



## Indigenous Women Rising: Reclaiming Leadership in Coastal Communities

**First Nations women have always been the backbone of our communities and played critical roles in the health of our communities and culture.** Over the past decade more women have been steadily stepping into positions of power.

In this special issue of ***Stories from the Coast***, we celebrate the stories of women leaders in our communities. By sharing the success stories of First Nations women who lead at all levels, we hope to bust stereotypes and shine the light on possibilities for the next generation. Women leaders in our communities have powerful voices that remind us that we have an obligation to take care of each other, our communities and our environment.

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Chief Councillor Roxanne Robinson made history when she accepted her role as first woman chief of the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation in July 2019. Previously Deputy Chief, Chief Robinson is now in her second term of office as leader of the 517-member Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation.

A member of the Salmon Clan, the Chief carries the name of Hbuks qaaps, "Mother of Spring Salmon". She will be taking over her father's hereditary chieftainship of the Wolf Clan under the name Git-kon in a future potlatch.

In her interview with *Stories from the Coast*, the Chief highlights the role of Indigenous women in leadership and her aspirations for her Nation and future women leaders.



## Roxanne Robinson

Chief Councillor,  
Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation

*"Stand strong with your voice and never be afraid to take a risk or leap of faith."*

### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ACCEPT THE ROLE OF CHIEF COUNCILLOR?

"I'm very passionate and I wanted to bring my voice to the table. My goal was to lead the community. It's easy to point out the problems in our community, but if you're serious you need to come to the table and lend your voice. It wasn't a decision that I took lightly. I had the discussion with my family and they 100 per cent stood behind me and that's what gave me the confidence to step forward and become the first lady chief of my community.

My hope was also to inspire and encourage the younger generation of youth, especially the girls, to show that it's possible for a woman to become a chief and to be a positive change for our community."

### WHY IS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN COASTAL FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES?

"We're a very matriarchal society and we are the matriarchs of our communities. We feel deeply, we love deeply, we have pure intent and we're able to have a voice for our Nation for our future generations. Women are the heartbeats of the Nations, we are the warriors, and the first to run to the lines to fight for the rights of our community."

### WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

"My first inspiration was my father – Ross Neasloss Senior. He led our community and served as Councillor Member and Chief. Watching our father lead and seeing his inspiration and passion for our community was very inspiring for me.

I also come from a lineage of powerful matriarchs. My father's grandmother Maryanne Mason was a very strong inspiration. I remember being a young girl and watching her and thinking, she's so powerful. Violet Neasloss, my maternal grandmother, was also an inspiration. Watching both Marilyn Slett and Crystal Smith of Kitimat make all the positive changes in their Nations also really inspired me to step into this role."

### HOW HAS YOUR FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE BEEN?

"It's been challenging because we're running our community in a global pandemic. But I can feel growth in myself as a leader, my skin's getting thicker. We're working hard to ensure our community is progressing during the pandemic. We set the goals of rekindling relations with ISC [Indigenous Services Canada], the RCMP and engineers. It took us three months to accomplish those goals, so we've been very proactive as a council. I can't be more thankful for our team because we're a good balance."

### AS A FEMALE LEADER, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

"I think the challenge of being heard as a woman's voice was hard. My voice wasn't heard because of my gender. I didn't silence my voice to make other people comfortable. I speak until I feel I am being heard. Sometimes that means getting people to look at an issue from a different perspective. If I feel it's going to be of benefit to my community, I'm not going to keep quiet."

### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THE COMING GENERATIONS OF FEMALE LEADERS?

"My advice is to be confident, to be courageous and never silence your voice when you know you are speaking with the best interests of your Nation in mind. When you lead from the heart, you cannot go wrong. Stand strong with your voice and never be afraid to take a risk or leap of faith."

### WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?

"That is a good question. Probably ensuring continuity of vision and coming out of the old school way of thinking from old school thinkers. Smoothing out the way for gender equality so that we're all sitting at the table as equals - working together with the same goals."

### WHO INSPIRES YOU TO CARRY ON IN DIFFICULT TIMES?

"The youth inspire me to carry on, my two-year-old niece. The decisions we make today will be felt by my niece and the younger generation tomorrow. Also, the elders – during this pandemic we've taken extreme measures to protect our knowledge holders. It's the elders and the youth who keep me moving forward no matter how challenging things get."

### WHAT'S ONE BIG GOAL YOU'D LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR TERM?

"I would really like to see our community grow. We haven't had a home built here in 20 years or the opportunity to expand with a new community centre. The hydroelectric expansion project is opening up a lot of opportunity for our community. It's an exciting time for our Nation. I also hope that I've inspired the young ladies to stand up and sit at this table and really be a voice. I hope that everyone knows that I've done my absolute best and led from my heart."







# Tina Ryan Coastal Guardian, Metlakatla Nation

Tina Ryan has completed her first year on the job as Metlakatla’s first female Guardian in the Coastal Stewardship Network. A member of the Killer Whale clan, Tina and her three sisters grew up learning to fish and harvest traditional foods on the ocean with their father. Tina is now a mother of five whose three young daughters love to go fishing with her. She shares her experiences on the water and her aspirations for young women in Metlakatla territory.

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A GUARDIAN WATCHMEN?

“I’ve always had a passion for the ocean – everything and anything to do with it. I saw that the position was available and thought, “this is a dream job.” My Dad had mainly all girls, but we’re all tomboys. Since I was young, I’ve always been out on the boat with my Dad hunting, fishing, and gathering our traditional foods.”

## WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR WORK?

“I thought it would be harder and more hands on but it’s the best job ever. It’s on the ocean and you can spend time with other Nations to see what they’re doing. That’s almost the best part – just meeting other Guardians.

I’m also not a person to keep still. It was go, go, go in the first few months and it was awesome. We were doing patrols on the ocean, doing creek walks to see if creeks were blocked for the fish to go through. We travelled to Hakai Institute for training and that was the best experience ever. We’d go into the forest to look for CMTs [Culturally Modified Trees] and do archaeology work.”

## WHAT SKILLS DID YOU BRING AS THE FIRST FEMALE COASTAL GUARDIAN FOR METLAKATLA?

“When this job came up, I thought “Heck, yah!” I found what I loved to do. I already knew the territory where our traditional grounds were and how to drive a boat. In our territory, it’s really rocky, so you need to know the layout of the land. I knew just as much as someone else with 40 years on the ocean.”

