



Sylvia Smith, 2011 Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching recipient.
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Project of heart

U of R graduate student Sylvia Smith pours her heart into a project designed to engage students in a deeper exploration of Indigenous traditions in Canada and the history of Indian residential schools.

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Photos by Don Hall, University of Regina Photography Department. Additional photos by Pat McGrath/Ottawa Citizen and courtesy of the Office of the Secretary to the Governor General.

It's a long way from a farm in Allen, Sask., to Ottawa and the 2011 Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching. But that's exactly the path that University of Regina Faculty of Education graduate student Sylvia Smith's life has taken.

It's also the culmination of a surprising personal journey for Smith, one that leads across the world and proves that a teacher really can be an agent of change in her life, in her work and in the world around her.

Smith won the award for her innovative Project of Heart, an educational tool kit designed to engage students in a deeper exploration of Indigenous traditions in Canada and help

students understand the history of Indian residential schools.

Indigenous concepts of education and literacy are fully integrated into the curriculum. Elders from First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities regularly participate in classroom presentations and discussions. Students lead many of the projects, demonstrating their learning through videos and multimedia presentations. One project in particular involves students decorating small wooden tiles that represent the thousands of young lives lost due to the effects of the Indian residential schools system.

A key objective of the program is to encourage "ownership" of this historic injustice by enacting gestures of reconciliation

for the past. Project of Heart continues to be shared with elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools in regions throughout Canada. It was showcased at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's first national event, held in Winnipeg in June 2010.

"It's an antiracism project in action," Smith explains. "It's opened up a whole new way for teachers to be working with their students and making a difference."

One of seven children raised on a farm in the Saskatoon area, Smith calls her background "privileged."

"Why do some of us have so much just by virtue of our birth? Somehow a lot of others have nothing. I think I had to do a lot of grappling with that, as a privileged person, trying to find out how you do something about that without being either patronizing or appropriative or sort of fakey. How do you help without it being charity?"

As a high school student, Smith says she was "a jock" interested in running and other sports. She still holds Saskatoon East school district records set in 1972 and 1973 for the 800 m and 1,500 m middle distance runs.

Smith earned her bachelor of science in physical education at the University of Saskatchewan in 1979 and went on to work for the Department of Social Services and Department of Education in Whitehorse, Yukon.

"I didn't have a context to put it in, but I got to see a lot of really terrible social and economic conditions that Aboriginal people were living in," she says of her time in the North.

From 1982 to 1986, she studied martial arts and taught English and self-defense in India, Greece and Japan. In Japan she earned a black belt that led her to develop a self-defence program for women.

After returning to Canada and settling with her partner in Ottawa, she taught a women's self-defence program for two years. Wanting more job security, she moved to Fredericton, N.B., for a year to pursue a bachelor's of education in physical education and biology at the University of New Brunswick.

Returning to Ottawa again in 1990, her self-defence course and her feminist outlook landed her a job with the Elizabeth Wyn Wood Alternate High School, where she has taught for 22 years. The school provides individualized programs for students who, for a variety of reasons, have fallen through the cracks.

Smith began to teach history there because another teacher retired, and that, she says, led to her taking classes in history and Indigenous studies at the University of Ottawa.

"I'm just one of these lifelong learners," she laughs.

In 2007, Smith enrolled in the University of Regina's part-time master's program in education. She still considers Saskatchewan home and looked forward to visiting family with her partner and two children while continuing to benefit from the intellectual stimulation of her studies.

She also wanted to study with Marc Spooner, a member of the University of Regina's Faculty of Education who came to Regina from Ottawa in 2006. Smith knew Spooner socially, and

sat in on a few of his classes at the University of Ottawa.

Spooner believes theory should have a practical component. For example, his own studies in homelessness led to the creation of the *City of Regina Survival Guide and Map* during his first year in Regina, and now there are over 10,000 in circulation.

Smith was also still teaching, and she recalls one Grade 10 student being "so saddened" by research into residential schools.

"It's not very often that you get kids that are so engaged in something that can be as dry as history."

That led Smith to develop Project of Heart proposals during her graduate classes.

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Christina Johns, a faculty member at the U of R's Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), recalls Smith presenting the project proposal during a graduate class in the summer of 2007. It stuck with her, and she contacted Smith because she thought the project would be a good fit in her educational esthetics classes at SUNTEP.

Johns presented the project in her class and gave drop-in presentations to some 60 students in all courses from first- to fourth-year.

