

Charmaine Cecile LETOURNEAU, C.M., April 29, 1947 - October 5, 2022. Charmaine Letourneau passed away at her home in Edmonton, Alberta at the age of 75. Charmaine was an educator, administrator, mentor, advocate and spokesperson for the Deaf. She was dearly loved by her seven brothers and sisters (Annette, the late Maurice, Robert, Lyle, the late Yvonne, Ricky and Cheryle), nephews, nieces and many friends and former students. The first Deaf recipient of the Order of Canada, Charmaine left a rich and deep legacy, having touched and improved the lives of many of her students and fellow members of the Deaf Community.



Charmaine receiving the Order of Canada from Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, with friend Kathy Dolby,

Born in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, Charmaine spent her early childhood in Smith, Alberta. She became deaf at the age of three as a complication of meningitis. In September of 1952, five-year-old Charmaine left her family behind to attend the MacKay School for the Deaf in Montreal. For the next four years, the school was her home during the school year, except for two months of summer vacation each year; she stayed connected with her family through letters from her mother, Cora. In 1956, Charmaine returned to Edmonton to attend the Alberta School for the Deaf (ASD), which had opened the previous year. She felt welcomed and at home there where she lived in the dormitory on weekdays and could return home on weekends. During her time as a student, philosophies about deaf education changed. At first, students were required to wear hearing aids, use their voices to speak and were restricted from signing. Later, they were required to communicate using fingerspelling at school; only later, education at ASD

focused on Total Communication, which allowed students to use ASL and English to communicate and educated them in reading and writing in English.

After her graduation from the Alberta School for the Deaf in 1965, Charmaine attended Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington, D.C. where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a minor in Literature. In 1970, she returned to Edmonton to further her education, earning a Professional Diploma after Degree in Education and a Graduate Diploma in Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. She worked as a dormitory houseparent at the Alberta School for the Deaf while completing her university courses. She joined the staff at ASD as a teacher in 1972, and later became Elementary Vice-Principal and then Secondary Assistant Principal. During her 30 years tenure at ASD, Charmaine touched the lives of hundreds of students, where she was known for her lively sense of humor and for her high standards. When the provincial government moved to close the Alberta School for the Deaf, Charmaine fought hard to keep it open. She believed that deaf students needed a place where they could be educated in their own language and culture. Her voice had an impact and the ASD remained open, although it is now under the administration of the Edmonton Public School Board.

Besides her professional role as an educator, Charmaine was a tireless advocate of Deaf Canadians and worked continually to bring accessibility, equality, and inclusion to Deaf Canadians. She served in positions of influence in many Deaf organizations, including the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf, where she was the longest serving board member, including serving as President for twelve years. Her vision of increasing the quality of life for Deaf Canadians energized her in countless ways. She fought to institute and improve relay telephone services for the Deaf. She helped to create a renowned college-level ASL/English interpreter program at MacEwan University, developed a bilingual sign language program for the Edmonton School Board, and prepared curricula for many courses taught in Alberta schools and adult literacy programs. As a friend and mentor, she wrote many letters and applications for and on behalf of Deaf people. In an interview with students in 1996, she described how she learned to channel her energy and her desire for change so that her influence would be positive. She learned by experience to listen and to take time to effect change and influence.

Charmaine met her dear friend and colleague Kathy Dolby in 1976. Together they founded the Western Canada Tournament of the Deaf and other projects. Charmaine was instrumental in the development and promotion of *The Canadian Dictionary of ASL*<sup>1</sup>, which was written and edited by Carole Sue Bailey and Kathy Dolby and published in 2002. Charmaine wrote the forward to the dictionary, a project that she had envisioned in her role as President of the CCSD and was very gratified to see to fruition.

Shy and modest by nature, Charmaine did not like to draw attention to herself. However, her efforts and advocacy for Deaf Canadians brought her recognition. Some of the honours she received included "Deaf Albertan of the Year" (1987), the Canadian Association of the Deaf

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, C. S., Campbell, H. M., Dolby, K. (2002). *The Canadian Dictionary of ASL*. Canada: University of Alberta Press.