## WHAT ACCOMPLISHMENT ARE YOU PROUD OF IN YOUR WORK?

“That I am the first female Guardian in Metlakatla. I’ve met only three other women Guardians – at Hakai [Institute] there were only four of us ladies that were Guardians and the rest were men in a gathering of thirty.”

*“When this job came up, I thought ‘Heck, yah!’ I found what I loved to do.”*

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIG CHALLENGES YOUR COMMUNITY IS FACING AROUND STEWARDSHIP OF ITS TERRITORY?

“For us, it’s living so close to Prince Rupert. Metlakatla territory is all around Prince Rupert and it’s only seven kilometres away so when it comes to harvesting our traditional foods, people think it’s a free for all. The popular ones are our seaweed, our abalone and our clams. Fish too – we have sport fishermen all day, every day. We educate them to let them know they are on Metlakatla territory and that we’d appreciate if they didn’t get greedy. That was what I was taught when I was little – just take what you need.”

## ARE YOU TREATED DIFFERENTLY THAN MALE GUARDIANS ON THE WATER?

“Oh, yes. When I go out and ask people questions while they are fishing, I usually get the stink-eye or I get ignored. Until they see my skipper, who is well known, and then they have their conversation with him. I thought I would be the gentle voice that people respond to but I guess not. It’s a learning process for me.

I am the first female Guardian for Metlakatla. The attention I get for that is pretty cool, but I’m here to do the job that I’m supposed to do. That’s what I want to show the younger generation of ladies. I tell them, it may be a man’s job, but I think that a woman could do it too and maybe even better.”

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IN CFN COMMUNITIES?

“In Metlakatla, men are providers but women are too. The men take the fish, but we ladies do everything else. We cut them, we cook them, we preserve them. It blows me away the elders here that are still doing stuff. The ladies are in their 70s, 80s and 90s and they’re still doing what they do with their traditional foods. There are not too many left yet the kids see them hard at work and they teach our kids still. The ladies over here are pretty cool. I keep coming back to our voices - they have voices.”

## WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

“My Dad started me on my love of the ocean. With his love and passion, he just showed me everything I love about the ocean. When I was pregnant, he was sick, and he never quit going out. Now it’s my uncle – my dad’s brother – who takes me out all the time. Even in my spare time I am out on the boat because of the two men who helped me love the ocean.”

*“Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do a man’s job.”*

## WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT THE OCEAN?

“How alive it is. The whales. All the food that you can get out of it to feed your family. We can travel anywhere. My heart is with the ocean and that’s where my Dad went when he passed away. We took him to the ocean to do one loop before we buried him. That’s probably what I would want is to go out like my Dad went out. Go out to the ocean for one last cruise.”

## AS A WOMAN, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

“I don’t say Guardian Watchmen. My business card says, “Tina Ryan, Guardian Watchwoman.” A couple of people say it’s Guardian Watchmen for a reason. They’re telling me that it’s a man’s job. Well you know what? I’ve been here for a year; nothing is holding me back. I can do anything a guy can do on the ocean. I’ve pulled in big nets, big crab traps and big fish. I’ve proved them wrong over and over again.”

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG WOMEN TAKING ON LEADERSHIP ROLES?

“Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do a man’s job. Personally, I believe women sometimes do it better. Our voices and ideas are just as important.”

## WHAT WILL BE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?

“I don’t think there will be big challenges. Our ladies have strong voices and authority. In Metlakatla, more and more ladies have stepped up to take on jobs dominated by men before like Chief and Council. I think they will only get stronger. It comes back to having a voice. Just use your voice, your voice has to be heard. Don’t be shy, speak up, say what you think.”

## WHEN YOU FACE CHALLENGES, WHAT INSPIRES AND ENCOURAGES YOU TO CONTINUE?

“I don’t expect special treatment because I’m a female. I expect to be treated as my other coworkers are. If I do face challenges, I talk to my coworkers and tell them what’s going on and they help me. The special treatment thing - I don’t think I’ve have had it yet, but I’m waiting. And I don’t want it.”

## WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MORE WOMEN BECOME GUARDIANS ON THE COAST?

“Oh yes, that would be awesome. We wanted to take on a youth worker this year but because of COVID-19, we haven’t even gone out the boat. That’s what I’d love to see especially here in Metlakatla. Just to show the kids what an awesome job it is and the places you get to go and the things you get to see.”





# Kirsten Milton

Director of Health,  
Nuxalk Nation

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO TAKE ON A HEALTHCARE LEADERSHIP ROLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

“Because of the respect I was always taught to have for my elders, my community, my leadership. My grandfather was a Hereditary Chief and very traditional. He held high respect in the community. He always paraded me around with him, so I’ve always been very comfortable speaking in my community and with my elders. I think that really helped me advance in my health career.

Whenever an emergency came up, I was always identified as someone who could hold it together, so I was encouraged to go into the health field. I’ve been an LPN for 10 years. I stepped away from that because I wanted to be more involved in supporting the community and the elders and to focus on the health programming I developed in my career.”

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIG CHALLENGES YOUR COMMUNITY IS FACING IN HEALTHCARE?

“Home support has been identified as one of the biggest challenges. As our population ages, what are some of the things elders need to get through their daily lives? That’s become really difficult under COVID-19 conditions. One thing we used to have is an elders’ luncheon. Under COVID, we realized we couldn’t just stop this program, so we decided to do a meals-on-wheels delivery program. Now we find the elders are waiting at their door for their weekly meal. We’re excited we can continue this program because so many things had to stop in our community.”

Kirsten Milton was in her first year as Director of Health for the Nuxalk Nation when the COVID-19 world pandemic struck in March. She is also in her first term as Nuxalk Nation Councillor and brings ten years’ experience as a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) to her role as Director of Emergency Operations.

Kirsten received her traditional name of “Syut” Killer Whale from her grandfather – a name she shares with her mother and other women in her family. Raised by her grandparents, Kirsten is the oldest of three children and is married to her high school sweetheart with three children of her own.

## WHAT ACCOMPLISHMENT ARE YOU PROUD OF IN YOUR WORK?

“We identified that there is a big service gap for First Nations living on reserve. Through funding bodies like FNHA [First Nations Health Authority], we were selected to have our own primary care clinic. It was months of data collection and figuring out where on the Central Coast it would make sense. It will be a big game changer for the Nation.

