



Government of Yukon

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NEWS release

FOR RELEASE #09-183
August 5, 2009

Tlingit Elder to Receive Council of the Federation Literacy Award

WHITEHORSE – This year's Council of the Federation Literacy Award will go to Elder Emma Sam for her contribution to literacy in the Tlingit language, Premier Dennis Fentie and Education Minister Patrick Rouble announced today.

The award recognizes learners, educators, volunteers and community groups for outstanding achievement and excellence in literacy. This year, the award acknowledges the work of an elder for a lifetime of promoting literacy in a First Nations language.

"I congratulate Emma Sam on her outstanding contributions to literacy," Premier Dennis Fentie said. "The Yukon government understands the importance of supporting Yukon First Nations languages and cultures, and we are honoured to recognize Emma Sam's valuable contribution to keeping the Tlingit language alive in Yukon."

"Emma Sam has shown great leadership in teaching the Tlingit language, in writing publications in Tlingit and in her mentorship of students," said Rouble. "This work is vital to maintaining the Tlingit language and culture. On behalf of the Government of Yukon, I would like to congratulate her for her exceptional work as a teacher and role model."

"I always say that I do this work because I love it. My Tlingit language isn't doing anybody any good if I keep it to myself. I have to pass my language on so it will be carried down through the generations," Sam said.

"Our language has been with us forever, and it will be with us in the future," Sam added. "I try to share our language with anybody that wants to learn. Our classes are free to all people, not only Tlingit people, and there's no charge."

"It has been a great honour for Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle to nominate Mrs. Emma Sam for this award and to see that she will be receiving the award," Adeline Webber, president of Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle said. "Emma's contribution to preserving and teaching the Tlingit language is most deserving of this national and local recognition. On behalf of our board and membership, I would like to sincerely congratulate Emma."

The premier will present Mrs. Sam with the Council of the Federation Literacy Award Medal at a special ceremony in Whitehorse on International Literacy Day, September 8, 2009. Past Yukon Council of the Federation Literacy Award winners are George Green, Rock Brisson, Patty Wiseman and Gordon Hardie.

Premier Fentie represents Yukon in the Council of the Federation, which comprises all of Canada's premiers. The Council of the Federation was created in 2003 to help the provinces and territories play a leadership role in revitalizing the Canadian federation and to build a more constructive and cooperative federal system.

A full list of recipients of the 2009 Council of the Federation Literacy Award and more information about the awards is on the Council of the Federation website at www.councilofthefederation.ca.

See backgrounder below.

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Backgrounder

Mrs. Emma Sam was born to David and Rosie Johnston of the Teslin Tlingit First Nation. Emma is of the Ishkhitaan clan whose crest is the Frog. Her Tlingit name is Wakhsâni.

Emma's first language was Tlingit. As she says, "I was born with it." She grew up speaking her language, and when she went away to school in Carcross, she made a promise to herself that she would not forget her language as she learned to speak, read and write in English.

Emma has been teaching Tlingit language in the Whitehorse area for many years. She began teaching language at Kishwoot Hall during women's sewing classes and was one of the early language teachers in Whitehorse schools. Emma worked for 13 years with the Aboriginal Language Services of the Government of Yukon as a translator and interpreter.

Currently, Emma teaches Tlingit language classes for the Council of Yukon First Nations. As well, she spends time transcribing Tlingit oral history from audio tapes to both written Tlingit and English.

Emma's published works include:

- Yu.a: They say, author. She won the Educators' Literature Award from Alaska Native Educators in 2002 for her work on this book.
- Interior Tlingit Noun Dictionary, 2001, expert contributor.
- Tlingit Language Lessons: Teslin Dialect, 1994, author.

Emma has taken on the role of mentor to many students over the years. One of her students recently completed a master's degree in education, and Emma was proud to assist her with her thesis. As a grandmother, Emma continues to practice her cultural traditions and to pass these on to her children and grandchildren.

"I have fun teaching the language," Emma said. She has always used her language and today she continues to "think in Tlingit."

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