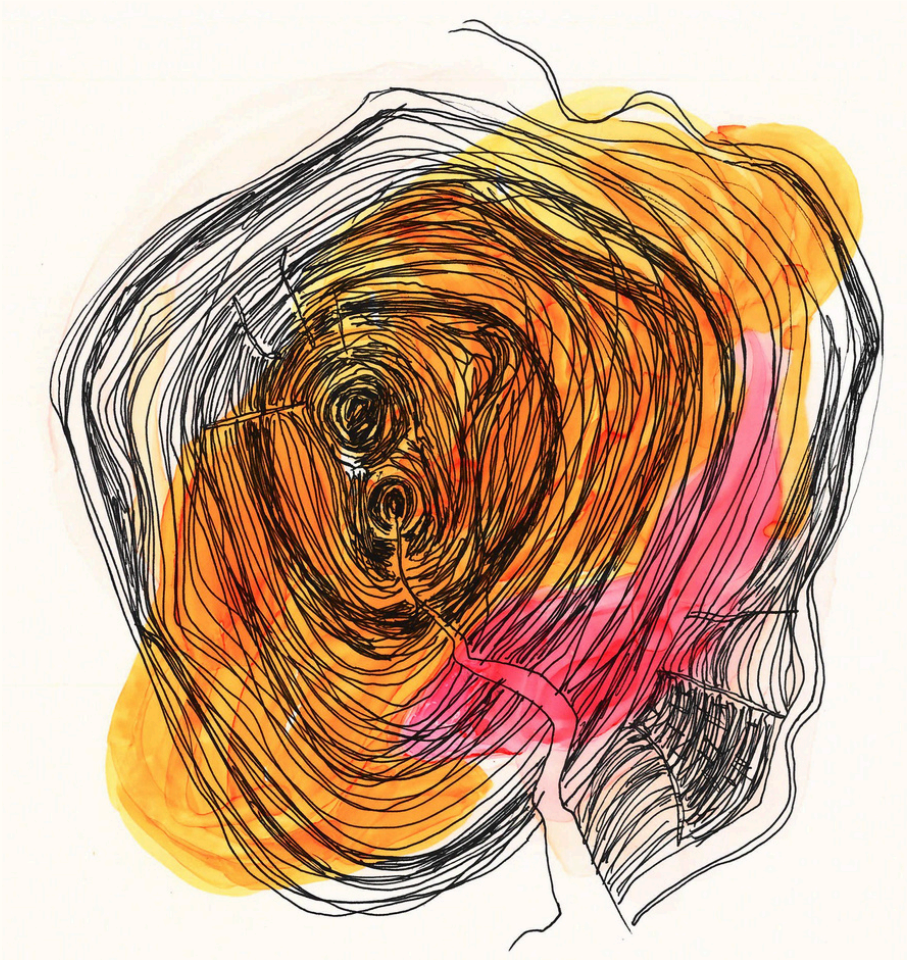
# VISITING JEAN

## Learning to Listen on Colonized Land



May Chazan
With Ziysah von Bieberstein and Emma Langley
Featuring the words of Jean Koning

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Visiting Jean: Learning to Listen on Colonized Land

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Cover art: Jenn Cole

In honour of Jean Koning

1922-2024

“Visiting… is a sharing of oneself through story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being.”

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy”

"This is not easy to do 'briefly' after 90+ years of 'bio!' I could introduce myself as I do in the Ojibwe language when I'm with my Anishinaabe friends: My name is Jean Koning. I was born in Windsor, Ontario. I now live in Peterborough, Ontario. I am a white woman. I have walked with Ojibwe people for many years. I am learning to speak Ojibwe. Beyond that, I have been a wife, mother of three, and I have 11 grands and five great-grands, with more on the way, I understand (happily!) My husband was an Anglican priest who served in Manitoulin Island, where we met "Indians" for the first time in 1966, and where I began to stand in solidarity with the First Peoples, eventually serving with Project North, later Aboriginal Rights Coalition (now a branch of KAIROS). I worked closely with Aboriginal Anglican Church people throughout southwestern Ontario, as well as Traditional First Peoples. As a member of the Kawartha Truth & Reconciliation Support Group, I have begun to understand just how prophetic those words have been, as I continue to learn, and benefit from, what they mean to me in my life journey."

- Jean Koning, 2015, in preparation for Aging Activisms' inaugural symposium

Jean Koning and Elder Shirley Ida Williams (Wikwemikong First Nation) at the inaugural Aging Activisms symposium, Nogojiwanong (Peterborough, Ontario), 2015.

"Jean and I became friends in many places with the work we did. We were grandmother warriors together, fighting for justice!"

- Elder Shirley Williams, 2025

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge Jean Koning: thank you, Jean, for your time, love, and teaching. Your tenacity, care for the world, and authenticity have long been an inspiration to me. I am grateful to Jean's family for playing such an important role in making Jean who she was. And to the many dear friends with whom Jean "walked" over six decades: thank you for persisting life, language, and culture, in the face of so much violence. From you, Jean learned about the transformative potential of humility, uncertainty, and deep listening—the central messages of this book.