Another thing I’ve helped take the lead on is funding for an elders’ village. The new housing will have 11 units and a space for a traditional gathering place. Since most First Nations don’t have the opportunity for direct support, we end up having to send people as far away as Merritt or Williams Lake for long-term care. That’s not First Nations culture – we don’t send our elders away. We’re hoping to break ground this fall and are working with a First Nations architect from up north.”

## WHY IS FIRST NATIONS WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN CFN COMMUNITIES?

“When you go into any cultural or traditional ceremony in our community, it’s often opened by a prayer by one of the most respected elders. And she is the one who inspires the people to do the work that we do. In our work, we always make sure we have traditional support right next to us guiding our process. I feel that in places where cultural guidance isn’t a part of it, emotions really cloud the process. Traditional women keep us focused and help us in our work.”

## WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

“Definitely the women in my family. The message they have always given me growing up was – always support your family and community. People in the community always tell me how much my grandparents did for the community. When I feel down and maybe it’s showing in my face, people come up to me and say your grandparents would be extremely proud of you right now. I love that. They never faltered in who they were as people.”

*“I think the biggest mistake you can make in a leadership role is that you know it all.”*

## AS A WOMAN, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

“Definitely confidence. That’s something you have to build. It’s not something you can just take on in a day. I think I’m in the perfect position and time in my life to do the work that has to be done and I have the confidence to do it. I find that I have to instill that confidence in my staff, in my coworkers, in my clients. When I hire new women staff, I think, “You are perfect for this position” and they say “Oh, don’t look at me, I can’t do this.” They almost have a panic attack. I find the women I work with, we boost each other up – we have to do that for each other.”

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO COMING GENERATIONS OF FEMALE LEADERS?

“I think the biggest mistake you can make in a leadership role is that you know it all. It makes a big difference if you are willing to listen. I go to the women in my building when I’m stuck on a problem. It’s scary if you have to go through a big decision alone. I tell my staff we’re doing this together as a team. I make that clear when we’re starting a new program, “Hey I don’t always know all the answers, this is brand new. If you feel I am making a mistake, please correct me.”

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?

“The technology really separates you from being grounded in your culture and your traditions. I think back to when I was a child, when you were at a potlatch you were engaged in what you were doing at the potlatch. At the same time, the next generation will be able to use the technology to its advantage. It will be a challenge to utilize those devices that will be of use to them but also learn how to work without them.”

## WHO INSPIRES YOU TO CARRY ON IN DIFFICULT TIMES?

“My children. I’m worried about the future and making sure they are safe. It’s easy for anyone to shut down and let the leaders deal with the problems at hand. But what am I actively doing to ensure their health will be protected in the future? Our community has faced a lot of loss with drug use and suicide. How can I ensure my children don’t get into that mindscape of mental health issues without supports in the community? It really scares me to know that something could happen to my children like that and there weren’t things available to them.”

## WHAT ARE YOUR ASPIRATIONS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?

“There’s a lot of racism in our valley and it’s really hard to live with. I’ve experienced it all my life – in Kamloops, living here, and it really stops our people from advancing ourselves. COVID-19 has forced all the leadership in the Bella Coola Valley to come together to discuss how can we address this issue together. Prior to this we were just starting the conversation of ‘how do we work together’ with all the agencies. Now, with COVID, we’re all at the same table to figure this out.”



# Jess Newman

Indigenous Health Dietitian,  
Island Health

Jess Newman is the Indigenous Health Dietitian with Island Health. She is Haida, Heiltsuk and Kwakwaka'wakw, and was raised in her mother's community of Skidegate on Haida Gwaii while spending summers in her father's community of Bella Bella in Heiltsuk territory. Coming from two fishing families, Jess had access to many traditional foods growing up. Her love of this food and her concern about the health issues faced by family members with diabetes inspired her to pursue a career in health and nutrition. She graduated from UBC in 2015 as a Registered Dietitian and now works with communities from the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuuchah-nulth, and Coast Salish family groups on northern Vancouver Island.



***“Food is love, food is medicine. Food connects families, it connects communities, it connects Nations.”***



## HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED IN YOUR WORK AS A DIETITIAN?

“When I was in my teens, I knew that my grandmother and my great-aunt had diabetes but I didn't understand what that meant for them, and I don't think they understood what it meant for their health as well. I feel that had a lot to do with racism in the healthcare system, as well as our community not having access to good care, so I wanted to be involved to try to change that. And I knew dietetics is a field that connects nutrition with wellness.

My work now focuses on food security and Indigenous food sovereignty. Recently our Aboriginal Health program approved a proposal I submitted, to create two knowledge keeper positions in north Island communities to work in food security and food sovereignty. That was one of my most proud moments as a dietitian. I also work in diabetes prevention and management and do diabetes education in schools which is very much my passion.”

## WHAT DOES INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MEAN?

“Food sovereignty means the community has control over its own food system – a system that is tailored to its cultural needs and specificities, and often means reverting back to our old traditional food systems. Trying to further Indigenous food sovereignty is quite a task because communities have been displaced from their traditional territories, so they don't have access to their hunting, fishing and gathering lands. As well, government policies that prevent harvesting and hunting and engaging in our old food systems are at the core of the bigger problem in accessing food. I feel if there were fewer regulations and restrictions around access to our homelands for harvesting, our wellness would be greatly increased.”

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIG CHALLENGES FOR YOUR COMMUNITIES IN TERMS OF FOOD AND HEALTH?

“Definitely remoteness and lack of access to nutritious food choices. For example, Kingcome, like many communities, has to have groceries transported in by plane and boat. Every transportation step requires a fee which makes groceries ridiculously expensive. It's also the entire system of displacement and government policies that prevent our people from being able to harvest or fish. Our entire way of life has been impacted due to ongoing colonization, and all of these things add up to huge challenges around food and health.”

## WHAT IS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE PROUD OF IN YOUR WORK?

“When I first graduated and moved back home to Skidegate, I created a successful diabetes group. I have a family member with diabetes, and I encouraged her to come. She hadn't told anyone she had diabetes because she was ashamed, but after a few months she was able to stand up and tell the group that she had diabetes. It felt good to know that I created a safe space, a place for people to connect. Many people with diabetes tend to feel like their condition is their fault – but it rarely is.

Diabetes is related to social inequality. It doesn't just disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples, but all oppressed people. It's connected to colonization and residential schools. It's a system-level problem.”

