



NATIVE WOMEN'S  
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES  
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA



# Storytelling: Debbie's Story



For years, communities have pointed to the high numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has been honoured to work with families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to share the story of their loved one. As part of the storytelling process, families' are also invited to share their experiences with the justice system, media, victim services and other institutional and community supports.

Storytelling is a way of teaching and learning. The stories shared by family members are intended to raise awareness, educate, and promote change. They have been told to honour the daughters, sisters, mothers and grandmothers that have been lost to violence and remember those still missing. This is what their stories tell us.

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## “Close in our Hearts”: Debbie Sloss’ Story

Deborah Anne Sloss, known to most as Debbie, was born on May 3, 1955 in Espanola, Ontario. She has two children, Laura and Len Jr., one granddaughter, Taylor, and nine siblings, John, Charlene (deceased as an infant), Mary Lou, Kathy, Tim, Roxanne, Sue, David and Daryl.

Debbie was placed in the Creator’s hands in 1997. Her family believes that the Toronto Police Service mishandled the investigation into her death. While police maintain that Debbie died from a drug overdose, her autopsy report shows no anatomical or toxicological cause of death. Citing this, and other unexplained circumstances, Debbie’s family believes that Debbie was murdered. They are calling on the responsible parties, especially the Toronto Police Service, to answer their questions.

At the time of her birth Debbie’s mother, Shirley (Sloss) Lascelles was living in Spanish, Ontario. She was taken by ambulance to Espanola where Debbie was born, a beautiful Ojibway baby with Mi’kmaq, Lakota and French heritage. Shortly thereafter the family, at that time comprised of Shirley, her husband (and Debbie’s legal Father) Albert and her older siblings John and Mary Lou moved to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Debbie was a joyful, pretty girl and the family was very happy about her birth. Debbie and her older sister Mary Lou were just over one year apart and their mother would dress them alike. People often mistook the girls for twins.

As sisters close in age, Debbie and Mary Lou had a lot in common. They spent all their time together and shared a very special bond. When the girls were two or three years old, they used to “save” going to the bathroom so that they could go together. The two tots would squeeze onto the seat together, their bottoms vying for space on the bowl. Mary Lou learned later in life that she and Debbie had a different father than the rest of their siblings. Shirley met the girls’ biological father in residential school but was forbidden to marry him since having a Native husband was frowned upon at that time.

Mary Lou describes Debbie as a Taurus who “was just living according to her sign.” Mary Lou recalls Debbie being hit with a ruler by nuns when she was in grade one at St. Anne’s Catholic School in Sault Ste. Marie. Debbie sat still while being strapped and though her hand turned red she stubbornly refused to move it. Debbie was also a cup-thrower; in arguments with her siblings, mainly her oldest brother John, Debbie was determined to get her point across and as a result cups would fly across the room. Mary Lou abstained from this behaviour since she was not a cup-thrower and she did not want to get in trouble with her mother (but this did not bother Debbie). An occasional rebel, Debbie sometimes skipped classes in high school. Mary Lou

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fondly remembers, “Debbie was just Debbie. She was stubborn and wouldn’t walk in the line that they tell you to walk in.”

Debbie’s early childhood was spent in Batchawana Bay located 70 kilometers north of Sault Ste. Marie. Always fun to be around, Debbie was an active member of her community. Debbie loved helping with community events such as potluck dinners, bingos, dances at the community hall and bonfires at the beach. Even after her family relocated to Toronto, Debbie still found ways to help Batchawana Bay community members. When Batchawana Bay’s priest was transferred to a church in Toronto, Debbie was more than happy to do what she could to facilitate the transition. Along with the rest of her family, she helped the priest look for a house and get set up in his new community.



*June/89  
I like this one the best.  
Take care My Baby Girl  
Love You Forever  
Mom.  
xxxxoo*

When Debbie was a teen her family moved to Toronto.

As she grew older, Debbie took on more responsibility for her family. Debbie’s mother was sick and had seven children to look after, so Debbie and Mary Lou assumed the roles of caregivers to their siblings. The girls would sometimes alternate between preparing meals and washing the dishes, but Mary Lou did most of the cooking. Their younger sister Kathy always dried the dishes. They also alternated housecleaning duties and clever Debbie adopted her older sister’s trick of cleaning the house a couple of days before asking her mother’s permission to go out with friends.

In high school Debbie enrolled in an arts and sciences stream. She spent a lot of time creating artwork and Shirley taught Debbie and Mary Lou to crochet items like blankets, vests and sweaters. Mary Lou remembers that she and Debbie spent most of their teen years crocheting. Their mother liked to keep her children close to home where she knew they would be safe, so the teens were allowed to invite their friends over to play records and dance.