I have carried out this work as a settler on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory, held and sustained by the land and water here. I am continually learning and growing in this place, nurtured by a beautiful community of artists, activists, Elders, youth, and scholars. I want to especially acknowledge Aging Activisms collaborators and participants, so many of whom have shaped my thinking: special thanks to Elder Shirley Williams and Elder Alice Olsen Williams, and to longtime research team members, Ziysah von Bieberstein, Jenn Cole, Melissa Baldwin, Mehrangiz Monsef, and so many others! Thank you to my children, Alex and Anthony Hodson, who teach me daily about intergenerational magic, and to the Youth Climate Action Club members, who have inspired me through some difficult years. At Trent, I am grateful for my brilliant colleagues in Gender and Social Justice: Kelly McGuire, Karleen Pendleton Jimenez, Jenn Cole, Nael Bhanji, Sally Chivers, and Lisa Boucher.

Ziysah collaborated with me on every part of this project: the grant-writing and visioning, the selection of materials, and the writing, editing, and design of this little book. Thank you, Ziysah, for your word wizardry, immense generosity, ongoing willingness to co-conspire, deep personal care, and steadfast friendship.

Emma Langley collaborated on the research I carried out with Jean in 2016-2017 and wrote a beautiful thesis on this work in 2018. Emma, I will always cherish our intergenerational trio and the hours we spent sharing stories, tea, laughter, and tears. Thank you for contributing your heartfelt song for Jean to this project.

Jenn Cole has generously shared her creativity, brilliance, and listening with me for as long as I can remember. Thank you, Jenn, for somehow finding the time, and for your guidance, beautiful cover art, and wisdom.

Thank you, Jillian Ackert, for bringing your creative talent and gentle patience to this work, and for your commitment to intergenerational community care.

And thank you, Alex Hodson, for jumping in with a fun illustration. I love the joy, hope, and vision you bring to this world, especially your dream of a summer camp run by grandmothers like Jean.

Finally, I am grateful to my wonderful colleagues at Concordia University, the Aging in Data Partnership Grant led by the formidable Kim Sawchuck, for their support with this project and help in building my research program over the last decade. Thanks also to Trent University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Canada Research Chairs Program.

-May Chazan

# COVER ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I was lucky enough to grow up in the bush in my home territory in the Kiji Sibi watershed. My Nan and her brothers and sisters went to Mattawa Day School. As a queer, neurodivergent, mixed ancestry Algonquin anishinaabekwe coming into activist and scholarly work with May and Ziysah, I experienced Indigenous people being put first in gatherings. In visits with Elders, scholars, artists, knowledge holders and changemakers in Michi Saagig territory, we entered into ceremony together with smudge, words, prayers, laughter and food. I never got to work with Jean in these spaces, but when I met her at the Aging Activisms book launch in 2018, her legacy was well known to me: beloved, an advocate for Indigenous people, fierce and funny, dedicated to visiting and contributing to the archive of settler-allyship in a time where this is desperately needed. We met one another and I complimented her on her bright red shoes. Mine were also red. Kinship in intergenerational fashion! In this artwork, I circled my hand, tracing a tree ring, abstractly, allowing my gestures to follow the shapes of time as I thought about intergenerational relationships and knowledge sharing. I used oranges to foreground those who have survived residential school and the children who didn't. I brought pink—a bright spot of levity for Jean's heart and bold shoes—to meet the orange hues in an act of responsive visiting.

-Jenn Cole

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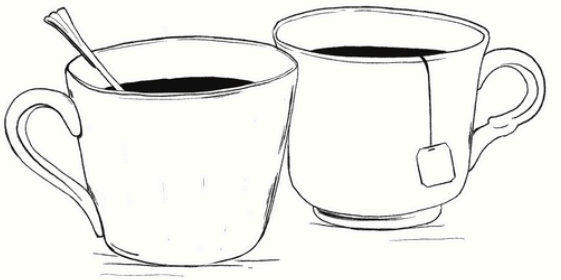
# INTRODUCTION

May Chazan



## "Bring Her Something Sweet"

I am grateful to Anishinaabe Elder Shirley Williams for first introducing me to settler-elder Jean Koning. Shirley, member of the Bird Clan of the Ojibway and Odawa First Nations of Canada, is a Professor Emeritus of Indigenous Studies at Trent. In her 70s at the time, she was one of the first people to welcome me to Trent when I started teaching there in 2013, and she invited me to the Elders and Traditional Peoples Gathering that winter.

"Jean will have some things to share with you," Shirley said. "After the Gathering, you visit her, bring her something sweet."

That Elders Gathering was my first opportunity to listen to and learn from Indigenous Elders, artists, knowledge holders, and writers, both from this territory and from across Turtle Island. Born and raised in Montreal on Kanien'kehá'ka territory, I had spent the previous decade living and working intermittently between Ottawa and Durban, South Africa. I was making home anew in Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory as a 38-year-old parent, professor, and queer, white settler of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.