## WHY IS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES?

“I believe it's so important for young Indigenous women to see women who look like them in positions of power because it makes them feel it's possible. I had that growing up. I saw women going to school and in those leadership positions and that made me believe I could get here.”

***“Diabetes is related to social inequality. It doesn't just disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples, but all oppressed people.”***

## WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

“I was so lucky to have many incredible role models growing up – but I would say my two grandfathers. They devoted their lives to the betterment of Indigenous peoples. The change they were able to create inspired me into a role of service. That's why I do what I do. They are two of the best men I know.”

## AS A WOMAN, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

“This is a tough question because I don't feel that I've faced any barriers in my career because I'm a woman. Working in healthcare, it's almost all women. I would say I've been really supported and uplifted by women in my career, and I see that more and more. Women are supporting women and it feels like lots of change is happening.”

## WHEN YOU FACE CHALLENGES IN YOUR WORK, WHAT ENCOURAGES YOU TO CONTINUE?

“I would say again the women that I work with. At Island Health, we have an Aboriginal Health team and all of the managers and directors are Indigenous women. And the ones that aren't are also amazing women! We all inspire and support each other.”

## WHAT WILL BE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?

“Racism within our systems and society. I felt it and I know it's still there, of course. Racism is so ingrained in our society and I feel there's not enough education in our system. It's very complex – I can't say whether racism will get better, but it seems that more people are willing to educate themselves and there are so many great resources out there. It makes me feel positive that people are willing to take that step.”

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG WOMEN WHO ARE TAKING ON LEADERSHIP ROLES?

“I would say they are difficult, but they are fulfilling roles and at this level you're able to effect change and that's really exciting. It's hard to find work that's meaningful. I would say go for it because we need you!”

## WHAT ARE YOUR ASPIRATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY FOR THE FUTURE?

“It's an exciting time. I think COVID is bringing a focus to our food systems that's really empowering communities right now. Food is so linked to our identity and our wellness. Our food connects us to our ancestors, which is why it's so powerful. If we have that tie to our foods and our land, our wellness can only be enhanced. Food is love, food is medicine. Food connects families, it connects communities, it connects Nations.

## DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE TRADITIONAL FOOD?

Sockeye. It's so connected to my upbringing. I love fish soup. I have such good memories of my Dad taking the fresh fish out of the ocean and cutting it right there, then cooking it on the boat. And sitting with my family enjoying each other's company and amazing fresh sockeye. Fish soup has a piece of my heart.





# Linda Innes

Chief Councillor,  
Gitxaala Nation

Lou Gagwelks Chief Linda Innes is in her first term as the first female Chief Councillor of the Gitxaala Nation. Growing up in her community, she has always been motivated to be a part of positive change. Chief Innes brings diplomas in Business Administration and Social Work to her position as Chief, and is completing a Bachelor of Arts, with a minor in Political Science. It is her hope to inspire all women to earn a higher education and to take their rightful place as equal participants in the community, workforce and society.



## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO RUN FOR LEADERSHIP?

"This is my first time in an elected position. In the beginning I was really nervous and I felt kind of fragile but after a while I thought, everything that I'm doing here I've prepared for this. I've always had a vision to run for leadership. I've seen women apply for jobs where they say it's a man job and I felt it was such an injustice and disservice that women are dealt with by their own people in that manner. So I felt it was time for women to rise up in our leadership."

*"As women in leadership, I feel we combine our knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively confront colonization."*

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ACCEPT THE ROLE OF CHIEF COUNCILLOR?

"I've always been very motivated. Our council vision, my vision, was to rebuild our Nation's unity by ensuring our members were participating meaningfully in all areas of governance, and by being accountable and transparent. How do we manage for the changes ahead? When I look back, I want to be proud that our policies are in place and to ensure that our Nation's members are the direct beneficiaries of our agreements and they have a say over what happens in our territories."

## WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING YOUR COMMUNITY?

"I really feel our language is under threat, our culture. We still have a lot of work to do to decolonize ourselves. Even for myself, I'm the first female elected Chief for Gitxaala and I'm proud of that, but not many people are proud of it because it's traditionally been a man's job. I think the threats we face are many: Our culture, our language, our unity – we need to work on our healing."

## WHAT IS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

"I would say I am most proud that we have a unified governing council. Based on that unity, we're able to make decisions. Even though in our meetings we deliberate and we debate issues, we do our best to make informed decisions to benefit our Nation. Another accomplishment I'm proud of is having extended an olive branch to our neighbouring Chiefs to ask how can we work together? And they've been very reciprocal. When you look at the opportunities before us, as long as we're not working together, we're leaving a lot at the table. Together we're stronger."

## HAS JOINING COASTAL FIRST NATIONS GREAT BEAR SOCIETY (CFN) BEEN PART OF THOSE EFFORTS?

"I didn't really realize how much a part of Coastal First Nations we were. We're the "People of the Salt Water". We live by the ocean, we depend on the ocean, that's our whole environment. Being a part of CFN gives us that collective voice with government. We have a stronger voice and impact and it gets the needs of our Nations met."

## WHY IS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN COASTAL FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES?

"Part of my courage to run for leadership came from watching others like Chief Marilyn Slett and Chief Crystal Smith. When you see more women get involved it's inspiring. Once you know the history of colonization, women in general were not allowed to vote in federal or provincial elections until 1918, and for Indigenous women, we were not allowed to vote until 1951. As women in leadership, I feel we combine our knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively confront colonization."

## WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

"In terms of leadership my strength comes from my mother and my grandmothers. They're very strong women, very motivated. They taught me how to provide for myself, lead for myself. In terms of community leadership, the one person who has always inspired me was one of our late elders, Johnson Gordon. He was a Hereditary Chief and served as an elected leader for over 30 years. My first encounter with him was an

interview for a Grade Eight social studies project. When I was done, he said, "One day you're going to be a leader in this community". What inspired me about that was his attitude of care. It is those little things we need to instill in our younger generation of girls and boys."

## AS A FEMALE LEADER, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

"As a female leader, being elected under the Indian Act itself is a barrier. On a personal level, a barrier has been the intergenerational trauma that I have experienced. Lateral violence was a huge barrier in my career. With continued healing over the past years, I can manage effectively the lateral violence and set respectful boundaries for myself and others. I have a very good grasp of governance and being a female has its strength: I am nurturing. I push for improvement and engagement in social determinants of health. I have courage and faith in our leadership and our people."

