

Murdena Marshall, Elder Eskasoni, NS Mi'kmaw Nation

Murdena Marshall is a well known and much loved Mi'kmaw Elder and Spiritual Leader from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. She lives in Eskasoni First Nation and has devoted her life to the promotion and preservation of the Mi'kmaw culture, including language, spirituality, education, and science. She has a vast knowledge of the Mi'kmaw language and is considered a traditional knowledge expert. Her efforts have been recognized within Aboriginal Canada and beyond. She received the Outstanding Leadership Award from Eskasoni First Nation in 1989 and a National Aboriginal Role Model Award in 1996. In 2006, she was awarded the Grand Chief Donald Marshall Senior Memorial Elder Award by Nova Scotia Premier Rodney MacDonald.



Although now “retired”, Murdena has been actively involved in many organizations and events, as for example the National Aboriginal Health Organization, the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources, the Elders' Advisory Group of the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre, the Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counseling Association, the Integrative Science program at Cape Breton University, and workshops throughout Atlantic Canada. Murdena also participates in many conferences of national and international stature as an animated speaker articulating her areas of expertise. Through storytelling Murdena shares the wisdom and understandings that the Mi'kmaw people have for the land and water, plants and animals, and all beings that make up the world around us.

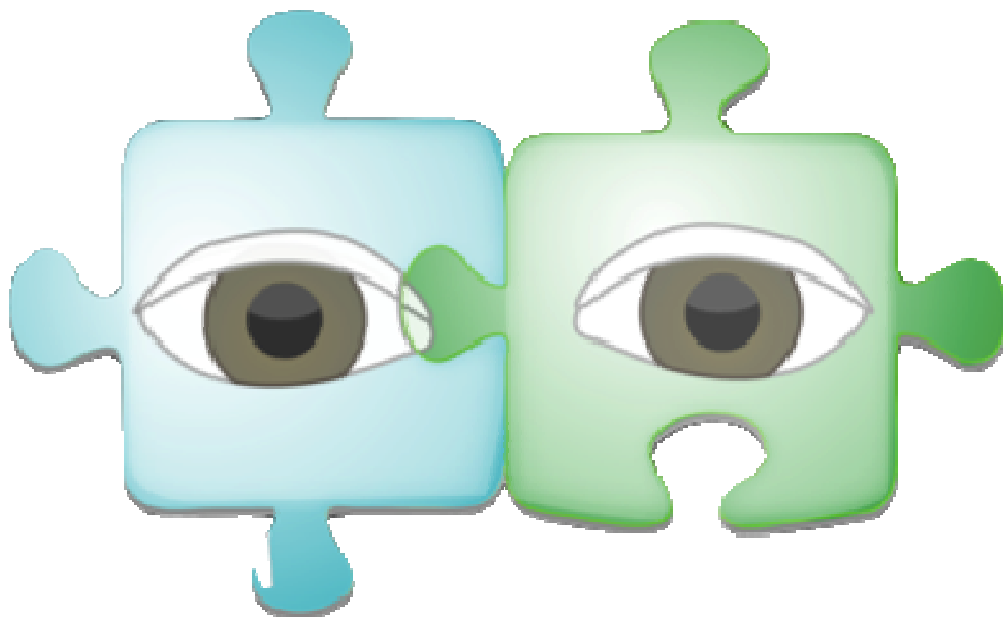
Murdena was born in Wycocomagh and was only eight years old when her Mother died in childbirth. Following cultural tradition, she went to live with her maternal grandparents although her Grandmother died shortly thereafter. Thus, it was her Grandfather, aunts, and uncles who raised her. Murdena credits her wonderful Grandfather, the late Gabriel Sylliboy and the first elected chief of the Mi'kmaw Grand Council, with helping her to learn to navigate the two worlds in which she found herself – that of her Mi'kmaw people and that of the non-native. Even though he could not read, write, or speak in English he insisted that Murdena and all his grandchildren be formally educated in English while he and others ensured that Murdena was immersed in her Mi'kmaw language and culture. Thus, Murdena attended Indian Day School in Eskasoni to Grade 8, then Grades 9 and 10 at Catholic Middle School in Arichat, and Grades 11 and 12 at St. Joseph's Residential Convent School for Girls in Mabou. At St. Joseph's, Murdena and the other nine or ten Mi'kmaw girls found themselves greatly outnumbered by the 90 or so non-native Catholic girls. Murdena “did her time there” but did not complete her final year. Instead,



she found full time employment in marriage to Albert Marshall of Eskasoni and motherhood to the six children who quickly arrived.

Murdena indicates that the loss of her young son Tommy in 1978 changed her spiritually, emotionally, and physically. She decided to become a teacher so that she could pursue her quest for knowledge and serve her Mi'kmaw community. She took courses from the Nova Scotia Teachers College in Truro and in 1984 graduated from the University of New Brunswick with a Bachelor of Education degree. She also has a Certificate in Mi'kmaq Immersion from St. Thomas University. Murdena taught in community for a while and then went to Harvard University where she completed a Master of Education degree. She again worked in education in community for a period before joining the faculty at Cape Breton University (known at the time as University College of Cape Breton). Murdena played a key role in developmentally enhancing the Mi'kmaq Studies program and in teaching in it for many years; she saw the program grow from only a few students to over 200. In the 1990's Murdena was instrumental in helping propose the university's radically innovative Integrative Science program that enables students to learn Indigenous and mainstream sciences side by side as science courses in a science degree. While this new program was threading its way through the inquisitional channels, Murdena's health began to fail. She retired from the university as an Associate Professor of Mi'kmaq Studies in the late 1990s.

Through her work and her life examples, Murdena constantly encourages the importance of education, especially what she and her husband Albert call **“Two-Eyed Seeing”** which is learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous peoples' knowledges and ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of the mainstream's knowledges and ways of knowing ... and to using these together, for the benefit of all.



TWO-EYED SEEING ...
two pieces among many cultural perspectives
able to offer understanding and wisdom for our complex world