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IN MEMORIAM

Chief Joseph (Joe) William Mathias
November 12, 1943 — March 10, 2000

VANCOUVER SUN EDITORIAL | March 27, 2000

Through tears, I bid goodbye to a dear friend | Squamish
Chief Joe Mathias worked tirelessly to build bridges between
communities and to instill pride among aboriginal peoples
Michele Guerin-Dimock

I have yet to learn how to say goodbye to a friend. Thus, as I attended the funeral of Joe Mathias, a hereditary Squamish chief two weeks ago, I couldn't say goodbye to him.

Perhaps it was the effort I made to be strong for his family and closest friends. I understood their enormous grief and I wanted to let love hold them up on that sad day. Yet, as the days pass on, I can't stop the flow of tears for my friend. I know the tears are because I haven't said good-bye.

It is not possible to explain what I learned from this great leader. Not just as a chief, a leader and a politician, but as a fellow human being.

The first time I marched on Parliament Hill with aboriginal leaders from across Canada, Joe was B.C.'s leader. I experienced immense pride and emotion that day in Ottawa.

The first time I carried a proxy vote for the elections for national chief, Joe led the Coast Salish and B.C. caucus meetings. He also gave one of

the best parties for the Coast Salish people.

Disparity in age meant nothing to him. Although we were a generation apart, a friendship emerged based on our love for sharing a good laugh.

Since I met Joe in the late 1980s, I have watched him work relentlessly. For many years, I listened to him advise B.C. chiefs and learned a great deal. When elected as a councillor to the Musqueam band, I counted Joe as one of my political role models.

I shared many meals and many laughs with Joe. For the past few years, until resigning last summer to go to university full-time, I did public education on treaties for the First Nations Summit. My inspiration came from Joe and other leaders who carry such a tremendous workload and responsibility.

In a recent conversation with one of my English professors at the University of B.C., we discussed an editorial from The National Post. The writer was disparaging self-government, treaties and university affirmative-action policies. The author criticized aboriginal university students for not being in the "hard science programs" and instead enrolling in "soft arts programs." I told my professor that I believe aboriginal students are being educated in areas based on their community needs. Our communities need social workers, teachers, counsellors and lawyers. We're just not building a lot of bridges on reserves.

I must now admit that I was wrong. Joe Mathias was an engineer. He tirelessly worked to design and build one of the strongest bridges to close the gulf between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities in Canada.

I believe a fitting tribute would be to rename the restructured Lions Gate Bridge after him. It is, after all, in the traditional territory of his people.

And, Joe, my dear friend, I'm really not very good at this. I love you and will miss you tremendously. *Heyawel, si?e'm*. Good-bye, respected one.

Michele Guerin-Dimock is studying arts at UBC and hopes to become a lawyer. The former owner of a gill-netter, she has three teenaged children.



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