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?

"The first thing that comes to mind is climate change. How do we help our Nation adapt to climate change? I don't know when I leave this world what will happen to our children. We're right by the ocean. Will we be safe? We have to think about the future, not just today."

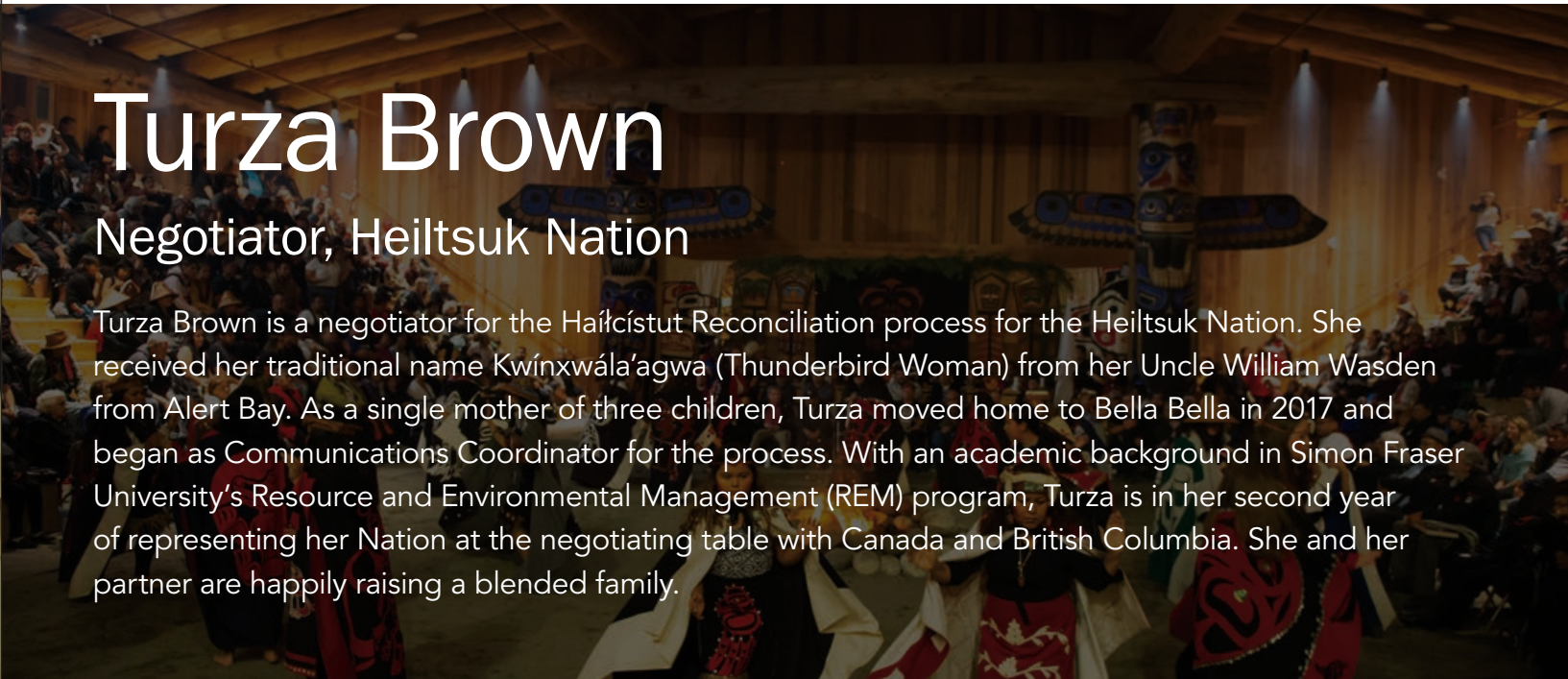
## WHAT INSPIRES YOU TO CARRY ON IN DIFFICULT TIMES?

I have a really good relationship with my husband. He's been my inspiration and he believes in me more than anyone else, even when I don't believe in myself. Self-care is important. In difficult times, I work on land connections - fishing, hunting, berry-picking. When I get a little break, I take advantage of them and I just love that connection."

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO FUTURE GENERATIONS OF FEMALE LEADERS?

"I would tell anyone who wants to go into leadership to believe in yourself, believe in your people, and believe in your community. Have courage to make the right decisions, don't be afraid to ask questions, don't be afraid to ask for help."





# Turza Brown

## Negotiator, Heiltsuk Nation

Turza Brown is a negotiator for the Hałcístut Reconciliation process for the Heiltsuk Nation. She received her traditional name Kwínxwála’agwa (Thunderbird Woman) from her Uncle William Wasden from Alert Bay. As a single mother of three children, Turza moved home to Bella Bella in 2017 and began as Communications Coordinator for the process. With an academic background in Simon Fraser University’s Resource and Environmental Management (REM) program, Turza is in her second year of representing her Nation at the negotiating table with Canada and British Columbia. She and her partner are happily raising a blended family.

### WHY IS THE PROCESS CALLED HAŁCÍSTUT?

“When we went to the elders and told them we what we were trying to accomplish, they weren’t comfortable with the term “Reconciliation.” Reconciliation refers to two people who have done wrong and are trying to make that wrong right. Our elders thought that as Heiltsuk people we didn’t do anything wrong – it was the government that systemically oppressed the Heiltsuk people, so this was something that the government needed to make right. The elders came up with word “Hałcístut” that refers to “turning things around and making them right again.”

### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO TAKE ON WORK AT THE RECONCILIATION TABLE FOR THE HEILTSUK?

“I know that deep down this kind of work is in my blood. My great-grandmother Brenda Campbell was the first president of the Native Sisterhood of BC. Growing up with grandmothers who incorporated Heiltsuk values into their daily lives helped me become the person I am today. When this job arose, I felt it was the perfect opportunity to ensure that these values were incorporated into Hałcístut and into turning things around and making things right again.”

***“I think one accomplishment I am most proud of is my ability to use my voice as a woman and as a Heiltsuk woman especially. As women, there was a time when our voices didn’t matter.”***

### WHAT IS A BIG CHALLENGE YOUR COMMUNITY IS FACING IN TERMS OF RECONCILIATION?

“One of the biggest challenges in my community in terms of Reconciliation is the socio-economic gap. In negotiating with both governments, we always remind them that this gap was created systemically. We’re trying to recover from that. We’re trying to create a sustainable economy, a different relationship with both governments, and ultimately a governance system built off our forefathers’ and foremothers’ footprints.”

