

Cheryl McWatch: “If you do it right, you’ll feel it in your heart”

Narrative 5 of the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project

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In 2008, we interviewed women about their experiences of childbirth and maternity care in Marathon, a rural community in north-western Ontario. This narrative is one of a series of stories that resulted from the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project. All of the narratives in this series were edited from the interview transcripts, then reviewed and approved for publication by the women involved. We invite readers to see the accompanying research paper for more on the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project.¹

My name is Cheryl McWatch, I’m 44, from Pic Mobert First Nation. I can only speak for my own experience, not for my whole people. I’m the owner-operator of a small gas bar on the reserve. I sell gas and like, small stuff: candies, pop, the basic stuff. My husband is the Chief of Pic Mobert, Jeff Desmoulin. I say my husband, but we’re common-law.

I’ve been in Pic Mobert all my life and right back to my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. Apparently they came from James Bay. They paddled down. I’m assuming they just followed the lake, because of back then, of what I learned from my culture and stuff, how our Native people lived back then, is they lived off the land and the lake. It is amazing, because today, in general, we don’t really know where we are in the bush. It’s too bad because we’re losing that connection. But we’re trying to struggle to get it back, as a First Nations person, I should say.

I didn’t really know much about being pregnant

I have 4 kids. My oldest one, a son, was born here in Marathon. My second was born in Wawa, Ontario. And I have twin daughters born in Thunder Bay. I had my first son when I was 17. I guess I could say I started off early.

I didn’t really know much about being pregnant. It was quite difficult really, because I was young, didn’t know what I was doing, didn’t get taught a lot of what the proper way to have him, like prenatal stuff. I ended up having him here in Marathon. It was quite a long delivery. It lasted over 24 hours. I was inexperienced. I didn’t really know what was going on, but, you know, I managed to have him. I was listening to my mom because they been through it. I don’t even know if I had the option at the time with going to Thunder Bay to be honest with you because that never even crossed my mind until I had my 2 daughters.

Well, at the time, I was in Mobert, where I lived. So the normal thing is you’re pregnant, you go see the doctor. You know, you start to have visits. His practice was in Marathon. Most of our First Nation people do come here, for appointments and stuff. At the time I went into labour, we had to drive from Pic Mobert, which is like 40 minutes or something. They basically took good care of me, you know. Coming to Marathon they gave me everything they could. Being young, too, I just went along, but they pretty well took care of me, did a good job, made me feel as comfortable as I could. I got no complaints. It was tough, but I believe it was tough because I was inexperienced because I didn’t know the breathing techniques, walking, being active. I didn’t know anything like that.

My mom* was there. You know what? Not knowing what was going to happen to me, her being there, it meant a lot. It meant, like, I was gonna make it. I was gonna survive. I was gonna get through it. It made me feel more relaxed just knowing she was there and holding my hand. My mom is pretty amazing. She’s always there for me. I could always rely on her. I remember having my baby and joy that I felt when I first held him in my arms and seeing him. The emotions, I guess, of being a mother, you know? As soon as I seen him, I didn’t really believe in one sense, about having him. Then, they just told me, “You got a little boy,” and all that stuff. So it was quite emotional because I never experienced that in my life. Like having the child and giving birth, it means joy, it means happiness, and it means life. Like, you know, your life is going on. A part of you is not ending, it’s going to keep living, it’s going to keep going. That’s you. Like, my grandchildren and my children, that’s me in them and their father in them, and

*The Marathon Maternity Oral History Project includes narratives from Connie McWatch,² Cheryl McWatch’s mother, and Marie Michano,³ Cheryl’s daughter-in-law.

we're going to live on and that's what life means to me and childbirth and having children.

You grow in your own self, too

My husband, he missed the first one. Us being young, you grow up not knowing the importance of being together—both of us not knowing the importance of being together and having the baby together. So he wasn't there with me at the first birth, but he was there at the second and the third one. It makes it a lot easier. You're bringing life into the world, you know. I think it's really important to be there to have that experience; it helps you grow in your own self, too.

For the second pregnancy, my doctor was gonna move from here to Wawa. So that's why I ended up in Wawa. Wawa's really only 20 minutes' more drive; it didn't really make a difference for me. I didn't think nothing of it really. I knew my doctor and I felt comfortable with him. I just went along with it. I went there, the ambulance took me. My husband and my brother drove behind. They took me there, put me in the hospital. I went into labour. I had a better understanding this time.

I remember going through all the labour pains talking to myself. I don't want to suffer like my first one; I just want to make sure I do it all right this time. Every time I had a contraction saying, "Take your time,

breathe. Be calm." My husband was there holding my hand and the doctor would come, the nurses were there. I had a real easy time having my second son. I just went with experience, I knew what I was doing, knew what I was in for. I did all the breathing and stuff and it was so much more easier.

It was really really different with my twins 'cause when I first started out, I'm thinking, being normal, that I'm going to have the baby here—thinking that it's just going to be one, not knowing that I had two. People were telling me, "It looks like you're going to have an earlier birth than normal, or you got two in there." Like they're joking at the time. So, they sent me for ultrasound. The lady was checking me over and stuff and all a sudden she says, "How do you feel about two?" I was just in total shock. That normally doesn't happen. So then, right away, once they found that out, you have to go Thunder Bay to have your delivery 'cause it'll be safer. He referred me over there to a doctor that does that kind of deliveries. I had them natural. The doctor said I carried well and one was 8 pounds and one was 7 pounds 10 ounces, so I did well having them.

