



Government of Yukon

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FOR RELEASE #09-210
September 8, 2009

Tlingit Elder Receives Council of the Federation Literacy Award

WHITEHORSE – Today Education Minister Patrick Rouble, on behalf of Premier Dennis Fentie, presented the Fifth Annual Council of the Federation Literacy Award to Teslin Tlingit Elder Emma Sam.

The Council of the Federation Literacy Award is a national award presented to a literacy leader in each province and territory. All the winners were announced in August.

"Emma Sam has shown leadership and commitment to promotion of literacy in the Tlingit Language," Fentie said. "It is my privilege to recognize her for her outstanding contributions."

"On behalf of the Yukon government and the Department of Education, I would like to congratulate Emma Sam for her long-standing commitment to promoting literacy in the Tlingit language," Rouble said. "Emma has been an exceptional teacher and role model, and her work in maintaining the Tlingit language and culture has made a lasting contribution to Yukon as a whole."

Premier Fentie represents Yukon in the Council of the Federation, which comprises all 13 of Canada's premiers. The Council of the Federation was created in 2004 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.

Past Yukon Council of the Federation Literacy Award winners are George Green, Rock Brisson, Patty Wiseman and Gordon Hardie.

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.

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See backgrounder below.

Contact:

Roxanne Vallevand
Cabinet Communications
867-633-7949
roxanne.vallevand@gov.yk.ca

Michele Royle
Communications, Education
867-393-7102
michele.royle@gov.yk.ca

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 Wakhsàni.

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., 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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