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Métis Elder Will Carry the Olympic Torch

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Photo: Elsie Yanik will participate in the Olympic Torch Relay across Canada when it visits Fort McMurray on Nov. 6

By SAMANTHA STOKELL, SRJ Reporter 04.NOV.09

Of the many honours Métis elder Elsie Yanik has received over the years, the idea of carrying the Olympic torch never entered her mind.

“I thought it was a joke, one of my friends playing a joke,” Yanik laughed. “I’m so excited and it’s hard to believe. It’s a great honour for me.”

The Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic Games selected 92-year-old Yanik as the final torch bearer for the Fort McMurray leg of the relay on Nov. 6. Yanik has volunteered her time and energy in Fort Chipewyan for over 30 decades and has received many awards for her dedicated work including the Wild Rose Foundation Volunteer of the Year Award, the Lifetime Achievement Governor General’s Commemorative Medal, four regional Aboriginal Recognition Awards, and the Keyano College Distinguished Citizen Award. Mayor Melissa Blake is very pleased with the decision the committee made.

“Elsie's big spirit and kind heart have already lit the way for many,” she said. “This special honour couldn't be more fitting as the world watches Wood Buffalo.” □

Yanik lived in Fort Fitzgerald, AB until her mother died when she was eight. Yanik and her sisters then moved to the convent school in Fort Resolution. She lived and worked there until she turned 18 and learned how to read and write in English, French, Chipewyan and Latin.

Her time at the convent school inspired her to help other people and as a young girl she wanted to become a nun. Her father, however, talked her out of it.

“He said I don't have to be a nun to do what I want, to help people and work with children,” Yanik said. “I could get married and have a family and have a life and still help people.”

And help people Yanik did. She worked in a hospital as a nurse's aid, helping the ill, depressed and out-of-luck patients. She then married and moved to Fort Chipewyan with her husband and children, continuing with her volunteer work and helping others.

“I love helping people in any shape or form. My whole life is helping people,” she said. “Even at 92, I'm helping wherever I can, cooking a little to help. It doesn't matter what you do as long as you do it with love.” □

In 1997, the Catholic Women's League of Canada created the Elsie Yanik Award, which commemorates leadership, ministry or service in any area of the Alberta Mackenzie parish.

Yanik has a saying that helps her get through difficult situations and motivates her to continue working with people in need.

“If you don't like something, do something about it. If you can't do something, then change your mind,” she said. “If you can't change your mind, then let it go. I don't let things get to me.”

As for her next challenge of carrying the Olympic Torch, Yanik has only one worry.

“I'm not nervous, I just hope they don't ask me to run,” she laughed. “I'm not afraid. I love challenges and just stopped being afraid. I'll try anything once.”

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