

Sunchild First Nations School Staff



Agnes Redcalf

For 23 years, Agnes Redcalf has been the Sunchild Student counsellor and school liaison. It's a role that connects the School with each student and student's family, and community Elders.

"I'm the baloney in the sandwich," says Agnes with a grin. "I'm always squished in the middle."

Agnes also teaches Cree to grades 7 and 8 at Sunchild School. She is very qualified to teach Cree because, she declares with a twinkle in her eye, "I was *born* speaking Cree."

She laughs at her own joke. The laughter of Agnes matches her smile, and can lighten almost any conversation. Her sense of humour is usually close by, like a sweater that is worn for comfort.

Her ability to laugh at herself, or seek a light-hearted comment, or find a silver lining in a situation that may not be ideal, lightens her own heart, too. Through all the years, Agnes has kept her ability to laugh, and kept her language.

In an instant, she can change her mood from joking to seriousness. She has met many Indigenous adults who lost their Cree language, especially if they had to attend a residential school.

“I never gave it up,” Agnes says, factually. “I’m a residential school survivor. I never lost my language. I never let them break me.”

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Agnes Redcalf was born on Sunchild First Nation, 70 years ago. She went to the Federal school as a child, one of the youngest of 13 children in the family.

With lots of mouths to feed, Agnes was “very poor” growing up. Agnes seems to have developed a strong sense of what behaviours help people succeed, and what behaviours hold people back.

She remembers thinking “I don’t want to live like this. I want to be somebody.” That toughness is the other side of her laughter, two of her character traits that helped her through the many challenges she would have to face.

At age 15, Agnes went to live with a Rocky Mountain house family, and went to high school there. She pushed herself to focus on school as much as possible, but did allow herself the distraction and enjoyment of basketball and baseball.

“I always wanted to go to school. I wanted to be something, be successful,” says Agnes. She was driven to graduate school and thought she was smart, “but it wasn’t easy.”

She is one of the very few Sunchild students who graduated high school in Rocky Mountain House. Why was Agnes able to graduate, when so many others have tried but not been successful?

She considers the question, and answers that she prioritized the time she needed for schoolwork. “Probably a big reason I was able to graduate was that I didn’t have a boyfriend,” she says. “I didn’t want one. Boys could come later.”

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Soon after high school graduation, she met a boy. He was a friend of one of her older brothers, and he was visiting Sunchild. The boy was from Nekaneet First Nation near Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, and that is where Agnes lived for about 30 years, until she returned to Sunchild.

She was a housewife, and raised 4 children, two boys and two girls. She delayed her dream of going to university, but she did not abandon the dream. It would come later.

“I was fine being a housewife,” says Agnes.

She enjoyed the self-discipline and emotional strength required to get things done. She had some pride and calmness in keeping her place clean. Having chores done, and a clean house, helps her to not have a cluttered mind. “It’ll get done if you work at it.”

“I always do dishes at night, I don’t leave them for the next morning. I want it clear and not cluttered. And I don’t mind doing laundry.”

She taught her kids what she had been taught. Her father told her to always make her bed in the morning. He said her spirit is in the bed, and if the bed is not made, the spirit stays in the bed. “I always make my bed.”

Making moccasins and ribbon skirts are productive hobbies for Agnes. They honour her culture, and give her a sense of accomplishment by creating something useful and beautiful, and creating income.

The intricate work grounds her in the moment and helps her relieve stress. “When I get home, if something’s on my mind, or if I’m worried, it goes away” when she spends time on her hobbies.

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Four children later, after her youngest was in Kindergarten, Agnes went back to school in her late 20s. One of her goals was to be in the RCMP. She had witnessed injustice, and was interested in helping others overcome it.

She went to Lethbridge College to study Criminal Justice. Agnes says the 4 year degree was not easy, “but I didn’t want to quit. I’m the type who, if I want to do something, I do it. I don’t give up.”

Enrollment wasn’t automatic for Agnes. She had to overcome a few barriers first, starting with upgrading her courses to university-level prerequisites in Math and English.

After completing and passing those courses, she still had to pass a physical exam to get into university. “I had to run 1-½ miles in 11 minutes. I had to climb 30, 40 feet on a knotted rope. I had to do lots of swimming.”

In those days, she could have worked at a Port, maybe in Vancouver or Thunder Bay, but those places were far from her family of four children. She put her family first, and made the choice to stay in Saskatchewan.

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After her husband passed away, and two years after Sunchild school was built, her family told Agnes about a job at the school, and suggested she apply.

She liked the idea. "Sunchild is my home. I know a lot of families here." And of course, she had her Criminal Justice degree. "I was not surprised at what I learned. I think I already knew how the court system worked."

She travelled back to Sunchild for the interview. "I didn't think I would get it, but they called the next day."

One of the duties Agnes has is to coordinate about 10 elders who take turns in being a teaching resource for kids. From about 10am until 2pm, 4 day a week, Elders teach about First Nations ways - activities like reading and sewing, health learning like smudging and Medicine Wheel teachings, Cree prayers each school day, participating in ceremonies, talking about bullying, and discussing the 7 teachings.

Agnes also does home visits when needed. "I want to know if everyone is OK. I try to understand the situation. We have to work on empathy, so everyone knows there is someone there for them."

She has a genuine enjoyment of her work. "I love to see the kids each day, and I hope they enjoy seeing me."

Being away from Sunchild for 30 years, and now back home for more than 20 years, teaches Agnes more about current challenges at Sunchild. "Kids have challenges everywhere, and they have challenges here."

She offers advice to get through those challenges. "Take a long view, a multi-generational view. Follow your dream, don't give up. You are contributing to your life and the life of those around you."