My first impressions of Jean that day: her sharp wit, strong convictions, and loving welcome. I was awed by her energy, her knowledge, and her huge web of relationships. Everyone seemed to be stopping to say hello. She was 91 at the time and had been, in her words, "walking with First Peoples" for almost 50 years. I could not have known then that she still had a whole decade of life ahead, nor that I would be so lucky as to become part of it.

Eleven years later, I am creating this heartfelt little book in close collaboration with my brilliant co-conspirator, Ziysah von Bieberstein, and held by the generous contributions of Jillian Ackert, Jenn Cole, and Emma Langley. All four of these beautiful humans are artists and change-makers currently in their 30s or 40s; they are all dear friends and longtime members of my research team, each committed to intergenerational visiting, and each in relationship with Jean. My teenage daughter, Alex Hodson, artist and activist who was also in relationship with Jean, offered the illustration of Jean's late-life journey with my research collective, Aging Activisms (page 8-9). This journey included countless cups of tea, over which Jean and I shared hugs, tears, laughs, stories, and revelations. There

were major life transitions as well: a move into assisted living, an archive of life works, and a goodbye at a palliative bed.

*Visiting Jean* is equal parts about Jean—her life and the stories she shared—and about the practice of visiting. I understand visiting as an emotionally and ethically complex research practice and a radical, intergenerational, anti-capitalist, decolonial commitment to making better worlds. It is through the practice of visiting that my research team came to know Jean and to build the trust needed to hear the reflections that we have featured in this book.

In 2015, Jean said this to me: "If there is one message I want to get across before I die, it is that we white settlers need to learn to listen to First Peoples." I have since discovered that she had been expressing this sentiment consistently over decades in her articles and blog posts, and with all who crossed her path. The book's subtitle, *Learning to Listen on Colonized Land*, reflects this teaching. It also reflects what I learned to do through the many hours of visiting with Jean. Listening to and with Jean was slow, deep, and often unsettling. It required me to confront my own ways of knowing; to set aside the capitalist time pressures in my life; and to sit with my own grief and longing. Listening to Jean, and being listened to by her, was transformative; it showed me that listening to each other is how we make better futures.

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"If there is one message I want to get across before I die, it is that we white settlers need to learn to listen to First Peoples."
- Jean Koning, 2015

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## Belonging to Our Work Together

In the first year of my friendship with Jean, we shared many cups of tea in her apartment, and quite a few chocolate chip cookies too. Initially, we talked a lot about books. She had me reading a steady stream of Indigenous authors writing about sovereign futures: Audra Simpson, Glen Coulthard, Taiaiake Alfred, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. We also talked about the news, our families, and various community events. Jean asked me so many questions, and she listened deeply to my answers.

Jean had spent half a century listening to First Peoples and struggling alongside them, at a time when few white people were. Still, she was adamant that she could not tell me what First Peoples thought (beyond happily assigning me a reading list). One morning in 2014, Jean asked me to record her saying this, in case I should ever decide to write a book about her:

> My disclaimer is that when I am speaking *of* First Peoples, I am not speaking *for* First Peoples. I am speaking from my own unique position of having had the privilege of walking with First Peoples and about my understanding of what I have learned. I have had opportunities and relationships that most white Canadians will never have, and I am very privileged for that. So I have something to share about our relationships with First Peoples, but I can only ever tell you my story, what I have been learning.

Despite this disclaimer, Jean knew she had something to offer future generations. I knew it too.

I was at a particular junction in my own life at that time. I had spent the better part of the previous decade overseas, working closely with grandmother activists in South Africa. So, when I moved to Nogojiwanong in 2013 to take up a research position at Trent, I was only beginning to engage with the upswell of new writing on Indigenous resurgence movements and Indigenous-settler relations on Turtle Island.

At Trent, I was immediately introduced to artists, community organizers, students, Elders, and academics—Indigenous and settler—who were dreaming and making decolonial futures. Ziysah, in their 30s when we met, was one of my first friends and collaborators in this community. Like me, Ziysah is a queer parent, community organizer, and settler of Ashkenazi Jewish descent. In 2013, they offered me their understanding that social justice requires a decolonial approach, and that the work of decolonization would require me to understand my own ancestry. I soon learned that this meant embarking on the kind of deep self-reflection Jean modelled, including understanding my own complicity in Canada's "settler problem." This approach would become integral to my research, teaching, and community work.

"We settlers are the real issue," Jean would say, calling out her British colonial mindset. She wept for the harm caused by her own way of thinking. She said that we need to listen more, talk less. I knew that listening to Jean, alone, was not going to result in the rematriation of stolen land or the healing of wounds. But, as my wise colleague and chosen kin, Algonquin-kwe Jenn Cole, recently reminded me: this was the work I most "belonged to."