### WHAT IS ONE ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE PROUD OF IN YOUR WORK?

“I think one accomplishment I am most proud of is my ability to use my voice as a woman and as a Heiltsuk woman especially. As women, there was a time when our voices didn’t matter. A time when as women, we were thought of as less than. I am proud to be a voice at the table that is negotiating Heiltsuk laws and rights with government.”

### WHY IS FIRST NATIONS WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN CFN COMMUNITIES?

“Heiltsuk is a matriarchal society so there is a term that’s often used that women are the backbone of our society. Women are the ones who bear the future generations and women have always been great advisors to leaders because of all the knowledge and values that we hold. We’re the knowledge keepers, it’s in every single one of us as Heiltsuk women.

Just seeing all the women emerging in their rightful roles as First Nations leaders is inspiring to say the least. Chief Marilyn Slett is someone who inspires me every day, she’s a very strong woman leader. Chief Roxanne Robinson is the Chief Councillor of Kitasoo/Xai’xais and she’s inspiring. She’s been a very dear friend of mine for all our lives and I’m very proud of her. Another leader, Chief Linda Innes from Kitkatla, I had the opportunity to meet when she came to Bella Bella.”

### WHO ELSE INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

“My mother, my aunties, my grandmothers – basically all the female people in my life inspired me. Through their collective strength, I got a strong sense of identity that has helped shape me into who I am. If there’s one thing I can pass on to the next generation, it’s our Heiltsuk way of life, our laws and our values. My Gran was taught all these things by her mother and she has been teaching me since I was little. I remember standing with her at a potlatch while she was performing a ceremony for a coming of age. As her eldest grandchild, taking on a role was something that was introduced to me very early on.”

### AS A WOMAN, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

“I have to say that the most significant barrier in my career is wage parity. It’s not just a First Nations issue but given our matriarchal society I feel that women should be equal to men in all areas, including wages. As a woman, I feel that we are very committed to our work. We often overextend ourselves and a lot of the time we become under-appreciated and under-acknowledged.”

### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG WOMEN WHO ARE TAKING ON FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP ROLES?

“Trust the process and never give up. I dropped out of college after one semester at age 18 and became a mom of three by age 27. I didn’t do things the way society thought was normal. At one point, I had three jobs to provide for my family, and I was the oldest student in most of my classes at college and university. I struggled but somehow got it all done. I was told by people throughout my whole life that I would never amount to anything and there are barriers I’m still faced with every day as a woman. But as hard as it gets, I keep facing forward to continue to find a way to break down those barriers, because that is what we do.”

### WHAT WILL BE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?

“I think the biggest challenge will be for them to find a balance to ensure we’re thriving in a modern-day system that still embodies Heiltsuk laws and values. We must never forget who we are and what it means to be Heiltsuk.”

***“I know that deep down this kind of work is in my blood.”***

### WHEN YOU FACE CHALLENGES IN YOUR WORK, WHAT INSPIRES AND ENCOURAGES YOU TO CONTINUE?

“What inspires me to keep going is reflecting back on the work of my ancestors as well as looking forward to the future generations. Our ancestors have left us everything we need to create a modern-day governance system based on Heiltsuk laws and Heiltsuk values. In order for us to be successful, we need to stand firm on keeping our Heiltsuk laws and values in place.”





# Simone Reece

Stewardship  
Director,  
Gitga'at Nation

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO TAKE ON THIS ROLE?

"I'm hoping to create small changes that start a path to increased inclusion, communication and solidarity in our community. I think that if you start to change the way people communicate, no matter where you are, that's going to have a ripple effect from the people in that program to their family and towards their friends and family and the bigger community."

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIG STEWARDSHIP CHALLENGES YOUR COMMUNITY IS FACING?

"Dealing with outside agencies and governments when we're trying to achieve a life of protection and sustainability for our people – and essentially for all Canadians. Being limited by provincial and federal policies can be tough when we've had traditional ways of conservation. Whether it be salmon, or any kind of wildlife, and we have to deal with agencies like DFO or BC Parks and Recreation, we're not always aligned in the methods for achieving those goals. And First Nations aren't always consulted when making those policies."

Simone Reece is the first female director of the Gitga'at Nation's Oceans and Lands Department. Simone graduated in the spring with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) from the University of British Columbia in Terrace and also holds an Associate in the Arts degree with a specialization in criminology from Coast Mountain College. A mother of three and a grandmother of three grandchildren, Simone started her new position in May. Simone's traditional name is Gwa-Lag, which describes the very instant a bolt of lightning hits the top of a tree and splits it.

## WHAT IS ONE GOAL YOU'D LIKE TO ACHIEVE AS STEWARDSHIP DIRECTOR?

"Clean and simple: To create an atmosphere where our Guardian team feels secure. Where they can face their educational and professional challenges and feel comfortable and supported. When they feel that level of security, they're willing to take more chances. We need our people to feel more comfortable because of historical and legal challenges and the legacy of residential school."

## WHY IS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN CFN COMMUNITIES?

"It's great to have all our people educated and confident. When men are educated and employed, they improve their standard of living and that of their immediate family, but when women are educated and employed, they improve the standard of living for people beyond their immediate family. They improve that of the children, the family and friends, and the people in the community they come in contact with. Sociological studies have proven that the way out of generational poverty is to educate women, get women into politics, and get women into leadership roles."

## WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

"My first inspiration was my mother. As a single parent in the early 70's, when many First Nations babies and children were being forcibly removed for no reason, she worked to provide for me and put my well-being, wants and needs above her own. As I got older, I looked back at the many years she didn't buy herself any new clothes and still managed to look professional. When I was a child, she enrolled in an adult education program, and talked often of the importance her father put on education when she was a child. Over the years, when my own children were young, I often spoke of going back to college and she always encouraged me to do that, but I was hesitant and afraid I couldn't do it. When I finally did go back, she was my biggest supporter in every way."

*"Systemic patriarchy has been the biggest barrier to me getting to where I am right now."*

## AS A WOMAN, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

I'd have to say that systemic patriarchy has been the biggest barrier to me getting to where I am right now. Parenthood and the inequality women face as opposed to men, the Indian Act, employment/wages, childcare services, the list goes on and on. The Indian Act essentially took women out of the equation and many of our societies were matriarchal. Just trying to get childcare services as a single parent while you're trying to go to school or work is ridiculous in Canada."

