



Mary Elaine (Sweet) Whitford

Mary Elaine (Sweet) Whitford was born in Islay Alberta and first came North in 1964 as a summer student from the University of Saskatchewan. With her Bachelors' degree, her first assignment took her to Inuvik where she spent the summer as a Social Worker for the Government of Canada.

In 1965 she received a scholarship to pursue her master's degree in Social Work at the University of Toronto. At the time, there were few (if any) northern or aboriginal social workers in the North and the Government was anxious to train anyone who was interested in working as a social worker in the north.

After completing her master's degree in Social Work she returned north to work in Fort Smith in the late summer of 1965. Shortly thereafter, she met her future husband (Tony Whitford), a mechanic with the Northern Canada Power Commission. They married a year later and over the years raised three sons Warren, Blair and Ian in the North.

During her life in the North Elaine strived not only to serve the public, but to encourage northerners to remain in school and for many, pursue a higher education. She had a particular fondness for social work and nursing and encouraged many to go on and obtain their diploma or degree and become the professionals and the supervisors working in the field today. Amongst the many who benefited from her encouragement was her husband Tony, who would receive his BSW from the University of Calgary in 1977.

Elaine led by example and became a role model because of her commitment. She was active in her profession and maintained a strict code of conduct and encouraged dedication, hard work and continued personal development. During her long career with the GNWT, she was also in a position to influence the changes leading to the professionalizing of Social Workers and the overall increase in numbers of Aboriginal employees in Government generally.

In 1997 when her position in the GNWT was dissolved in a reorganization of departments, she retired to travel the world and spent months as a volunteer teaching English in Nepal. Elaine was also a tireless volunteer in the North, especially in sport, fitness and health. She served on many boards and committees and was an active fund raiser for many great causes. Elaine died on February 23, 2003 after a brief bout with cancer.

The Elaine Whitford Scholarship was established in her memory in 2009. It is designed to assist Northern post secondary students in their second or subsequent year of study in Social Work or Nursing. One of Elaine's concerns was for mature Aboriginal students with families returning to school and the commitment and hardships they faced as a result. As such, priority consideration will be given to those students.