Jean and I were not only sharing quiet cups of tea. We were also getting to know each other within our wider community through grassroots events and initiatives. In addition, Jean actively participated in Aging Activisms, the intergenerational research program and collective I was just beginning to build at that time.

Working with a talented team of research assistants and community facilitators, my goal with Aging Activisms was two-fold: to build intergenerational activist community; and to share and record diverse activist stories, centering those most often omitted from social change scholarship and archival records, such as women, elders, youth, queer and trans people, Indigenous and racialized people, and people with disabilities. I was fortunate in this work to receive support from Trent University and the Canada Research Chairs program from 2013 to 2024. I was also fortunate to receive widespread community support.

In our first symposium, my research team called together activists of varied ages and backgrounds, asking what this community might want or need from an intergenerational research project. Jean was integral to this event, as was Shirley. Over the next eight years, we then facilitated nine intergenerational storytelling research workshops, collaborated on numerous research endeavours, built a community archive of local activist stories, created short films and art installations, hosted a multi-year lecture series, and presented at panels and conferences (see page 90 for links to some of our work).

In November of 2023, we mounted an interactive installation at the Peterborough Public Library as a culminating project of Aging Activisms. The central image of the display was the photo of Jean and Shirley at the start of this book. One month shy of her 101st birthday, Jean was finally beginning to slow down. She nonetheless made the considerable effort to attend the community dinner celebrating the installation. Jean whispered to me that this was likely to be her final community event.

Mehrangiz Monsef, Jean, May, and Ziysah at the Aging Activisms culminating event, Peterborough Public Library, 2023.

### Jean's Involvement in Aging Activisms

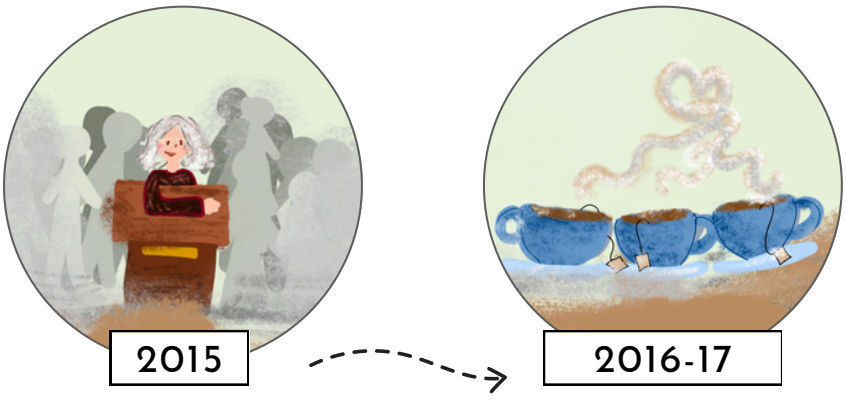
2015: Jean attended our inaugural symposium.

2015: May interviewed Jean as part of a collaboration with the Trent Centre for Aging and Society.

2015: Jean was a guest on Aging Radically, a Trent Radio show hosted by Aging Activisms research assistants Maddy McNabb and Melissa Baldwin.

2016-17: Jean, May, and Emma undertook an extensive life history and archiving project.

2016: Jean participated in an intergenerational storytelling workshop.



2018: Jean reviewed Emma's thesis and attended their defense.

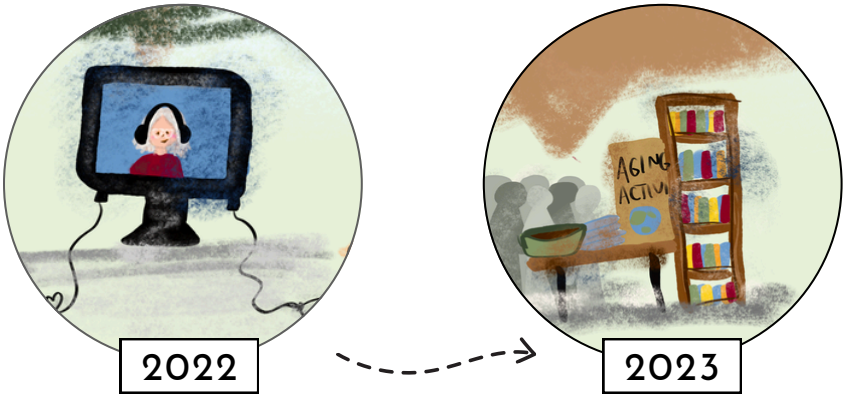
2018: Jean contributed to our Aging Activisms book, and attended the community book launch.

2022: Jean participated in our Zoom focus groups on imagining futures.

2023: Jean recorded a message for youth participants in our Youth Stories workshop.

2023: Jean attended the Aging Activisms library installation and community dinner.

**See Page 90 for a link to Alex Hodson's illustration of Jean's journey with Aging Activisms, with excerpts below.**



Aging Activisms brought together hundreds of social changers of all ages. It is hard for me to disentangle my friendship with Jean from the many ways she participated in this larger project. She attended so many of our workshops and events, while continuing to invite me for tea in between, always offering guidance as I navigated community-building as a visitor on colonized land.