Last year, Johns presented Project of Heart again, and some of the interns and pre-interns began to use the kits in their classrooms.

"Students are hit hard by it emotionally because it is such a big part of our Indigenous history," says Johns. "Project of Heart is hands-on, so you can really see what's going on, not only with the art and tiles but you can kind of feel, with the students that are involved, it's very close to their hearts."

"It's close for me as well," says Johns whose mother and aunts went to a residential school and have also participated in the project. "Lots of our students have experiences like that, so they'll go home and they'll talk to their parents and grandparents about their experiences."

Her education students developed lesson plans based on further research, including creative aspects such as poetry. "For themselves, it's a healing process, because they are impacted through the generations of what had happened through residential schools," Johns says. "As for teaching, it's an inspiration to go forward and teach the truth about that part of Canadian history."

Johns has presented workshops with Smith and the two have kept up their friendship over the years by e-mail and, when possible, over coffee. "Even though she's not an Aboriginal person she really fights for and believes in Aboriginal issues. I am in awe of what kind of teacher she is," Johns says.

"She's just so down-to-earth. I think that's what I love about her. She's so passionate about this project and about Indigenous studies and Indigenous issues. It's truly inspiring."

When Smith was looking for a master's thesis topic, she had already developed Project of Heart. Still a classroom teacher during the school year, she was able to implement the project in her high school history class.



Left: His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, congratulates Sylvia Smith at a December 2011 ceremony honouring the Governor General's History Awards recipients at Rideau Hall in Ottawa. Centre: Christina Johns, a faculty member at the U of R's Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP). Right: Faculty of Education associate professor Marc Spooner.

The Durham District School Board of Ontario – located close Ottawa, where Smith continues to live and teach during most of the year – had also taken on the project “with real gusto,” Smith says. It was Spooner who suggested she combine the two.

“Project of Heart is an action project that she did, and now she’s doing the MA thesis on participant perceptions of using the project,” he explains.

Spooner is pleased to see the success of Project of Heart with schools and teachers across the country. “I think it’s the perfect blend of theory and action.”

He also wasn’t surprised to learn Smith had won the Governor General’s award for teaching. Her strengths as a teacher include her ability to convey complex ideas in a way that’s non-threatening, to welcome everyone to learn and share new ideas, and to lead by example.

“Professors say that we always learn from students, which is true,” he adds. “In her case, I’ve learned as much or more as she’s learned from me. She’s taught me so much about First Nations issues in Canada and Indigenous education. She’s very passionate about that, and it comes through.”

Interviewing other teachers for her master’s research has been eye-opening for Smith. “Most of the teachers said what was left at the end of this, when they finished the project, was a real sense of hope,” she says.

“The kids could think of – and this is where they actually led the teacher – they could think of piles of ways that they could take action on a current issue that affects Aboriginal people today.”

For example, as well as painting the art tiles that will make up a wall at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg, they also created YouTube videos and got other students involved in projects such as writing letters to the government.

“Our classrooms are really diverse places. It has to connect with them. This is a way to make them connect because they get to see themselves as part of a whole group of people.”

Smith’s work has also moved outside the school system, into yoga classes, book clubs, retired teacher groups and even

to the Durham School Board office where staff had a chance to participate. The oldest participant is 92, Smith says.

“I’m just so pleased because we didn’t have any funding for this. And I think that’s another reason that it’s made such an impact, it’s been word of mouth that has driven it.”

The project offers a new kind of pedagogy that Smith believes teachers will welcome.

“I think it heralds a new way to teach and a new way to start thinking and perceiving, one that uses the heart and uses the spirit,” Smith adds. “Our students are crying not just for information, but for a way to deliver that information that speaks to the emotional part of them.”

As the project grows too big for one person, Smith is glad to see schools and learner groups across the country make it their own. With Project of Heart listed on the National Day of Healing and Recognition website, a second phase has begun. Smith is also glad to see resources being made available in French and English.

“It’s growing because people are finding that it’s answering a need that isn’t being met in other areas,” Smith adds. “Teachers are tired of being police officers,” she says. “They want to work with their kids, and they like to see themselves in partnership with something that’s bigger than they are.”

How does someone top the Governor General’s award? Smith plans to continue raising awareness and making transformative change through reconciliation gestures, she says, and she expects to announce her newest project soon.

“I know she has many ideas about new projects,” Spooner says. “With the opening of doors that the Governor General’s award gives someone, it adds a lot of respect and legitimacy to what a person says. With that, she’ll turn that into another – or several other – great projects.” ■

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