Debbie became more independent when, at about 14 years old, she began to work as a waitress at a restaurant named Ted’s. She enjoyed the freedom of earning her own money and would spend a lot of time shopping for clothes in department stores with Mary Lou. The girls also decided to venture into “interior design” with part of their paycheques. After they got the go-ahead from their mother, Debbie and Mary Lou painted the bedroom they shared purple and turquoise and papered one wall with large flowers of the same colours. The girls just loved it!

Debbie graduated high school and later earned a certificate in bookkeeping. When Debbie was about 17 years old, she began to date Len, a young man who worked at the gas station across the street from her house. The two married and when Debbie was 18 she gave birth to her first child, a daughter she named Laura. Debbie was a very doting mother. The entire family loved Laura

and gave her plenty of attention as she was the second grandchild to Shirley and first niece for all.

Shortly after her marriage and the birth of her first child, Debbie began to change. Once having an easy sense of humour and light outlook on life, Debbie became serious. Mary Lou speculates that this change may have been due, in part, to an increasing number of arguments between Debbie and her mother. As a teenager, Debbie argued with her mother over matters like her curfew. The arguments continued as Debbie got older. Mary Lou thinks Shirley saw some of her younger self in Debbie, which is why the two clashed. Debbie, Len and Laura moved to Heyden, Ontario for two years then settled in Goulais River, Ontario, where Laura still resides. At 21 years old Debbie had her second child, Len Jr.



Debbie on her wedding day with Albert Sloss.

While they later divorced, Len still smiles as he remembers what a great mother Debbie was. Debbie and Laura were very close during Laura's childhood. Laura remembers being hospitalized with bronchial pneumonia at age five and how hard she and Debbie cried when they had to be separated overnight. After a few days, doctors had to ask Debbie to stop visiting Laura at the hospital because the stress and heartache of her mother's departure each night was hampering Laura's recovery. While they were forced apart, Laura says, "we were close in our hearts." Although his parents' divorce took its toll on Len Jr., he grew close to his mother in his teenage years. Len Jr. is still healing from his mother's death and Laura believes the entire family would be further along in their healing journeys if they received answers to questions about the circumstances of Debbie's passing.

In 1979, Debbie was in a serious car accident with Len, Laura, Len Jr. and her sister Roxanne. In the aftermath of the crash, Debbie was pinned under a truck by her arm and leg. While Debbie was stuck, she feared her loved ones might be severely injured or worse. This anxiety affected her for years to come. Laura thinks Debbie developed post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the accident but that it went undiagnosed since less was known about the disorder at the time. All of Debbie's family noticed changes in Debbie following the accident. To cope with the trauma and anxiety Debbie turned to alcohol. Laura believes that her mother's life could have turned out differently if she had the proper treatment for this disorder.

After Debbie and Len divorced, Laura and Len Jr. stayed with their father. Debbie took advantage of a promotion offered by a bus company and bought a ticket that took her across Canada where she visited family and friends. While in Edmonton, Debbie raved to Laura about the grandeur of the West Edmonton Mall. Finally, Debbie returned to Toronto. Her family hoped that being close to her sisters Mary Lou and Kathy would help Debbie deal with her alcohol problems. However, it took some time before Debbie was able to overcome her alcoholism. Upon her arrival, Debbie linked up with a group of street people. The family says that some of Debbie's friends also had addictions, which fed Debbie's alcoholism. Still these friendships were

very important to Debbie, who once referred to the crowd as “her family;” Debbie sometimes felt like an outsider in her own family because of her struggle with addictions. After her death many of Debbie’s street friends attended the feast in honour of her life.

In the last year of her life Debbie became more optimistic. She was determined to quit using alcohol and drugs, reconcile with her ex-husband and regain her family. Debbie was taking advantage of services offered by the Elizabeth Fry Society. She began her path to recovery and was sober for five months. Even though Debbie and Laura were separated by distance, the two kept in touch and made it a habit to talk on the phone every Sunday. Mary Lou and her husband Dan Smoke had begun to teach Debbie words and their meanings in Ojibway. Debbie accompanied Mary Lou and Dan to listen to Elders and to learn more about her traditions.



Debbie in Kirkland Lake, Ontario

Debbie’s body was found in her Toronto apartment in July 1997. Laura had been worried about her mother for a while since Debbie had stopped answering Laura’s Sunday phone calls. Debbie’s birthday came and went without any sign of her. Not knowing what else to do Laura continued to call her mother but received no response. Laura also tried to call Milton, Debbie’s boyfriend at the time, but he refused to speak to her. The family never imagined that anything had happened to Debbie, so no one thought it necessary to file a missing persons report. On July 29, the building’s landlords found Debbie’s decomposed body in her apartment. No one knew how long she had been there and the exact date of her passing is still unknown. Debbie had recently turned 42 years old. Despite the following problems with the investigation, the police stopped working on Debbie’s case only two days after her body was found.

