

Gitxsan Country
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The only way you create real change is by acting in a way that changes the culture.

In 1927 my mother was unwanted as a baby (white father), passed from home to home until she was sent to residential school (Edmonton) at age 5. She reached grade 9, returned at age 15, and moved to Hagwilget reserve in 1946. She had 9 children, had 3 miscarriages, and was beaten by an abusive, selfish husband for 20 years – finally separating in 1967.

With my brothers and sisters, I grew up in poverty - no food in the house, we often went to school without breakfast and had very little for dinner. We slept together piled on one or two beds with old coats for blankets. For years, when our dad came home drunk we all hid under beds and in the attic as our parents fought throughout the night. Most mornings we crept around in a home that was a total war zone. In 2012 this has not changed, many of our families continue to live with this disadvantage.

We can go in two directions: one is toward less opportunity and less fairness on reserves. Or you can work alongside your Simogyat for where we think we need to go: making a living off our lands. The Simgiigyat are building a strong record of employment, young people are earning a living in forestry, mining and being re-trained in new skills. We are doing things that may seem deeply unpopular, hard to understand and we are not going to get it perfect everywhere. However you have a choice, a better future is possible.

Things we regret most in life are the chances we don't take. As a poor man, I took a chance in life: *First*, I became involved in the treaty process in 1972 when our leaders began organizing the bands into a tribal council. *Second*, I became a lawyer in 1982 with the specific purpose to expand our opportunities, to help renew and restore the values of the Gitxsan people – making a living off our traditional resources and protect our food supply and water. Then through the bloodline of my mother I became a Simogyat in 2002 with full responsibility to expand opportunity for 589 members - in concert with simgiigyat on Gyet im galdo'o table. (A Simogyat pays in the feast hall to be a leader.)

As you know, there are attempts to unravel the strong Gitxsan land tenure system. Our reputations are routinely distorted, individual Simogyat are under fire and education programs are facing cutbacks. I admire the few that administer the poverty on reserves with the ever-dwindling funds coming from Ottawa. However Gitxsan people are very lucky, as the head chiefs, including your Simogyat are providing opportunities and implementing change for you.