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**Sophie Pierre *née* Eustace**

# The Little Girl Who Would be Chief

On 22 January 2003, I stood on the front steps of the St. Eugene Mission Resort (now the St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino), near Cranbrook, British Columbia, and proudly watched as my five year-old granddaughter, Samantha, helped cut the ribbon to officially open our hotel. As I had looked out across the snowy driveway, my mind had drifted back in time to 1956, and I saw another little girl coming up the same driveway, desperately holding on to her mother's hand and looking up towards the Sister standing on the same spot where, forty-seven years later, I stood in 2003. That little girl was me. My name is Sophie Pierre, *née* Eustace, a member of the Ktunaxa Nation. I am Chief of my community, Aqam, also known as St. Mary's Indian Reserve, and I am a Survivor of residential school. That little girl in 1956 would spend nine years at the Kootenay Indian Residential School and, forty-seven years later, would witness the opening of a five-star hotel at the same site. This is our story. It is a story of making the choice to turn something so negative in our history, as Ktunaxa living in our traditional territory, into something positive for our future generations. It is a story of courage,

perseverance, and some might say stubborn determination, but mostly it is a story of vision and choices.

The Kootenay Indian Residential School, formerly known as the Industrial School, was built in 1910 and operated by the Catholic Church until 1970. Children from southern Alberta, the Okanagan and Shuswap, as well as from the local Ktunaxa area were brought to this school for ten months of each year. I am often asked what it was like in the school, and I reply that it was a very lonely place for a child to grow up. It did not matter if you were a local kid like me who could see my home from the top dormitory windows, but could not return there, or if you were an Okanagan or Shuswap kid who would not see their parents or their home for the whole ten months. When the school shut down in 1970, the Oblates, the priests who operated the school, made a deal with the federal government to turn over the school buildings and the land in trust to the five local bands. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time, and the transfer was made. Before long, it became clear that what we had was, in fact, a huge white elephant. The building maintenance costs were prohibitive, and eventually the building was abandoned.

It would stand empty for the next twenty years, a constant reminder of the pain, failure, and abandonment that our people felt, until one day, at a band meeting in our community, which we call, *Aqam*, complaints were voiced about how much we had suffered and lost at the former residential school. One of our Elders, Mary Paul, very softly said, “If you think you lost so much in that building, it’s not lost, you just need the courage to go back in there and get it. You only really lose something if

you refuse to pick it up again.” It would take a few more years of struggling with the aftermath of the residential school before we really understood what she said and then make the choice to follow her words.

Our Ktunaxa Nation Council, made up of five local bands, agreed that if we were going to do anything with the former school building it would have to be some type of a business venture, something that would generate money for its own maintenance costs. This eliminated any social program-type initiative in education or health, for example. So the idea of a hotel and golf course was born. We started talking to various people in government, like Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), in banks, and in the hospitality industry. Understandably, we were met with a fair amount of skepticism: Would anyone want to stay at a former residential school? How will we attract business being off the beaten track (meaning on the rez and away from a major highway)? How will financing be realized (again, because we are on the rez)? But we also had support right from the start by people who could see our vision, people like then premier of British Columbia, Mike Harcourt. At a business summit in London, England, Harcourt spoke of the growing business opportunities with First Nations and used our development plan as an example. Mike Harcourt remains one of our staunchest supporters to this day.

One of the first things we had to do was get the support of all our communities, since the lands where the resort was planned upon was Indian reserve lands held in common by our five bands. INAC’s regulations require a referendum for any land-use

development. We spent two years planning the development and bringing the plans to band meetings, to individual homes, and to any gathering we could to get as much input as possible from our nation members. This was not an easy process. There were many former students who strongly believed that we should just knock the building down—get it off the face of the earth—because they had suffered so much in that building. But slowly, primarily through the work of our youth, as they were the ones bringing the plans out to the communities, the words of Mary Paul started to come through. The referendum vote went through the five communities with no problem in 1996, and, more importantly, we had gained the approval and support of our people that would see us through the tough times ahead.

We ended up building a forty million dollar resort by creating partnerships between our tribal council and such entities as the Royal Bank, Columbia Basin Trust, Lake City Casinos, and Delta Hotels with the help of government programs like INAC's Aboriginal Business Canada Program and from Western Economic Diversification Canada and with the help of Human Resources and Social Development Canada, among others. But first we had to convince every one of these parties of our vision: to change something so negative for our people into something positive, something we could all be proud of and want to be a part of. We could only do that because we, the Ktunaxa, believed it ourselves.