The family recalls that Debbie was named a “Jane Doe” and her body lay unidentified in the morgue for almost a month. The police did not contact Laura or any of Debbie’s relatives, but the sad news reached the family by “moccasin telegraph” when a relative from Batchawana Bay overheard it on the street in Toronto. The fact that Debbie had passed then spread by word-of-mouth to each family member. The Toronto Police Service told Sue, Debbie’s sister, that Debbie died of a drug overdose. They also told Kathy that “Debbie liked to party too much!” Debbie’s family has raised serious concerns about the quality of the police response to Debbie’s death. Noting that the police report describes Debbie as a “Native Indian” and known “alcoholic and crack addict,” the family believes that police officers made judgments about Debbie based on preconceived notions and stereotypes and that these assumptions hindered the investigation into her death. Laura believes, “they just passed her off as another dead Indian, so to speak... She was still loved.”

Laura and Mary Lou recount a series of suspicious circumstances surrounding Debbie’s death. These discrepancies have still not been investigated. First, police told the family that Debbie’s death was the result of a drug overdose. If this was the case then something in

Debbie's body had to have given way, but no specific cause of death was ever reported. The family later learned from the coroner's report that there was no sign of alcohol or drugs in Debbie's system (the coroner did not examine her stomach or liver contents). Second, police reported that there was feces spread all over the walls of Debbie's apartment, an incident strange in itself, but completely illogical when combined with the fact that Debbie was a very clean person. Third, police had secured the area with yellow tape and Debbie belongings were held for two days, but by the time the family got to Debbie's apartment, the landlords had given away all of her possessions and rented the space to a new tenant. While the belongings could never take the place of the wonderful woman, Laura was looking forward to Debbie's promise of an heirloom sapphire and diamond ring for her birthday.

Furthermore, Laura recounts a conversation she had with Milton that she felt sent up a red flag. Debbie and Milton had been together for about eight years, so Laura contacted him to ask if he had anything that belonged to her mom, even a sweater, that she could have. Milton responded, "I want nothing to do with it." What, Laura wonders, did Milton mean by "it?" Milton has since passed on so Debbie's family cannot ask him what he meant by this statement. Although Mary Lou had a positive relationship with Milton, Laura thinks that Milton's apparent lack of interest in Debbie's death is suspicious.

Additionally, Laura has found many inconsistencies in the police and coroner reports concerning her mother's death. Many of these discrepancies seem like they could have easily been avoided. For example, the Coroner's Investigation Statement got Debbie's date of birth wrong and states she was found on her back, while the police report states that she was found lying on her left side. One report says that a cheque was found on Debbie's apartment floor; however another report states that the cheque was found on her table. Laura also relates how the police report states the landlord saw Debbie on July 23rd and thought she looked unhealthy, but the coroner reported that Debbie was well nourished. The office that misreported Debbie's birth date also presumed Debbie died four days before her body was found; Laura thinks it is unlikely that the decomposition of Debbie's body could have occurred in such a short time. Finally and perhaps most disturbingly to Laura, the copy of the police report Laura obtained more than five years after her mother's death did not include any of the information investigating detectives told Laura around the time of the incident.

Laura has so many unanswered questions. Why was the information in the police and coroner reports never explained to her family? Why are there numerous unexplained inconsistencies in these reports? Why were they never addressed and corrected? And most importantly, what *really* happened to her mother? The family feels like Debbie's death was just brushed under a carpet from every direction. Her family, however, refuses to be brushed aside.

Debbie's brother-in-law and Elder Dan Smoke tells the story of Dudley George's brother Sam and his powerful statement, "I want the truth" in regards to Dudley's death at Ipperwash. With the help of an Elder, Sam's steadfast determination to achieve the debwewin (truth) brought healing for all those concerned and as a result Dudley's life will never be forgotten.

“I want answers,” Laura says. Like Dudley George’s brother, Laura wants the truth. She wants someone to be held accountable, particularly for the police to admit that they mishandled the investigation into Debbie’s death. She wants to be able to tell her daughter Taylor why she does not have her grandmother to help guide her through life. She does not want another family to have to endure this kind of pain. Laura continues to press for answers to the question of what happened to her mother and to search for someone to assume responsibility. Until that day arrives, Debbie will be remembered as a proud grandmother, a loving mom and a young girl who loved purple and turquoise flowers.