

A CLASS ACT

AN ISMAILI TEACHER LEARNS ON A RESERVE

By Tazim Keshani

After graduating from the University of Calgary in 1990, I was excited about teaching and keen to apply what I had learned. At that time, it didn't matter where I taught, as long as I was able to teach. As students, we were all worried about jobs, so I applied to as many places as I could. Then I saw a newspaper ad for a Special Education teacher on an Indian reserve named Onion Lake, a half-hour north of Lloydminster, Alberta. I mentioned it to my dad, who said, "Apply everywhere, you can't restrict yourself!"

Special Education involves teaching children with a range of special needs. The children, who may be gifted or have severe learning disabilities, receive individual plans of study allowing them to progress at their own pace, in the company of their peers. The position in Onion Lake involved mostly students with a variety of learning disabilities.

A month after I applied, I received

a call from Onion Lake requesting an interview. My brother and I drove six hours to get there. As we approached the reserve, we hit a gravel road. The ride was rough, bumpy. We took a turn and found, suddenly, a run-down school. Both my brother and I were distinctly apprehensive about entering. Once inside, we found a big mess with boards and nails all over the place. No one was in sight; the place looked deserted. We gave ourselves a tour and were even more appalled. I immediately made up my mind. I told myself, "There's no way that I'm teaching in this school."

Then, rather unexpectedly, we heard rock music. My brother and I followed the sound and eventually found some construction workers. Apparently, we had turned at the wrong stop sign and were nowhere near the real school.

When we arrived at our destination, we were greeted by the principal and an education consultant. The weather was hot and dry, and I wearing my warm navy blue suit. By contrast,

the eight people who interviewed me wore shorts. We sat across a long table as they fired questions at me. To my surprise, they actually knew very little about Special Education. I later discovered that a psychologist had coached them on the questions to ask.

The interview committee said it needed an hour to make its decision. While waiting, the principal gave me a tour of the real school, which was recently built and quite impressive. It was shaped like an eagle! Sure enough, I was given seven days to make a decision. When I returned to Calgary, my dad recommended that I take it; my brother was also very encouraging. Not entirely convinced, I called my practicum teachers and advisor. All said that Native children were delightful to work with. Besides, I was young, adventurous. I was 23. I had nothing to lose.

I made the decision to go. I moved to Onion Lake that weekend.

Little did I know that it would be the start of an incredible experience that turned many of my notions upside down — including just how much I would feel at home in my new community, which felt “Indian” for a host of unexpected reasons.

MY PARENTS STAYED WITH ME for a few days on the reserve and helped me get organized. They remained astonishingly supportive of the move even as they helped me clean up the filthy place that was to be my apartment. Then, one

of the neighbours came by and informed us that a few years ago, a young teacher had been murdered in Onion Lake. Needless to say, my parents left feeling a little uneasy. I put on a brave face. I didn't need to; in general, the reserve was a very safe place. The people who got to know me proved very protective.

My impressions kept changing steadily for the better. At school, I had a huge classroom with two computers and considerable resources, a dream



Keshani (standing, right): Class at Onion Lake

come true at a time when the cutbacks have hit much of Canada's education system. I kept reminding myself that I was in the middle of nowhere, yet living and working near a beautiful lake, and teaching at a high-tech school equipped with the most modern equipment available.

On the first day, the high school and the elementary school staff met to celebrate the opening of the new school. A sweet grass ceremony was held, prayers recited, and singing and drum

beats filled the air. Later that day, I met a teacher whose husband was also a Muslim, from Guyana. When she invited me home for supper sometime later, I was taken aback at the spread: *rotli* and chicken curry. Bernice, the teacher, had cooked the meal!

My students proved to be a lively bunch and very eager to please. I had heard horror stories about one of my students, Billie, who had a reputation for truancy. I was expecting a monster; instead, I saw a chubby, innocent little boy with the most beautiful green eyes. He looked so scared. Apparently, he had been worrying all summer about who his new teacher would be. We hit it off, and I developed instantly a fondness for him. Every five minutes he would ask me, “Where's Mr. Hurton?” That was the name of his previous teacher, whom he did not like.

From time to time, my students would ask me a recurring question: “Who do you live with?” They all expected me to live with someone since common-law relationships are a way of life on reserves. They would also ask, “Where are your kids?” to which I would respond, “All of you are my kids.” They liked that answer so much that they never stopped asking the question.

Each child had tremendous needs. Many had been brought up in homes with parents who had been sent to so-called “residential schools.” These were English-speaking schools where their Native tongue, Cree, was forbidden

upon threat of physical punishment. As a result, these parents were stuck in a linguistic no-man's-land: fluent neither in Cree nor in English. Their own children knew very little Cree and spoke only broken English. They had never heard simple nursery rhymes or fairy tales, even from their own culture.

I knew I had to expose their children more fully to English, to help develop valuable skills for use outside the reserve. So I took them on various field trips in Lloydminster. Once, we visited the local Safeway, where the manager gave us a tour and showed us the different departments. In the produce section, the manager asked the students to name the various fruits. Names like cantaloupe, watermelon, and honeydew were difficult for the kids. Since they were unable to pronounce them, the manager gave us a bag filled with fresh produce. We took the fruit back to the school and made fruit salad. As we were doing so, we practised naming the various fruits.

We also went every week to McDonald's, where the kids learned how to order their own food and count their change. Initially apprehensive, they soon developed confidence. They observed how I always requested water; to my surprise, every one of them started ordering water. One by one, each learned to ask the cashier for water, especially when they had no money.

