

With tradition comes forgiving and healing

By Theresa Devlin

It's been a year since we buried Kenny and I thought it would be helpful to share the experience.

Kenny is the son of Mike and Daisy Demientieff. They are devoted Catholics who winter in Anchorage and spend summer living with the land.

Michael's mother, Frances Demientieff is a well known Athabascan artist, respected as a woman who was able to raise her children after the death of her husband, also a devoted Catholic. On the other hand, Daisy's mother, Belle Deacon is an honored artist, well known for her baskets, for her knowledge of tradition and is a respected Elder. Both women are still living and treasured.

Both Mike and Daisy were raised to respect the teachings and ways of the Church. They were also taught how to live with the land, the river and how to use the natural resources with respect. Mike and Daisy taught these ways to their children as well.

When news of Kenny's death reached me, I knew that it would be very hard of Mike and Daisy. Kenny was the youngest of four.

I stopped by to see if there was anything I could do to help, but as I expected, they turned to the strength which lies within traditional ways. They busied themselves in preparation.

When I arrived at the visitation, Mike and Daisy were there to receive family and friends who came to pay respect. Frances and Belle were there as well. I went through the line to be greeted first by Mike. He said "Go to Daisy." She was sitting. As I approached she stood to greet me. She looked tired. I thought, the fatigue was from the work she must have done to prepare Kenny. With my little knowledge of tradition, I knew that many things needed to be done. I asked if she had completed her work. She looked at me blankly and asked if I looked at him, I just shook my head, no. Her tired weary eyes came to life almost like a realization of accomplishment, accomplishment of love. She took my hand and said "I'll show you..." I was reluctant, I acknowledged within myself, that I really didn't want to admit that Kenny had died. I didn't want to look upon him, I thought if she as his mother could do it, why can't I? Together we walked to the side of the coffin. I looked down at Kenny. His youth made him look as though he was merely deep in slumber.

Then Daisy said, "see he's all ready for his journey. He has his good coat, his fur hat, his beaded slippers, his mittens..." I nodded listening carefully. I couldn't help but think how much work she had accomplished in a short time. How much love went into the stitches and careful attention to detail. I said,

"the mittens are even old style, with strings joining them, fancy tassels..." She continued with her explanation. "yes, the strings are important, once he starts on his journey, he can't look back, he had to keep going, the strings will keep him from having to stop to pick up a mitten in case he happens to drop one. He won't have to think about that..." There was a rosary intertwined between his fingers. I noticed a book of paper matches. I asked "why are there matches there..." she explained. "His journey will take four days. There are four matches, There are four candles in all, one for each day of his journey." They were placed in each corner of the coffin. "The candles are there so he can find his way, if it gets dark..."

There was a sprig of sweet grass. She explained that Kenny had become very interested in learning more about Spirituality and that he liked sweet grass, so it was there for him. Lastly, I asked her why was there a picture of Father Spils? It was placed near his left shoulder. She said, "When Mike and I lived in Paxon, Father Spils was our very dear friend. Since Kenny was just a child at that time, he wouldn't recognize Father, so we place the picture there for Kenny. We could count on Father to help Kenny, but Kenny might need help in recognizing Father, so that's why the picture is there." I couldn't help but notice that by that time Daisy's appearances had changed. It was as if she realized that she had done all she could to prepare Kenny for his journey and that through the explanation, she acknowledged the accomplishment. She looked good. Her fatigue had given way to a kind of satisfaction that she had dressed her son and dressed him in a manner that would reflect pride in his heritage, in his tradition and in his family. It was as if she was proud of how he would look for his journey to our Lord. I felt much better.

The next day, we had the final rites. Father Tom Gallagher, S. J., presided. He didn't know Kenny, but he was considerate enough to ask Mike and Daisy if there were any special readings, or tradition that they wanted to include.

Father welcomed everyone and explained that since Mike and Daisy were Catholic, they requested a Mass for their son. They also requested that Deacon William Tyson please do a Native dance. Then after, the dance, the grandmothers would both do something from their Native tradition, a Sending of the Spirit.

I was sitting with my husband, Jack. I whispered to him, "I can't believe it. I can't believe that this is happening. For how long we were taught that tradition was evil, that it was the work of the devil, that dancing was no good! And here we are in the church with a Catholic priest leading a service which includes some of our tradition! Tradition I never even heard of before. Sending

of the Spirit. I felt a whole range of emotions, curiosity disbelief, amazement, shame, uncertainty. My attention was called back, as Father was leading into the Mass... "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit..." After Mass, I impatiently waited for the Sending of the Spirit.

Father then introduced Deacon Tyson. He, his wife Marie and singers went before the altar, turned and faced us. William explained that for years we were unable to express ourselves in our language, nor dance our dances, but with the encouragement of Pope John Paul, we are now encouraged to use tradition. The drumming started. There are many different types of drums perhaps just as many ways to beat a drum. But one thing remains the same. The effect it has on people. The sound and maybe the vibration seems to reach out and connect people. William performed a quiet, respectful dance and when the drumming ended, he bowed his head and returned to his seat. Then Father invited Belle to come forward. She moved slowly and stopped by the coffin. Slowly she turned and in a soft voice explained. "The family and friends are invited to come forward. We'll gather around the coffin and together we'll stomp feet. We'll only stomp four times."

Jack and I went forward. Frances and Belle had placed themselves at the head and foot of the coffin. Then together we began to stomp our feet. One, two, three, four, it was as if we were calling to Kenny. Then Francis and Belle spread their arms out in a gathering motion, as if to gather Kenny. Together they raised their arms to send him on his way. It was almost possible to see him leaving.

Then we went to the cemetery to bury the coffin. There were more prayers, tears and hugs, but for me there was a new feeling of pride in learning about a new tradition.

Father announced that Mike and Daisy invited everyone to join them at their house. There they had prepared a feast. We sat, shared a meal, talked of Kenny... fond memories, funny memories and lasting memories.

Perhaps about a week after the experience, when my emotions settled, I told Archbishop Francis Hurley the whole story. I was excited, yet a little nervous thinking that what had happened could bring a reprimand. But as I talked the Archbishop nodded now and then, smiled, agreed that it was good. He also told me that we as Native people have that option available to us. I was surprised, but encouraged. My concern was how do we get the word out to people. That's why I'm writing this article. In reflection, to finally be recognized as people with meaningful traditions comes forgiving and healing. My challenge now is to learn as much as I can about tradition.