

Carolyn KIRKLAND

NOMINEE: Carolyn KIRKLAND

MEMBER SPOUSE: John BRANEY, # 3759

DETACHMENT: Grassy Narrows, 1975 – 1977

NOMINATOR: Spouse

SILENT PARTNER STORY

It was 1974 when my husband, Provincial Constable John Braney, told me that he would like to volunteer for the new Indian Policing Program in northwestern Ontario. We were living in the small northern community of Temagami. Little did I know what a drastic change of living arrangements there would be with a relocation to Grassy Narrows.

After a long drive to Kenora in January 1975 (we were twice snowed-in due to Highway 17 closures), we were notified that the mobile home that had been set up just off the Grassy Narrows reserve had been broken into and had sustained extensive damage. Arrangements were made to spend the next month in a hotel, with our kids and pets in tow.

Access into Grassy Narrows was by way of a logging road. The rule was that if you saw an approaching logging truck, you had to move as far to the side as possible, even off the road if necessary. The trucker would then stop to pull you back onto the roadway.

As the OPP personnel were moving to Grassy Narrows in increments, and since I was the only wife who had lived in northern Ontario and had driven in northern weather, we were elected to go in first. I would drive our own car, while my husband would drive the police vehicle. When we finally arrived at our trailer site in the middle of the bush, it was with relief but also with some apprehension. At that time, there was no hydro-electricity or phone. Our water was drawn from the lake.

We soon found that the mobile homes were not really winter ready. With pipes freezing every night, it meant no water until late in the day. So, our nightly routine was to fill up all available pots and containers with water or to collect snow to melt and boil. Another unpleasant discovery was that our trailer was overrun with mice.

These trailers that served as accommodation for OPP personnel had to also function as the detachment office, as that particular trailer had not yet arrived. It meant that at all times of the day or night we could have visitors from the reserve, including women who had been beaten and kids who had been left abandoned. Although our trailer was not the first in line, individuals seemed to come to ours. In part, I think it was because we were first in and that my husband was liked by most of the residents. He was even given the nickname of "Big Ears." Quite often, I was the only one home and had to deal with the problems. I also volunteered at the school and substituted as a teacher when the regular instructor was ill.

Encountering medical emergencies

On one occasion, a woman who was pregnant knocked on my door. She had two toddlers, one of whom could not walk, so sat in a stroller with one wheel missing. All she said to me was "big pain." I brought them into the trailer and tried to contact someone who could help. At that time we had a citizens band radio so I called the Hudson's Bay store manager to contact an ambulance. He had a radio phone. I tried to keep the mother comfortable and I looked after the children while we waited. By the time the ambulance attendants arrived, I was beginning to deliver the baby. They had arrived just in time.

On another occasion, I was called to the house of a woman who had been badly beaten. She was about six months pregnant. I was there at the delivery, but sadly the newborn took only one breath and died.

Once I had to witness the questioning of a woman who had left her baby outside in the middle of winter, thinking that she had killed him when she threw him up against a wall because he had spilled her home brew. It turned out he died of hypothermia. From time to time I had to help write reports, some of which were very disturbing.

One day in March, my husband brought home twins he had found in the back of a pickup truck. All that the boy and girl were wearing were diapers and t-shirts. They were both very dirty. I brought them in

and gave them a bath and fed them. It was the next day before Children's Aid could send someone to get them. A few days later, the parents, now sober, came looking for the twins. I hate to think what would have happened if the children had not been found. I witnessed many other cases of child neglect.

Our own children were very young – just starting school on the reserve. My daughter began attending first. Because her dad was a police officer, she was bullied. My daughter would come home with horror stories about what the kids were doing with her. The year my son started kindergarten he contracted Shigella. He was only five years old. My husband was away so since our son was very ill we were driven to the hospital in Kenora. The staff at the hospital first thought he had spinal meningitis. They were doing all kinds of tests and kept him in isolation, as this disease is very contagious. While he was in hospital, I stayed with the wife of an OPP officer in Kenora. One thing about living in isolated areas is that you develop a strong bond of friendship with other wives.

Not long after we arrived in Grassy Narrows, I started to experience severe headaches. It persisted for a few days so I went to the hospital in Kenora where they admitted me. After placing me in a room a nurse came to ask me some questions. She was very cold and harsh with me, not even looking at me. Then she asked for my band number. When I told her that I was not native, she asked why I was living in Grassy Narrows. I told her that my husband was an OPP officer. Her whole attitude toward me changed. I had never before experienced what discrimination feels like, but I did that day. I realize she had to deal with a lot of different situations, but it saddened and angered me how she could treat anyone like that.

Alarming incidents

At the end of the school year, we were driving the police vehicle to the school to pick up report cards. All of a sudden someone came running out of a house yelling about a serious fight going on. My husband left us in the vehicle and went into the home. The next thing I saw was my husband outside on the ground totally engaged in an altercation. It did not look good. The kids were crying as they watched. I radioed for help for my husband and I was so relieved when it arrived.

One morning in April, I heard screams coming from outside. When I went out, I saw my four-year-old son holding the hand of his friend (the son of another OPP officer) who had fallen through the ice. I immediately ran down the hill screaming for help as I approached the lake. Only we four wives were home. I screamed for a rope. When I got to the edge of the lake I was calm as I told my son to lie down

on the ice (for fear of him going through as well.) One of the wives came with a rope and I tied it around my waist. I slowly crawled out over the ice and when I had grabbed the boy's hand I told my son to crawl to shore. When he was safe, the other wives started to pull me but the weight was too much for the ice and I went in as well. Luckily, I had that rope around my waist and the other wives succeeded in pulling us to safety. I still have a slight scar on my arm from the puncture of the ice that day.

My time in Grassy Narrows was an experience I will never forget. I have good and bad memories. There is a unique bond among people who live in isolated postings. You have to make your own fun, and that we did. I also have fond memories of the Ojibway people with their feasts and their pow wows, as well as the gifts they made for us. One day a woman arrived at my door with a green garbage bag. She said, "You Big Ears wife." Then she gave me the bag and left. Inside was a beaded moose-hide vest and purse which I still cherish. When we left I was given a very large bag of wild rice. I had made it often while there. Now, every time I make wild rice I think of the people of Grassy Narrows.

Of the original OPP group posted to Grassy Narrows, we were the first family to arrive and the last to leave. For us, it would be on to another small community: Burks Falls.

About Grassy Narrows

Located 80 kilometers north of Kenora, Grassy Narrows is home to approximately 950 people. The area has been the focus of public attention in recent memory when it was revealed that a company operating a paper mill had dumped 10 tonnes of mercury into the river between 1962 and 1970. The resulting poisoning of the fish and those who consumed fish from the river has devastated generations of residents in the area.



Cutline: From left: Commissioner Vince Hawkes, recipient Carolyn Kirkland, OPPVA President Bob Arbour and Chief Supt. Chuck Cox.