In March of 2003, we had our initial nation meeting in our new hotel. This was very emotional for us as it was the first time for

many of our members to re-enter the former school building. It was imperative that we were prepared for this. In the mid-nineties, our treatment centre had created an innovative program called the Residential School Trauma Training Program. This enabled members from our nation to understand the very deep-rooted effects of our residential school experience and that it was so powerful it created trauma in our lives and in the lives of all our families. I cannot possibly explain in full how critical the work was that these courageous people undertook. They first had to deal with their own pain by understanding where it came from and then they had to learn how to help themselves and then all the others out there who were still suffering. They became our Trauma Training Counsellors, and they were there to help us as we participated in our first meeting in our own hotel. The counsellors held talking circles to give everyone a chance to express their feelings and emotions. The one I participated in included many people that I had gone to school with. One woman's comments in particular stayed with me. She said, "I was really scared to come here and almost stayed home this morning, but then I remembered Mary's words and so I came. I'm so glad I did. When I came in the front door I was blown away by how beautiful the room was. It really is a hotel. It really is ours and I'm so proud of what we've done!" Both of us cried after she spoke.

The Trauma Training Counsellors did so much to make our dream a reality. While I have been given a lot of credit for the physical building of the resort, it was really these people who brought us through it safely, and they continue today to provide guidance to those still dealing with the residual effects. They

also helped Survivors from other nations who came to the building while we were in the middle of the development to deal with their own ghosts. We held many cleansing ceremonies, including one with the Catholic Church—a bishop had participated. The ceremonies held both our own Ktunaxa cleansing as well as the other First Nations’ cleansing ceremonies, and these were of major importance to all of us, particularly while we were doing the non-structural demolition. The majority of that work was done by our own people, and we had to ensure their safety in every sense of the word.

The 2003 year was a very challenging year, with huge ups and downs for us. With the tremendous high of seeing our dream come to fruition with the opening of the hotel came a very stressful summer of financial crisis. Even though we were in business, with the casino opening in 2002 and the golf course in its third year of operation, we were beyond broke. Every effort we made to refinance the development fell through, and by December 2003, we were seeking protection under the *Companies’ Creditors Arrangement Act*,<sup>1</sup> one step away from bankruptcy. Because of all that we had gone through, failure was not an option. This is when our Elder’s words really pulled us through; we needed courage and perseverance, especially since one of our own communities was now fighting us and insisting that we should give up and let someone else come in and take over the property. The rest of us knew we could not let that happen. So, with the full support of the other four communities, we were able to enter into a partnership with two other First Nations, Samson Cree from Alberta and Mnjikaning First

Nation from Ontario. We signed our partnership agreement in November 2004. In September 2008, we celebrated our fourth year with a positive financial report given to our shareholders at our annual meeting. This partnership, which I believe is a first between three First Nations from different parts of our country, is truly something we can all be proud of.

We chose to maintain the history of the former residential school and share it with our guests through an interpretive centre and through the many pictures we have displayed throughout the resort of our life while at the school. One of those pictures is of six little girls in their first communion finery. Sometimes, when I walk past that picture I smile at those girls and tell them, “We did ok!” You see, one of those little girls was me.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The *Companies’ Creditors Arrangement Act* (commonly referred to as the “CCAA”) is a federal Act that provides large corporations in financial trouble to restructure its financial affairs in order to avoid bankruptcy.

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## Biography

**Sophie Pierre** was born in Cranbrook, British Columbia. She obtained a business administration diploma from Camosun College in Victoria on Vancouver Island. Sophie has led her own band, St. Mary's, for 30 years, with 26 of those years as Chief. She no longer functions as chief, but still demonstrates her commitment to her community through her ongoing involvement in youth activities, women's advocacy, and Elders' support.

Sophie has always been a strong advocate of economic development as a means to achieve self-determination for Aboriginal peoples. With Sophie at the helm, she demonstrated this commitment through her dogged determination in making Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Tribal Council's St. Eugene Mission Resort a reality for her people. Her business savvy has made her one of the most recognized Aboriginal leaders in the country, and she is a frequent speaker at business and economic development conferences. In 2003, Sophie was honoured with the National Aboriginal Achievement Award in the business category for her leadership in the creation of the largest and most elegant destination resort /casino in Western Canada. "It's not a personal award," Sophie says, "It's an indication of what our bands have accomplished." In addition to this award, she was recognized as CANDO's 2002 Individual Economic Developer of the Year.

She is a past co-chair of the First Nations Summit and a recipient of the Order of British Columbia. In December 2002, Sophie received the Queen's Golden Jubilee commemorative medal, created by the Department of Canadian Heritage where recipients are nominated and selected by their hometown communities.