Ongoing and engaged relationship-building was a core part of our research methodology. We made space for slow trust-building as we invited participants and partners into our research. This often involved visiting. I understood this approach as resistance to time-pressured, capitalist, colonial ways of extracting people's knowledge. My visits with Jean and many others often included offering rides to appointments, assisting with malfunctioning computers, and holding spacious debriefs of community events. I recall Ziysah once troubleshooting a problem with Jean's vacuum cleaner on a visit to sign a consent form. Though it was often at odds with institutional structures and expectations, this relational practice was indeed the work we belonged to.

## Archiving

One summer morning in 2016, Jean called, sounding distressed, and invited me over for tea. When I arrived, I found every surface of her usually tidy apartment covered in files and papers. She explained that it was time; at 93, she was preparing to move into assisted living so that she would no longer need to worry about cooking or shopping. Her issue was her "stuff." She felt trapped by her own meticulous record-keeping and lifelong writing.

Her apartment was filled with the records of her life, dating back to the 1940s and before, most of it detailing her work with First Peoples. This invitation for tea was a plea for help. She was caught between the need to empty her apartment and the fear of discarding anything that might be of use to others.

I am not an archivist, and the task she was setting out was well beyond my plan for Aging Activisms. But I understood the urgency of holding tight to what our elders leave for us, and I wanted to help Jean. We began a series of conversations to plan out our work together. With Jean's permission, I invited graduate student, Emma, to assist in our process. A queer, white settler in their 20s at the time, Emma was in search of a project that would allow them to explore questions around settler consciousness and decolonization. I knew Emma belonged to this work too and would benefit immensely from sitting with Jean.

As we embarked on the work of sorting, cataloguing, and repatriating the materials, it was clear that this downsizing was deeply emotional for Jean. She did not want all she had learned through her treasured relationships with First Peoples to be lost. And so, I asked Jean whether we could record some of her life history as she "toured" us through her personal archives and whether Emma could draw on these interviews in their MA thesis. A publicly available thesis would ensure that Jean's story be accessible to future generations. I also assured Jean that I would hold on to our work together and return to write about it when time and space opened for me to do so. Jean agreed with all of this, happily. She often told me how validated she felt by our deep listening and interest in her life story.

We had about six months to carry out this work before Jean's move to St. John's Retirement Home in 2017. Jean, Emma, and I spent many afternoons together. I led four lengthy life history interviews and six even more lengthy conversations about the contents of Jean's archives.

Guiding Jean's decade-by-decade account of her life, our questions returned often to trying to understand her evolving activism: What drew her into activist work and specifically into her work with First Peoples? How did this change for her over time? How did she sustain herself throughout decades of this journey? What ideas, messages, and wisdom did she want to offer to future generations? We also asked questions about her changing mindset as a settler on colonized land, her views on reconciliation, and her hopes for the future. Toward the end of our intensive work together, Emma led one additional interview with follow-up questions related to their thesis. Throughout this time, there were also many visits that we did not record and many email exchanges.

Meanwhile, we were hard at work organizing Jean's files. Together, Jean and I arranged for the Anglican Church of Canada to acquire much of Jean's original collection, and for other materials to be returned to various organizations and individuals. However, Jean also wanted to ensure that my students and I could easily access her files in the future, and so we agreed to keep copies for our later writing. In the winter and spring of 2017, a wider team of Aging Activisms research assistants became involved in the mammoth project of photocopying files and transcribing interviews. The intergenerational web of connections grew, as Mehrangiz Monsef, Frank Nasca, Melissa Baldwin,

Melissa Hunt, Heidi Burns, and Abi Myerscoff, all in their 20s and 30s at the time, came to belong to this project as well, each in their own ways. In 2018, Emma defended their brilliant thesis, titled *"I will not use the word reconciliation"—Exploring Settler (Un)Certainty, Indigenous Refusal, and Decolonization through a Life History Project with Jean Koning* (see page 91 for a link to this work). Jean was thrilled!

## The Final Years

After Jean moved, we resumed our more leisurely visits. Jean also continued to participate in Aging Activisms research and to show up in community when she had the energy.

In the final years of her life, I did not see Jean as often as I would have liked to. In an era of COVID-19 precautions, I recall a few chilly outdoor visits, many phone calls, and her 100th birthday party on Zoom. I was undergoing breast cancer treatment, parenting, and caring for my parents, both of whom died within a year of Jean, and so our quiet teas in her apartment became impossible.

I took comfort knowing that Ziysah had begun to visit regularly, listening carefully to what Jean wanted to leave behind for future generations—I am grateful that their end-of-life visits inspired this collaborative project. Jean held so many of us through a world on fire, under lockdown, at war, mired in grief, and still full of possibility. In her very last days, I had the chance to thank Jean for all she had offered me, as I sat bedside in the hospital, holding her hand.