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG WOMEN WHO ARE CONSIDERING TAKING ON LEADERSHIP ROLES?

"Don't be intimidated and don't worry about making mistakes. There are always people who are willing to help and people are more understanding than we assume. Be open enough to change your mind if the proper information leads you away from your current beliefs. I've been on a journey for the last 45 years. My personality previously was very rigid and I'd go from one extreme to another. It's taken me years to discover there is a lot of middle ground and a lot of pieces to make the picture whole."

## WHAT WILL BE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF FIRST NATIONS WOMEN LEADERS?

"I'm going to go back to patriarchy. Colonization and the Indian Act have altered the reverence First Nations people have historically had for women. It's changed the historical way of interacting as families, clans, communities and Nations. Men were put at the top of the pecking order by the patriarchal Indian Act and for some of them, it is difficult to imagine that there was, and could be, a different way of existing together for the betterment of our people."

## WHEN YOU FACE CHALLENGES IN YOUR WORK, WHAT INSPIRES AND ENCOURAGES YOU TO CONTINUE?

"Duty. Duty to my children and grandbugs, duty to my job, my employers, my community, my People. Throughout the courses in the BSW program, we explored a lot of First Nations content and I have great role models who I was able to reflect on. A theme that came up for me continuously was duty. Duty can be a double-edged sword; it can cause stress and discomfort, but it can also provide clarity and motivation. I have at times felt cursed for the duty I felt to family or the clan system, but then I have been held up, supported and comforted by that duty."



# Vanessa Bellis

Haida Fisheries Program Manager,  
Council of the Haida Nation

SGiids Kung (Red Moon) Vanessa Bellis has been the Program Manager for Haida Fisheries of the Council of the Haida Nation since 2017. A mother of four, she lives with her husband Noel in Masset on Haida Gwaii where she was born and raised. Vanessa grew up with a deep love of the ocean and has always been comfortable in the waters of Haida Gwaii. She was a competitive swimmer for five years and swam year-round in the ocean in front of her house.



***“You just have to work hard and stand up for what you believe in and don’t be afraid to ask for help along the way.”***



Photos by Jack Litrell

**WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WORK IN FISHERIES?**

“I’ve grown up on the ocean, it’s always been a part of my life. I started with Haida Fisheries as a summer student, then a Field Technician, then became the Watchmen Supervisor, then Operations Supervisor. When this job was advertised, I had worked for the program for a long time and I felt I could do it.

The longer I worked in fisheries, the more I wanted conservation and sustainability, not just for my children and grandchildren but for generations to come. Having Council of the Haida Nation be in charge of its own resources could ensure that.”

**WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIG STEWARDSHIP CHALLENGES YOUR COMMUNITY IS FACING?**

“Right now we work with all the different government agencies on Haida Gwaii and what we want is to be in charge of our own resources in the future. So coming up with the recruiting and training of people is going to be challenging but I know that a long-term goal is for the Haida Nation to be the authority on Haida Gwaii. We’re starting with the Guardians and they work closely with DFO on joint patrols and monitor the traditional harvest and commercial fisheries on Haida Gwaii – but moving forward we need to come up with a plan for more management of our resources.”

**WHAT IS ONE ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE PROUD OF IN YOUR WORK?**

“One of the things I’m most proud of is becoming a certified occupational scuba diver. When I did the training in Campbell River, only one in 12 students was female. Fisheries is predominantly a male field and I’ve often been the only female on the dive team on a boat, but I think it comes naturally to me. I have three brothers and all of the cousins my age were male, so I always could hold my own.”

**WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT DIVING IN THE OCEAN?**

“It’s so beautiful under there. It’s just a totally different world. It’s quite calming for me to be doing my work underwater. It’s something I’ve always enjoyed.”

**WHY IS WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN CFN COMMUNITIES?**

“We come from a matrilineal society along the coast. I come from a long line of strong, resilient Haida women so it feels like a natural fit for women to be in leadership. That’s what I’ve seen, that’s what I’ve known. And I think women have a different approach to things - they can be strong leaders, but they can also be gentle in some situations if they have to be. I think women are very strategic thinkers and can read situations – and we’re multitaskers.”

**WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?**

“I think first and foremost it would be my Mom. Being so strong she raised us to be strong and to speak up for ourselves. Our father always told us we had to work hard for what we want. My parents have been very inspiring to me, but also in my job we had May Russ, the Senior Executive Director in CHN. We lost her last September and it’s had a ripple effect through the Nation. She’s always been very inspirational to me. She worked so hard for her Nation and in her personal life. So many people have inspired me – my Naanii (grandmother), also. She was so resilient and strong.”

**AS A WOMAN, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?**

“As a woman, I’ve felt I’ve always had to prove myself and I’ve always had to work twice as hard as any man to get to where I am. Working in fisheries is a very male-dominated field; whether it’s working physically alongside the men to show them you can do it or not being taken seriously when I need to bring something forward.”

**WHEN YOU FACE CHALLENGES IN YOUR WORK, WHAT INSPIRES AND ENCOURAGES YOU TO CONTINUE?**

“When I’m faced with challenges, I always keep the strength of my Mom and my Naanii with me. It’s definitely not an easy position being a woman in charge, but I want it to be the norm, and that people will have to get used to it because women are going to start speaking up and taking over these leadership roles. I’ve had some very challenging times in the last five years working in Haida Fisheries and my mom

was always my rock in helping me get through it. Along with my husband - he supports me 100 per cent. I would not be able to do it without their support.”

**WHAT WILL BE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS?**

“I think there’s always going to be that stigma about women being in charge – and maybe in the future there will be less. I see the confidence in my children; my daughter being a teenager - to see how strong and how fierce she can be. It gives me hope for the future that we will overcome this stigma.”

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG WOMEN WHO ARE TAKING ON LEADERSHIP ROLES?**

“You just have to work hard and stand up for what you believe in in and don’t be afraid to ask for help along the way.”





In February 2020, Chief Danielle Shaw was elected to lead the first all-woman council for the Wuikinuxv Nation. Chief Shaw is from the Ugvalas family of the Wuikinuxv. A graduate of the Capilano University School of Business, Chief Shaw always knew she would bring her skills to the work of supporting her Nation toward self-governance and growth. Since moving back to her community in 2011, she has supported capacity for her Nation in diverse roles – from janitor and receptionist, to administrative assistant to marine planning coordinator and stewardship director.