Our field trips were fairly regular, and we ended up at the radio and TV

Stations, the local newspaper, IGA, banks, the airport, donut shops, Canadian Tire, and the hospital.

As well, for two years in a row, I organized a major trip to Edmonton. One year we visited the Science Centre, and the other year we saw the Dinosaur exhibit. When we got to Edmonton, the kids were in total awe. Their eyes popped out as they saw all the cars and people. One student called out, "Holy, look at all those bikes!" Their heads and eyes were in constant motion.



Children: City tours

Many of them had never seen a skyscraper before.

OCTOBER 1992 WAS A GLOOMY month in Onion Lake. It had become a habit for me to keep looking if the school flag was flying at half mast. That October, someone died every week, so the flag stayed at half mast for the whole month. Among the casualties was Billie's father, who had died of cancer.

Funerals on the reserve remind me somewhat of the funerals I have experi-

enced. When someone dies, the family and friends visit the home to offer support and condolences. Then, a wake is held. On the day of the funeral, the family sits with the body while everyone prays. Almost everyone on the reserve comes, whether they know the person or not. (As I stood in line to pay my respects to Billie's family, in my mind I caught myself saying prayers for the father's soul.)

The family then leaves with the coffin for the cemetery, and the rest of the community follows in their cars. Men and women both are allowed to the burial grounds. At the cemetery, the men dig a hole with the help of a tractor, a few prayers are recited and the coffin is lowered. After the funeral is over, the family holds a feast.

Other ceremonies, like pow-wows, were beautiful events. The children dressed in elegant costumes, each unique. They wore shiny ornaments made of ordinary things like snuff cans. I was always so overwhelmed by the pow-wows. It reminded me of *rasna*; everyone involved felt so good about themselves.

Many of the Natives went to "sweats" — during which they sat and prayed all evening in a sauna-like environment. My teaching assistant prayed for me. She even went to a sweat the day before my evaluation by the school superintendent.

SINCE I WAS INDIAN, I BLENDED quite well with the Natives. One of my

students was upset with me when I first came because I looked Native to her but did not speak Cree. It was from her that I learned the various Cree swear words, so at least I knew what the kids were saying behind my back.

I managed to pick up more Cree, since the school was teaching Cree to the kids. When I went to the corner store, I would always meet an old man who would sit in a chair and wave at me. I would usually wave back. One day after I had learned some Cree, I went up to him and said, "*Tansi.*" (Hello.)

He replied, "*Tansigici.*" (How are you?)

"*Na moyo nanto,*" I said. (I am fine.)

"*Miyo kisa kanse,*" he said. (Have a nice day.)

"*Kista meena.*" (Same to you.)

After that conversation, my first full one in Cree, he looked at me and asked, "Are you Cree?"

I laughed and replied, "No."

Another highlight was meeting Ovid Mercredi, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, at our teachers' convention. He said to me, "You're Indian, the other kind."

WHILE I WAS LIVING ON THE reserve, I met an Ismaili family, Rizwan and Azmina Suleman and their daughters, Salima and Shabira. Every Friday, I was invited to their home for prayers and supper. They had a little room in their basement which served as a *jamatkhana*. Rizwan and his family made me feel very comfortable and, more importantly, they made me feel connected to my faith.

I became very good friends with Azmina and Rizwan, who never failed

to provide me with support, care, and warmth. Their children were wonderful. I always looked forward to reading them bedtime stories and telling them about the reserve. They were like a second family to me. Meeting them was one of the most special things about my experience in Onion Lake. I miss not being able to see them and watching the girls grow, just as I miss my students at the school.

LIFE IN ONION LAKE COULD BE tough. A few times there was no running water or electricity, so the school would shut down for a few days. You always had to have some water stored. I remember boiling snow one day so that I could wash my hair. My hair has never felt so soft in my life. Nevertheless, I felt lucky compared to my kids. At least I could head off to Lloydminster. Many of my students never had running water on a regular basis. I visited the very small home of one student and discovered that a family of eight lived in it. Not that everyone was desolate. Discrepancies in wealth affect reserves as much as any other place. Some of my students lived in what may easily be considered mansions.

The worst thing about the reserve? The roads. When it rained, the roads became muddy and dangerous. In the dead of winter, the roads became extremely icy. Once, when I was returning from the airport after visiting my parents in Calgary, the temperature stood at below minus-40 degrees Celcius when my car slipped into a ditch. I remained calm because I remember Lucy, one of my colleagues, saying, "If you ever drive into a ditch

don't worry, someone will pull you out." Sure enough, within minutes two guys in a truck came by and towed me out.

When I got home, I found the pipes had burst. I phoned home, but what could my parents do? I called my neighbour. My house was ice cold, and I became very sick. A teacher friend let me stay with her for a few days.

I MADE A LOT OF WONDERFUL friends in Onion Lake, all of whom really believed in me — if I'm honest, more than I believed in myself. There was always someone to go out to dinner or have coffee with, someone willing to hear me vent my frustrations. This helped me get through difficult times.

But after almost two years in Onion Lake, I made the decision to leave. The time had come for me to try something new, although the decision was painful.

I still remember my last day on the reserve. I had told the kids I was leaving, but they didn't quite believe me — until they saw the U-haul in front of my place. Student after student came by, along with their parents, to thank me. They were all upset. I also said goodbye to my assistant and the other teachers, knowing even then that they would always remain special in my memories. But my fondest recollections are of my students. Every once in a while I wonder how they are doing. Especially Billie, and whether he ever asked of his new teacher, "Where's Ms. Keshani?" ♦

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