; she wanted to give her findings back to the people who inspired and contributed to the work. To do so, she took the data from her interviews and created three composite stories: one each from an elder, a cancer survivor and a family member. She then worked these stories into a drama presentation, for which she dons costumes and acts out each person's story. "It's really powerful," she said. "By the time I'm done (performing for an audience), they're sitting there bawling their eyes out, because it brings home the message of how life-changing it is."

Roberts has also arranged to have the three stories translated into Cree syllabics, so that the elders can read them, and she is working with the U of S's media and technology staff to create a DVD with the drama presentations and the text in both English and syllabics, which can then be distributed to schools and health clinics.

As a educator, a health professional and a First Nations person, Roberts is hopeful that her work will help to create culturally-appropriate disease screening, prevention and health

promotional programs, and educate health professionals about listening to and respecting their First Nations cancer patients and families. And, while being one of the rare First Nations academics can be lonely, she is also proud of the contributions she is making toward her students' education – long after she originally gave up her teaching dream.

"It's the capacity to change somebody. It's that ability to let them see, 'oh yeeaaah,' or see a different perspective," she said. This spring, after teaching a two-week course on working with communities as a nurse, Roberts received a gift that showed her just what she has accomplished. "I think the definition of success was that they gave me a standing ovation on the last day of lectures," she said. "And they presented me with a book, and it's called 'Sky Woman: Indigenous Women That Have Inspired Us'. So yeah, they made me cry."

"In order for us as a people to start taking control of every aspect of our lives," she said, "this is what we need to do, is to get the master's (degrees) and the Ph.D.'s, so we can have the credibility to walk in both worlds and build bridges."

And while her journey has been very different from her mother's, Roberts has in a sense followed in Elizabeth's footsteps: making a better life not only for her community, but for her children. "Everything that I've done in my life so far has been to provide them the best that I can."



Dr. Rose Roberts (centre, with starblanket) was honoured by chief and council at their June meeting in Grandmother's Bay, for her accomplishments in becoming the band's first member to achieve a Ph.D. Dr. Roberts, now an assistant professor in the University of Saskatchewan's College of Nursing, is originally from Stanley Mission.

time getting her to agree to any surgery," Roberts said. "Just the way she was behaving, I began to wonder if it was just my mother, or if it was more of a cultural thing... I saw a certain personal or cultural pessimism in her reactions, and I wanted to find out where that came from."

To do her research, Roberts went home to the Lac La Ronge band, where she made contacts – through all the appropriate channels and following all ethical guidelines – with a group of elders, cancer survivors and victims' family members who became her research subjects. She probed into Woodland Cree definitions of health and illness, experiences of cancer diagnosis and treatment, and the place of cancer in the Cree worldview, coming away with some surprising findings and some heartbreaking personal stories.

For example, she discovered that her interviewees' definitions of health and illness were both intertwined between traditional Cree and western viewpoints, and also that age and education affected the definitions – the younger people had a more individualistic view of health while elders referred to health from a community standpoint, such as respect, helpfulness and being thankful for what you have. At the same time, people with training in the health care field were the ones using the holistic definition of health to include the mental, spiritual and emotional sides of health in addition to the physical, while "the elders were mostly (defining it as) 'when I don't hurt any more.... A more concrete definition," Roberts said.