“Citizen of the Year” (1989), Outstanding Service awards to the CCSD (1984, 1986), and “Global Woman of Vision” ( 2001). In 1996, the CCSD created the “Charmaine Letourneau ASL/LSQ Award” in her honour to be given to students from all Schools for the Deaf in Canada for excellence in ASL/LSQ.<sup>2</sup>

Charmaine received the highest honour afforded to Canadians when she became a Member of the Order of Canada on November 15, 2000 and invested on May 31, 2001. The Order of Canada website describes her as “An educator, a leader and a role model in the Deaf community, she has worked tirelessly to improve the quality of life for Deaf people and to encourage an integration of their culture and experience in Canadian society. An inspiration to many, she advocates for equal rights and initiates special cultural, recreational and social programs. Serving on the executives of provincial and national organizations and Assistant Principal of the Alberta School of the Deaf, she has enriched the lives of Deaf and hearing Canadians for almost thirty years.”



Charmaine Letourneau with Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, John Ralston Saul and friend Kathy Dolby

Upon receiving this honour for a lifetime of work with the Deaf, Charmaine said, “I felt very, very proud when Governor General Adrienne Clarkson pinned an Order of Canada medal on me. However the proudest moments have been the ones when we, the Deaf Community, have

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell, H. M., Robinson, J. A., & Stratiy, A. (2002). Deaf Women of Canada: A Proud History and Exciting Future. Duval House Pub. <https://books.google.ca/books?id=dka-tAEACAAJ>

succeeded in our quest for equal rights. It hasn't always been easy, but when you are faced with adversity, it means so much to have the support of so many people." She also said, "I feel very thankful to be Deaf. It gives purpose and direction to my life."

In recommending Charmaine for the Order of Canada, her good friend Kathy Dolby described her persistence, determination and vision. "It would be unusual to encounter a member of the Deaf Community anywhere in Canada who does not know or know of Charmaine and her work on their behalf. She is equally well known and respected by all the hearing people she's educated as to what being deaf is all about." Her friend Carole Sue Bailey, co-editor of the Canadian Dictionary of ASL, in her letter of nomination, called Charmaine "one of the GREATEST deaf leaders of our time." She wrote, "It's hard to find words superlative enough to describe what Charmaine's very presence has meant to us deaf Canadians. She has done so much to make our lives better and easier. We trust her unconditionally to speak on our behalf, and when she does, I look on with pride."

A descendant of Métis from the Red River Settlement, Charmaine was a citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta and took pride in her First Nations ancestry. She loved Family History research and sharing what she learned with her extended family. She received the Esquao Award from the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women in 1999 and a recognition award from the North Peigan Blackfoot Confederacy for her leadership, public service and advocacy.





Along with her friend Kathy Dolby, Charmaine continued to advocate for the Deaf by establishing the Charmaine Letourneau Scholarship in 2002 to support post-secondary education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Albertans. This scholarship is awarded each year to a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person who will attend an academic or training program at a qualified institution, recognizing individuals who demonstrate involvement in Deaf and Hard of Hearing organizations, school or community leadership, commitment to and diligence in studies, and likelihood the program of study will lead to employment or further educational opportunities. Besides her own diligent fundraising (even bottle collecting!), ongoing donations from many individual contributors and community organizations continue to honour Charmaine and support the fund, which is administered by the Edmonton Community Foundation.

In her retirement years, Charmaine was always busy. She continued to substitute teach at ASD for many years and teach ASL at MacEwan University. In her spare time she read voraciously on her Kobo, quilted, taught ASL by Skype and Facetime, and wrote many letters to advocate for the Deaf Community. Fridays were the highlight of her week, when her friends came over to play games and socialize. Most recently, she was involved in a literacy project for Deaf adults, assisting in the creation of vocabulary videos with Angela Straitiy and the Alberta Cultural Society of the Deaf. This was a work of love for her because of her passion and enthusiasm for the expressive and beautiful language that she loved so much. Charmaine had a tender heart and a lively sense of humor. Her twinkling eyes and ready laugh showed her delight in living, connecting, and sharing with others. She had many more projects planned before her untimely death. We will all miss Charmaine greatly.

Charmaine wrote this poem that summarizes her life and her legacy so well. She said that it was the only poem that she ever wrote.

#### TEACHER

From nothingness to abundance of knowledge,  
Teacher, you have taught us so much and so well.  
Teacher, you have given us the world.  
Now we know it is not a silent world,  
But a world full of words.  
You have led us to all this knowledge.  
You gave us the words to express our emotions.  
You gave us the words to form our ideas  
And use our ideas to write.  
From nothingness to abundance of knowledge,  
Teacher, you have taught us so much and so well.  
Teacher, you have given us the world.  
For this we thank you forever and ever.

If you wish to commemorate Charmaine, please consider a donation to the Charmaine Letourneau Scholarship through the Edmonton Community Foundation at <https://www.ecfoundation.org/funds/charmaine-letourneau-fund/>.