

First Nations Women in Leadership Videoconference
by Rick Garrick Feb. 2008

Elder Pastor Rhoda Beardy highlighted the vast changes she has seen in women's leadership over her lifetime during the Jan. 28 First Nations Women in Leadership Videoconference.

"Her role as a woman was defined," says her niece Rosie Mosquito, recalling what Beardy said in her Honouring Women Leaders videoconference presentation from the Keewatinoak Okimakanak office in Balmertown. "She was brought up to listen to her husband – and that's what she always did."

In churches, women weren't allowed to stand on pulpits, play guitar, sing, much less operate them, Mosquito adds. Over time, women have taken on new responsibilities. Women now preach and play the guitar and sing.

When her husband passed away, Beardy spoke about how she reluctantly took on the responsibility for her own church in Red Lake, and how she now helps support another woman in Thunder Bay who runs her own church.

"For her, the role of women has really changed," says Mosquito, executive director of Oshki-Pimache-O-Win Education & Training Institute. "She shared her personal experiences and how she has changed over the years."

She also encouraged women to do their best when given new responsibilities and to never to give up, Mosquito says.

Keynote speaker Nishnawbe Aski Nation Deputy Grand Chief Roseanne Archibald and a group of about 25 women from nine or 10 sites across northern Ontario participated in the videoconference, which was presented by K-Net as a showcase of how videoconferencing could be used by different groups across the north.

"There are always different kinds of workshops being advertised," says Penny Carpenter, K-Net's business manager. "Now with videoconferencing, we are able to bring these conferences to people in the communities."

Helen Cromarty, special advisor for First Nations health at the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre, finds it "truly amazing" that people from communities across the north are now able to communicate with each other by videoconference.

"We can set up a videoconference and see the people we are talking to in their community," she says. "One Elder said, 'It's almost as though you're in the same room with them. It brings people together.'"

During the videoconference, Cromarty spoke about the work she has done over the years, as a registered nurse, a Nishnawbe Aski Nation representative on many boards

and committees, a founding member of the Native women's crisis home Beendigen, and a member of the Working Group of native nurses who helped develop the Native Nurses Entry Program at Lakehead University, and the work she continues to pursue. "The value of a conference like this is being able to support and encourage other women," says Cromarty. "To move ahead in life and do what they want to do." Mosquito also spoke about leadership roles she has taken on over the years, including a three-year term as Chief of her community of Bearskin Lake in the 1980's, her executive director position at NAN, her work with the Chiefs of Ontario, and her current position with Oshki.

"Since I was young, I wanted to work for NAN," Mosquito says, noting that she persevered towards her goal even though a teacher at the time told her Treaty 9, as NAN was called back then, wouldn't be around when she grew up to be an adult. "Everything I've done has had something to do with NAN."

Mosquito, often described as a trailblazer, explains that every position she has held was through the request of someone else, from the community members who requested her to come back to Bearskin Lake to run as Chief in 1986 to the people who asked her to help rebuild Oshki as a strong and vibrant Aboriginal education organization.

"I'm always conscious of being a role model," she says.

Although Mosquito, like most of the speakers, could only listen to part of the videoconference due to other commitments, she believes videoconferencing could become even more commonplace across the north than it is now.

"I think that the potential for its outreach is incredible," Mosquito says. "Once videoconferencing becomes the usual way of conducting business, I can see a whole lot more people using it in the future. That could lead to significant savings to the cost of doing business throughout northern Ontario and Nishnawbe Aski Nation."