## Complexities of Visiting: Grief, Consent, and the Writing of this Book

Visiting is deeply meaningful work, but, as a research process, it is not straightforward. Coming into writing about visiting Jean now, when she is not here in body, reminds me of the complex emotional and ethical dimensions of this work.

From my earliest conversations with Jean, she was preparing to die. Jean anticipated missing her loved ones, worried about her children and grandchildren, and tried to reconcile ongoing tensions in her relationships. She felt grief for people she had lost along the way, for the people she would soon lose, and for the world. In some ways, I was helping her prepare for the end: listening deeply while she shared her stories for posterity; making sure her things made it to where they needed to be.

There was grief for me too. The anticipatory grief of growing to care for someone in the final chapter of life is perhaps inevitable when you begin to visit someone in their 90s. But there was unanticipated grief as well: visiting Jean filled a hole in my own life, calling up my longing for my own grandmother, one of my favourite people in the world, who had died when I was very young. As I listened to Jean, I often imagined what it would be like to hear such intimate stories from my own family members. Emma's thesis and Ziysah's poetry both refer to similar experiences of grief (see page 90-91). I wonder how grief shapes our research, our archiving, our writing? When we extend our research practice into the radical relational work of visiting, is grief inevitable?

"I wonder how grief shapes our research, our archiving, our writing? When we extend our research practice into the radical relational work of visiting, is grief inevitable?"
- May Chazan, 2025

I have also grappled with ethical deliberations that arise in this visiting practice. Which parts of our work become our "data?" How do we know what to include and exclude? How do we write about Jean now that she has left this realm?

Jean's consent for the recordings used in this book was express and ongoing; in fact, she would often insist I record something she wanted to say, even when we were just out for a casual lunch. Many times, I explained that, as a professor funded by academic research bodies, I had to follow certain protocols, specifically that the processes surrounding interviews I intended to later cite in my writing had to be approved in advance through an ethics review board. Jean understood. Still, she would sometimes insist I record her, saying that she trusted me to share what needed to be shared, and to do so with accuracy and thoughtfulness.

In 2022, Ziysah took on their own personal project that likewise involved visiting and recording Jean's wisdom. Jean offered this same level of trust and consent to Ziysah, both orally and in writing, even communicating this consent to her children in writing, as she looked ahead to the possible use of these recordings after her death. While Ziysah's project was not a part of Aging Activisms or affiliated with the university, it was intimately connected to our decade-long story sharing process with Jean.

When Ziysah and I decided to collaborate on this project —a project that would not have happened at this time if not for Ziysah's impetus to assist with grant-writing—I was faced with difficult deliberations. How do we honour the knowledge and wisdom Jean entrusted to us and wanted to share, while also respecting the ethics protocols governing my work? This deliberation, I have come to understand, is perhaps the most complicated part of engaging in visiting as methodology. To be clear, I have never considered standard research methods involving one-off interviews particularly ethical: these tend to extract knowledge without context, relationships, or reciprocity, despite the formal consent process. Visiting, on the other hand, centres relationship; requires ongoing consent and explicit invitation; is based on trust and care; and resists capitalist extractive processes. Still, how do we honour knowledge shared over a long, care-filled timeline, from within and outside of an academic institution, as people who care deeply about ethics protocols?

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"I have never considered standard research methods involving one-off interviews particularly ethical: these tend to extract knowledge without context, relationships, or reciprocity, despite the formal consent process. Visiting, on the other hand, centres relationship; requires ongoing consent and explicit invitation; is based on trust and care; and resists capitalist extractive processes."
- May Chazan, 2025

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While I don't have clear answers, I do want to outline the decisions made in this project.

*On citing Jean directly:* The most detailed citations of Jean sharing her life story, which appear in the section called "In Jean's Words," are drawn from the interviews I carried out with Emma in 2016 and 2017. This work was approved by Trent's ethics board and completed while Jean was able to review all of the transcripts.

The selected stories are carefully curated from a much larger body of material in an attempt to deliver Jean's core messages to future generations. Ziysah supported the selection and editing process, translating the dialogue into written stories that hold the integrity of our conversations, and adding sub-titles for readability. I then grouped these stories into five chapters, loosely based on the different stages/places of Jean's life.

In addition to these stories, we include several clearly-labelled quotations from Ziysah's personal recordings. Where we include citations from Jean recorded outside of institutional ethics protocols, we focus on personal exchanges or ideas that she had also shared publicly elsewhere: for example, in her blogs, public writing, and/or other interviews that were part of our research.

*On personal reflection and paraphrasing*: In trying to honour knowledge Jean shared outside of Aging Activisms research while still respecting institutional protocols, I have invited personal reflection into the project. Ziysah, Emma, and I all offer reflections on visiting Jean, sometimes drawing in stories or quotations as we do. This aligns well with the project's thematic goal of exploring the practice of visiting and meets academic ethics guidelines.