You can't beat it where you grew up

It was hard for me to go over there, because as soon as I start to get closer, I think would have been probably



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the month before the actual birth, he said, “We want you to stay here now.” If that’s what I gotta do, I gotta do. Whatever’s best for me and the babies, I’ll do it. I was fortunate, me, I didn’t have to stay in the hospital because my sister-in-law and my brother live up there. The month I was up there, I could feel myself getting tired—tired of being here, tired of this environment because it’s not home. It takes a lot out of you. I came home one weekend cause I couldn’t do it anymore. I just told my husband, “I just wanna go home; I don’t wanna be here anymore. I need to be at home for a while in my own element.” That’s what I did. I took a chance, and I just knew in my own self that I just wanted to come home. I had my 2 older boys I had to juggle. I give my mom a lot of thanks and a lot of credit because she was there all the way. You need family. She stepped in when Jeff was working and stuff, so that made it easier for me to go over there until the babies were born. But it was hard to leave home, you know. You always feel more comfortable being at your home. You don’t realize that growing up, there’s nothing like home. You can’t beat it where you grew up, or where your haven is, I guess. That’s where I feel most comfortable, around family, brothers, my mom is there. Once you make that connection to your land, and you know, it makes it that much more enjoyable to be there.

I think a lot of people get lost where they think Thunder Bay has got so much more to do and so much more to offer, when sometimes, it’s not really the case. Lots of times, people only see the bad, they don’t see the good. You know, Marathon is nice. I believe they got everything here. I think a lot of people choose to have their babies in Thunder Bay, to be honest with you. Some people just think grass is greener over there. I think they just gotta believe in what we have here and it’ll make that more of a connection to their doctors or whoever they have to see and stop thinking that everything is in Thunder Bay or a bigger community. I understand there is situations where you have to be over there. If I had the choice, I’d rather have them here in my own home, in my own area and community. I’d rather have my daughters have their children here or my sons have their children in this area, because it really takes a lot out of people to leave home to go away.

But where do you go with that? I think we’re losing a lot of that connection of the importance of life, of child-birth—how important it really is to be a mother and a parent. You know, you don’t just bring a child into his life. You got a big responsibility. I think that mothers as in general, they really need to know that importance of actually, you know, feel that life-giving, that birth, and really make that connection with your child. I seen a tape of one of our spiritual leaders. He interviewed this grandmother that was talking about raising children and all that stuff and how important it is. She really


made me think. She said, “From the time you have your first child ‘til they’re 5 years old, least the mother, if not both parents, should be with the child. Not go out, get work, get a babysitter, come back at 4:00.” That really hit home for me.

I know who I am; I know what I want to do

That’s what I push on my family and my daughters. You need to give them patience; you need to be there with them all the time as a parent. It’s not just when you feel like it. It’s constant, it’s a lifetime commitment and I push that with my daughters. They’re young, they’re only 19, and they don’t have kids. I try to teach my children, and give them the values. I tell them that you really need to know who you are. You need to find who you are and try to live your life to the full. First you’ll become a teenager. If you do it right, then you’ll feel it in your heart. Live your life. First, enjoy your youth. All of a sudden you’ll want to get married, then you’ll want to have children and it will just go on. It’ll become important to you. You’ll know when you’re ready; you’ll feel it inside you that you want to do something different, like have a child. It’s like a cycle of your life. If you take the proper course, you won’t feel you missed anything. I’m so, how do I say this, proud that my daughter-in-law is there 24/7 with her children. You’ll actually meet her when you come in and do your interview with her.³ She could go out and look for a job, but she knows the importance of being there with her child and I strongly believe that. I feel that lots of the society doesn’t realize how serious or how important that connection is to be a parent.

I’m just learning that myself, knowing who I really am. Sometime I wish I could go back and have especially my 2 sons. I wasn’t taught the proper stages in my life, having kids so young. I feel that I missed the teenage years. I wasn’t made aware. My mother, she gave me a lot of things, a lot of values. But there’s a lot of things I needed that I didn’t get. You run into trouble. I could have been there more. I feel like I really wasn’t there as a mother because of being young.

That’s the key to surviving, I think. Being who you are; that’s how I live my life, or try to. You know, you got so much things out there that, you know, that can take you away from that, can lead you off on a different path, whether it be a crazy path or drugs. Everything’s around you, you know, if you don’t ground yourself, you could get lost so easily. All the drugs, the alcohol—you know, that shouldn’t be a part of our life. It just takes away the values of parenting. It’s wrong for people to do that to their selves because their child takes that too. Like I said, I think us as a whole, as people, are losing that sense of value, that sense of who you really are and who you’re supposed to be. That’s one of our values that we have but it’s lost.

We're clean. My husband he's working hard, trying to make a better community for Pic Mobert, but you can only do so much. He's trying to put programs together, to work hard in making a better First Nation. Sometimes it's tiring. We try to stay positive about our First Nation, to move forward together. Now as I'm older, I know who I am, I know what I want to do, and I want to follow my culture as being First Nation. I'm an aboriginal person, and bring those values back, that's what we work at, me and my husband. I tell my family that, my kids, if you want something bad enough, you'll go after it. I think everything is out there whether it be in Mobert or in Marathon. It's right there; it's right in front of you. That's the way I try to live my life. 

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Competing interests

None declared

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