Photo by Laura Hope, Courtesy of Coast Funds



# Danielle Shaw

Chief Councillor,  
Wuikinuxv Nation

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ACCEPT THE ROLE OF CHIEF COUNCILLOR OF YOUR NATION?

"I was the Stewardship Director until about a year ago when I went on maternity leave and had my youngest daughter in August of last year [2019]. I had many members talking to me about the different policy issues and governance issues the Nation is facing and asking if I would consider running for Chief or Council. Not being one to sit at home and enjoy my maternity leave, an election was upcoming and I decided to accept. We have our first all-woman council for Wuikinuxv. I'm fortunate to be elected with two other really strong capable women who I work well with."

## WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT TO HAVE AN ALL-WOMAN COUNCIL?

"Historically our Nations were always matriarchal societies and our women served as advisors to our Chiefs. Although this is a new system and we are elected leaders and not hereditary leaders, I think it is still important to have the voices of our women heard. We did have our first woman chief a few years ago – Rose Hanuse Hackett – and she was a real strong leader as well."

## HOW HAS YOUR FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE BEEN?

"This pandemic definitely has brought forward some unprecedented challenges that we've just been able to react to. We're finally getting to where we've set things in place and now can look to what we need going forward. We've already developed some strong financial policies. Hopefully by the end of our first year on Council we'll have developed a strong suite of policies and can move on to implementation for the second year of our term."

## WHY IS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT IN THE COASTAL FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY?

"It's really important to encourage our women to speak up and hold roles and that they not feel as if they can't. I've been in a number of rooms and meetings where I've been the only woman, or there's been only one other woman. I want to see more women in the room."

## WHO INSPIRED YOU AND WHY?

"I think about this so often because there are so many women who inspire me in so many ways. First and foremost, my mom, who was a single mother and went to residential school and was in the foster home system, and despite all that raised some really strong children. She's one of the kindest and most selfless people I know and definitely inspires me to keep moving forward."

I have really strong aunties who set a good example for working hard and speaking up for what you believe in. My mother-in-law is a marine biologist and she's able to give me a good perspective on things. My fellow counsellors are really strong women. I'm inspired by Jess Housty and everything she does for her community; Megan Humchitt for her calm demeanour. Cindy Hanuse from our community who has a quiet strength about her that I admire. So many women who I look up to on a daily basis."

*"It's really important to encourage our women to speak up and hold roles and that they not feel as if they can't."*

## AS A FEMALE LEADER, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIER IN YOUR CAREER?

"My biggest barrier has been my own inner voice and I'm often second guessing my abilities in certain projects and wondering if there's somebody else better to do it. I'm constantly critiquing everything I'm doing, and when it comes to taking that next step or climbing that ladder a little more, I find myself getting stuck and thinking maybe I'm okay where I am. What's helped me through that is having a really strong support system in place to remind me when I'm not so confident in my abilities."

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THE COMING GENERATIONS OF FEMALE LEADERS?

"Take care of yourself and take care of each other. Rather than tearing down other women or feeling there's only space for one or two women in the room, make space. Lean on each other, uphold each other."

## WHAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF FIRST NATIONS WOMEN LEADERS?

"I think it's going to be a challenge to really push those boundaries in leadership to allow women to be the powerful people they can be. I think that often people perceive women, and especially moms, to be housekeepers and caregivers and I think we can be those things and more. I think the challenge is people try to put women into a box and don't let them decide what they want to be."

## WHO INSPIRES YOU TO CARRY ON IN DIFFICULT TIMES?

"My kids. I've had my own struggles with wellness and mental health and there's been times when I've lain in bed and thought, I can't get up. And every time I've been in that situation, it's been my kids who have helped. Just being with them really helps motivate me to move forward."

When I'm on the verge of burnout and going in circles, I also find our culture and our singing and our dancing just feeds my soul. Whether we're in the Big House or around the fire with friends and someone has a drum, it really replenishes me. It makes me realize we have a long way to go, but we've come a long way, too."

## WHAT'S ONE GOAL YOU'D LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR TERM?

"One thing I'd like to achieve for my term is to create a mechanism for strategic planning for our Nation, so every year, we're reviewing it and it's a moving document that you're constantly checking back to."

I want to put in place strong mechanisms for accountability so no matter who is elected, the people know this is what we expect from our leaders. One of the biggest things I'd also like to do is to contribute to a healthier environment for work and community where people are acknowledged for the work they do."



# Indigenous Women Rising: Reclaiming Leadership in Coastal Communities *(cont'd from p. 1)*

*"We have integral roles as knowledge keepers, as well as caretakers of our lands and waters. In addition, we are leaders in the defence of our lands and territories and strong advocates for Aboriginal Rights and Title."*

We are politicians, educators, healthcare professionals, negotiators, fisheries managers, guardians (protecting our lands and waters) and emergency response coordinators.

Twenty years ago becoming the elected Chief of the Heiltsuk Nation and President of the Coastal First Nations didn't seem like a possibility for me. A lot has changed in those years.

I attribute much of my success to my grandmother. Florence Humchitt was a strong and humble woman. Her leadership qualities continue to inspire me. I was taught the importance of knowing our history. That it would help community leaders lead if we understood what happened to our people in the past. She also taught me the importance of being a good listener. That it isn't always the loudest speaker who is a natural leader. It is important to listen for the voice in the community that may not be heard.



Female leadership matters in our communities. Collectively we should be looking for ways to include our women in senior leadership positions. First Nations women face the same barriers as other women but with additional challenges and expectations. As they take on more leadership positions in their communities, educational institutions, politics and business, as well as providing support to others women are also expected to take on more "traditional" roles within communities.

These powerful, compelling and inspiring stories of our women warriors have the ability to influence and transform our lives and our communities. The leaders who shared their stories with us can change the lives of our next generation. We thank them and uplift them for sharing their stories with us.



**Chief Marilyn Slett**

Chief Councillor, Heiltsuk Tribal Council  
President, Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative

## Share Your Story Idea with *Stories From the Coast*

Coastal First Nations communities are filled with some of the most inspiring and interesting people you want to meet. Let us know about people, places and projects your communities are involved in! Share your story idea with us to win one of our styling CFN baseball caps in a draw every month.

Contact: **Stories From The Coast** | Editor – Bessie Brown | [bbrown@coastalfirstnations.ca](mailto:bbrown@coastalfirstnations.ca)



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