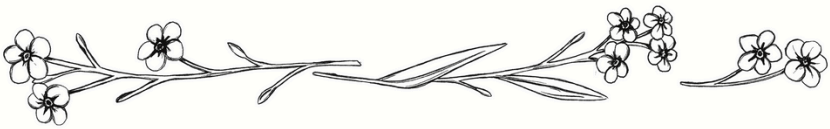
Drawing on critical and feminist approaches to oral history, I have chosen to leave in my own voice in certain

places within Jean's stories, as a way of reflecting the relational nature of the knowledge shared. Where pertinent, I begin Jean's stories with my own research question in italics. At the start of each section of Jean's life history, I offer short context pieces in my own voice, paraphrasing some of what I heard Jean share about that period of her life. I hope these choices reveal some of the context in which Jean offered her stories, while also reflecting my own active listening and learning.

*On photos, art, and other materials:* The photos throughout the book come from Jean's files, Aging Activisms, and Ziysah's files; all are shared with permission. I am grateful to Jean for encouraging me to keep copies of her archives, as I have also dipped into these to add visual interest throughout. I credit Jillian for selecting and placing the visual materials; I am grateful to Jillian and Alex for their artistic contributions.

*On the book's focus*: This project focuses on Jean's more public work, particularly her reflections on walking with First Peoples, learning to listen, and settler responsibility. It has been difficult to narrow down what to share, and the most glaring omission may be Jean's great love and commitment to her family and friends, whom she spoke about extensively. I felt that the most sensitive approach was to highlight Jean's public and political reflections, particularly as Jean is no longer with us to review the work. Personal names are omitted, with the exceptions of Jean's late husband, Tony, their children, public figures, and the names of Aging Activisms participants.

I acknowledge that this small project does not capture a fraction of all it could have—particularly if Jean had written it herself! I also acknowledge the rich web of relationships that held, taught, and brought Jean to the moment in which she was able to share her stories with me and my research team. I offer deep thanks to all those close to Jean, as I know you are a part of the wisdom she is offering here to future generations.



# ALL THE WAY TO THE END

Ziysah von Bieberstein

"You know, I always felt I had a book in me, I just never had the chance to write it," Jean mused over the phone one day when COVID protocols kept us apart. A fire was instantly lit inside me. When your hundred-year-old friend makes a wish, you're ready to drop everything to help make it come true.

I met Jean almost twenty years ago when working on a community project supporting people without housing. When I found out about her career of journalism and solidarity with First Peoples, I asked if I could take her out for tea. I had recently graduated from Trent, and I had no idea where to go next in life. The one thing I knew was that I wanted to take my lead from First Peoples. She gave me some great advice at that first visit, and also invited me join the Kawartha Truth and Reconciliation Support Group as their Jewish representative.

Over the years, I got to know Jean through her work at the KTRSG, her steady flow of informative emails, and an occasional visit. As time went on, Jean narrowed down her commitments, reduced her outings, and even slowed down on email. I went to visit shortly after her 100th birthday and found her apartment chock full of flowers, plants, chocolates, and heartfelt greeting cards. By the end of that visit, we had decided to try making our visits more regular. And so, for the last year of Jean's long life, I had the privilege of visiting with her almost every week.

> "You and I can talk and we hear each other because we know where we come from. We're kindred spirits. We'll get further thoughts and that will allow you to move forward in some way. If it's mean to be, ways will bubble up. Not only between you and me but between you and the other people you talk to and me and the other people I talk to. It guides us toward how we are to move forward to create for the greater good, whatever that is."
>
> - Jean Koning, 2021
>
> *from Ziysah's audio files*

As Jean's mobility decreased, we moved from meeting out at a café to meeting at the retirement home. She would make the tea and fret about not having more to offer. At 100, Jean began to finally feel her age. She began greeting me in her pajamas. And soon after that, she would simply leave the door unlocked so I could come right in and join her at her bedside.

Then came hospital visits—a brand new experience for Jean who had somehow avoided being a hospital patient

her entire life. When she spent two nights on a gurney in a hallway at the ER, I sat next to her and held her hand, singing to her over the beeping machines and sirens.

I wanted to support Jean to create the book she had dreamed of. However, Jean deferred to me. I wanted to follow her vision, and she wanted to follow mine. So instead of deciding anything about the book, we came up with a process: every week, I would visit and bring along my voice recorder. Instead of trying to tell her life story from beginning to end, Jean would share whatever was on her mind in that moment.

Sometimes, it was memories of childhood; other times it was her feelings about what was in the news that day. Usually, it was both! We also started a tradition of recording a little video at the end of every visit, where Jean would share the main message she wanted to convey from our visit. She often mused about sharing them on social media, but was rightfully skeptical about TikTok. I'm grateful that they are now up on the Aging Activisms website so that I am not the only one who gets to enjoy these gems.

