

Use Your Anger to Initiate Positive Change!

A Tribute to Mary Two-Axe Earley

by Katherine E. Wallace

June 21, 2006 is the perfect opportunity to give credit where it is due. In my mind there is no better example than that of a phenomenal native woman named Mary Two-Axe Earley who was born on the Mohawk reserve at Kahnawake, on Montreal's South Shore.

The frustration and resulting anger over the circumstances of her friend's death, is what propelled Mary into activism. Instead of turning the anger inward which would have become a "Bitter Root" which is toxic, Mary chose wisely to turn that frustration and anger outward to initiate positive change for native women in Canada. There is much to be learned by my generation in the example of Mary Two-Axe Earley. She remains, in my mind, one of the most outstanding women of the last decade.

Framing the life and times of Mary is interesting and worthy of this memorial tribute coinciding with National Aboriginal Day, June 21, 2006. Worthy because she proved it is never "too late" to become an activist...never! For at the age of 55 years, Two-Axe Earley entered politics fuelled by the fact that her friend had lost status through marriage, and ordered off the reserve where she was born. Within that same year Mary's friend died...broken-hearted no doubt, and thereafter denied permission to be buried on the reserve where she grew up. All this built-up the reservoir of emotion, and anger that ironically fuelled and propelled Mary Two-Axe Earley's activism to new heights. This is the beginning of her "Eagle Flight to Equality".

During her thirty-year career as an activist for Native Women's Rights, Mary accomplished much. First, in 1967, she founded the provincial organization, Equal Rights for Indian Women. It later became the National Indian Rights for Indian Women. These events were catalysts to positive change. 1967 marked the year life changed for every native woman in Canada. Mary wrote many letters, made passionate speeches and presented government task forces with submissions and information. Mary Two-Axe Earley, with the courage of a warrior woman, also faced much opposition from the men of First Nations and its leadership. In one instance, Mary was pressured from her home band at Kahnawake not to appear before the Royal Commission. Like so many activist before her, Mary was faced with life-changing decisions. But she had made her decisions long before, way back in 1966 and she never waivered from taking the high road. Two-Axe Earley had decided in 1966 to take the anger and frustrations of life and turn them outward in the direction of positive change.

So she continued to be met with both human and institutionalized obstacles with an unmatched resolve to change the status quo. When she moved back to her Kahnawake log house that she inherited from her grandmother, it was clear that she was not welcome. This personal blow to her spirit did not defeat her resolve. She continued to work as an activist for native women and in 1970 submitted a report to the Royal Commission despite discouraging comments at home. Instead she remained focused on her "Vision for Positive Change."

Over the next ten years Two-Axe Earley worked towards changing the Indian Act. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada found "there is a special kind of discrimination under the terms of the Indian Act which can affect Indian women upon marriage". It was thereafter recommended that sections of the Act be repealed, which discriminated on the basis of "sex" and recommended that "Indian women and men should enjoy the same rights and priviledges in matters of marriage and property as other Canadians." In this important moment of history, Mary Two-Axe Earley saw how much good anger turned outward in the direction of positive change can really do. Her anger had finally paid off "big" for all native women.

Mary's life had been negatively impacted by the Indian Act just as her friends had. This doubled-blow left Mary with a desire to make the wrongs contained in the Act corrected to the mutual benefit of native men and native women. Like her friend, Mary Two-Axe had lost status when she moved to New York and married Edward Earley, an Irish engineer. Under the Indian Act, she was stripped of her Indian status and could no longer live on her Kahnawake reserve, nor be buried there. At this time, the discrimination contained in the Indian Act came to life for her and her young family. As a reaction to her anger and frustration, Mary travelled a path of positive change. This path sees Mary attending women's conferences in 1975 and using that opportunity to gain public support for native women's issues under the Act. That first conference was a gateway when she revealed publicly that she had been given an eviction notice by her band council and faced displacement because of the regulations of the Indian Act.

At the same time, a group of Native women in New Brunswick were battling these same issues. Shirley Bear, Mrs. Enos and Mrs. Lilly Harris said "Enough is Enough!" and organized a group of ordinary working women from that small eastern community, to march in Ottawa in support of Mary Two-Axe Earley's vision of change to the Indian Act. These combined efforts on several simultaneous fronts changed the lives of Native Women in Canada. We owe them a huge debt and homage as "Sisters in the Struggle for Positive Change."

After that first international women's conference in 1975, Mary Two-Axe Earley organized Canadian native women and urged them to speak out on relevant issues of the Indian Act. In 1975 she received the Persons Award for contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of women in Canada. In 1981, she was presented with an honorary doctorate of laws from York University. In 1985 she was recipient of the Order of Quebec. She later received the governor general's award and was nominated for the lifetime achievement National Aboriginal Achievement Award.

Today, Mary Two-Axe Earley, along her supporters, Mrs. Enos, Mrs. Bear and Mrs. Harris, are remembered as the ordinary female leaders of the battle to repeal sections of the Indian Act that stripped Aboriginal women of their status when they married non-natives. Those changes were included in Bill C-31, and were passed in 1985. These "ordinary women" suddenly, became extraordinary having accomplished so much.

These recognitions though prestigious were also met with much intimidation and threats. Women in the movement today, can almost all certainly identify. They know trying to change the "Status Quo" and efforts to make positive change also brings backlash and retaliation. Like Mary, many women activists pay a huge price for launching social reforms. Nevertheless, let the example of Mary Two-Axe Earley be forever etched in your mind. Mary, just like the warrior women we know, always held her position, refused to cave and succumb to intimidation! Mary's courage and tenacity is an example to imitate. Her commitment to positive change for Native women during the span of thirty years was tireless and fuelled by the sadness of being denied rights and privileges by virtue of choices.

In 1985, the fruit of her labours was seen in the passage of Bill C-31, and Mary Two-Axe Earley was the first woman to have her status officially restored by then-Indian Affairs minister David Crombie. That accomplishment paved the way for thousands to follow her example in re-gaining status for themselves and their children. In 1985, largely due to Two-Axe's efforts, Parliament passed legislation amending the Indian Act to eliminate the discrimination that penalized Status Indians who were women, and to provide reinstatement process. Once reinstated, these women could reclaim their rights under the Act. This important step opened the doors to improved health and educational services for these native women and their children. Mary Two-Axe Earley, died August 21, 1996 at the age of 84. She left women with the gift of equality, and this positive change proved that it is never too late to become an activist!

Today, there are still challenges and obstacles to full equality. Facing this, can we look to our Aboriginal youth to take the reins and ride forward? Do we have expectations and a mentor's patience to groom and nurture the youths chosen for the annual National Aboriginal Role Model Awards? Do we have a platform for youths like Jenna Walker of Easterville, Manitoba to speak on? If not,...then why not? When are we going to learn the moral of this Two-Axe Earley story? Now what are you doing with your frustration and anger?...are you turning it inward or wisely turning it outward? Why haven't we learned that anger is a normal emotion that can be mighty powerful at "effecting lasting positive change?"

This year, on National Aboriginal Day, June 21, 2006, we give tribute to a Native Women who had the answers. Clear, and simple. Mary Two-Axe Earley is a native heroine because she made that first decision to turn her frustration and anger outward towards positive change!

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