



Personal Support Workers embody the traditional helper role



Crystal Whitehead (left) and Shirley Bertrand-Jooris (right) at the Health Centre in Fort Liard.

Since 2008 the DHSS has recognized Home Support Worker day on the last Tuesday in June annually, as a way to acknowledge and honour the contribution of Home Support Workers to NWT health services. Now the name of the day has been changed to **NWT Personal Support Worker Day** to also encompass Resident Care Aides and Personal Care Attendants who work in Long Term Care, and Personal Outcome Support Workers who work in Supported Living environments, to ensure inclusion of the entire Continuing Care team. All provide caring, personal assistance to NWT residents who require help to meet their basic needs.

To celebrate the day, here is a profile of two Home Support Workers who have found that their work embodies the traditional helper role in their community of Fort Liard in the Dehcho Region.

If you ask Shirley Bertrand-Jooris what made her decide to go into Home Care, she'll tell you that when she was young there were people around her who were ill, and she didn't know what to do to help, and it made her decide she wanted to learn how to take care of people. "That is how we were raised in our traditional area, being around the elderly and younger children, to help out when there was a sickness or someone needed help. I was brought up to help people, whenever I can. And now, because of my training and my experience, I know what to do."

Shirley's co-worker, Crystal Whitehead, also went into Home Care because she wanted to be helping elders. Crystal was with Home Care part-time for a while and recently stepped into it fulltime. "I knew it would be a challenge," says Crystal, "and I took a while to decide but the regional manager waited so patiently for my answer and so I said yes." "What I like about Home Care," adds Crystal, "is the clients, their stories, and just helping with the elders at home. I am so pleased to be with

elders in their homes. They invite us in. They share their daily life with us. I like helping them, just making sure everything is OK. Being with them makes me smile.”

Tiiu Cli, the Home Care Coordinator for the Dehcho Region, says, “The ability to communicate is so important to this kind of work. Crystal’s listening skills when interacting with clients are exceptional. She shows such kindness and respect. This is such an asset to our team.”

Shirley has found that working in Home Care requires you to be ready for anything, and be willing to learn as you go. “What I’ve learned at work is, every step is a learning curve,” says Shirley. Shirley has also found that listening and hearing what people say is central to her ability to provide the help that people need. “My personal philosophy is, really listen to what’s being said.” Shirley says that missing even a few words may mean you have lost an opportunity to understand. “If they are sick sometimes they are not going to tell you straight out, so I have to really ask a lot of questions even when I don’t like to bother them especially when they are not feeling well.” The work we do, “goes well beyond how to cook and clean, but you have to know how to spot something is not right with a person, health wise, or to detect a word that may indicate that something is not right.”

Tiiu Cli, says, “Shirley has a way with the elders that is so soft and gentle. Her ability to speak the language surely connects her with each and every one of our clients, and also helps bridge communication gaps between the clients and others on the health care team.”

The traditional setting shapes Shirley’s commitment to her work as well. She says, “I get to know the history through stories told by the elders, and hearing their stories helps strengthen my language.” Shirley describes how she went to residential school and lost her language, and now has regained it. “The elders like to hear me speak and correct what I am saying and now I speak it much better.”

Shirley describes her job as a Home Support Worker as a traditional role in modern times. “Today we get paid to work,” she explains. “Work is counted as dollars. In the old days of our elders, a person was rewarded for work with a story. On good days I am rewarded with both!”

The work is a full cultural immersion. “A big challenge for me,” says Crystal, “is my Slavey language which I do speak (and understand most of it) but there are some words that I cannot pronounce right. But I’m still learning my language and improving on it every day. This is the perfect job to learn my language: I think I’ve improved a lot since I started.”

Part of it is respect. Crystal says. “It is our tradition to respect ourselves and to respect others, especially elders. Shirley adds, “It takes time for people to get to know each other and time before a person can earn respect.”

Tiiu Cli adds, “It is a pleasure to work with all the personal support workers of the Dehcho. They are hardworking individuals who show their love, compassion and respect for the people they care for. It is truly an honour to work with them.”