I was delighted to learn that May had her own desire to share her stories and materials from Jean. It's been a blessing to spend all this bonus time with Jean, pouring over the audio recordings, video, articles, and transcripts. And it's been an unexpected treat to be able to process the complex grief and gifts of this work with May as we considered the art and ethics of visiting, and the wider web of intergenerational relationships surrounding Jean. I remain curious about what book Jean would have written herself, but I know and trust she'd feel proud to see this tribute.

And to see that her message of "We must learn to listen to First Peoples" is continuing to reverberate.

My visits with Jean included so much more than the recordings reveal. I would help to get her dehumidifier working, or accept a mission to shop for a new nightie (no synthetic materials!) Jean would calm my nerves before a big performance by speaking to me of the prophetic voice, or by telling me, "It will be good because you are good. And we all love you." Jean told me about how hearing my spoken word led her to spontaneously work rhymes into her nighttime prayers. She was deeply committed to learning how to use gender neutral pronouns, often pausing to ensure she got it right. She remained curious and compassionate all the way to the end.

Speaking of the end, the topic of aging and dying was ever-present. Jean was candid about her at times harrowing and at other times hilarious adventures in staying alive past 100. It was an honour to witness Jean's conscious attempt to let go of the level of discipline and autonomy she had relied upon for so long, and to accept the transition that was coming.

> "I'll just need listening to. Your greatest gift to me is simply being able to listen and feed back to me what I think I'm saying to give it relevance and authority in some way. That I'm not just an old crone who is sounding off. I can say to you every now and then, 'Am I making any sense?' And if you say yes, that's all the affirmation I need."
>
> - Jean Koning, 2023
>
> *from Ziysah's audio files*

In February, 2023, Jean told me about her grandfather: “I can remember him sitting on his bed, telling us stories about being in the army in Crimean War time. He used to sing this old solider song. Old soldiers never die, never die, never die. Old soldiers never die, they only fade away.”

Jean cried as she sang, and then said: “So, that’s what I’m doing. I’m not dying, I’m fading away.”

A few months later, in June, she was flustered trying to keep up with her email, and explained to me: “I tell myself: Jean, the world’s going to continue doing its thing whether you’re here or not. So just relax. If I miss out on something, too bad!”

And then, in July: “Something’s happening in my life and I don’t know what but I don’t really care, frankly. I can just lie here and let it happen.”

Throughout, we would check in. “Do you want to keep doing this?” she’d ask me. “Yes!” I’d answer, “Do you?” “Yes!” Jean would say, “For as long as I last!” And so we did...

The last time I saw Jean was about an hour before she passed. I sang to her, kissed her hand, and then drove up to Trent for the Indigenous Women’s Symposium. Jean’s daughter, Val, was with her to say goodbye, prayers were recited, and the snow began to fall in earnest. As Jean left her body, Innu astrophysicist Dr. Laurie Rousseau-Nepton shared teachings about how stars influence each other over generations. “We come to the stars and we return to the stars,” she told us, as we felt Jean begin her journey skyward.

# IN JEAN'S WORDS

"There's something about the slowing down … having a relationship, sitting and drinking together, drinking kind of medicinal drinks that I think's important... I'm really interested [in] thinking about tea as a form of *mishkiki wabo*, or medicine liquid, as a way that can bring us together."

- Dylan Miner, discussing his exhibit,
"The Elders Say We Don't Visit Anymore"

## From May

The following chapters are primarily excerpts – in Jean's own words – from the life history interviews I carried out with Jean in 2016 and 2017, in collaboration with Emma. These were very intimate conversations, full of laughter and tears, over many cups of tea. I guided Jean through an exploration of her own life, decade by decade, asking her to reflect on how she came to be an activist, how she came to "walk with First Peoples" for so many decades, what sustained her in this work, and what she hoped to impart to future generations.

Here are some of the questions we asked Jean:

1. Would you be able to reflect back to the moment in your life when you first became politicized? Can you remember what your earliest thoughts were—when did you first perceive the situation as unjust?

2. Were there any moments or events that you feel impacted how you thought about First Peoples? How you thought about the roles of settlers?

3. Do you want to reflect on the word "reconciliation"? Can you remember when this concept first became part of your consciousness? Can you reflect on how you have come to think about this word differently over time? What does reconciliation mean to you now? What would it mean in practice? What would be required?

4. In your blogs and recent writings, you write about "learning to listen" and about the idea that "we are all Treaty people." After nearly 60 years of "walking with First Peoples," are there a few key lessons you've learned that you think will be important for settlers to understand?

5. You have kept such detailed records and collections of your work and your writings. What drew you to do this? What are your hopes for these?

6. If you have to name your one most significant contribution, do you have a sense of what it would be?

This section is divided into five chapters, each featuring short stories told in Jean's own words. The opening of each chapter and the questions throughout are in my own voice. This section also includes pop-out reflections from Ziysah and myself.

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"I grew up in a home where I knew who I was. It wasn't much, but I knew who I was. I was born of a British mother and Scottish immigrant father. I was a member of the clan Mingus from Kirkney Scotland. I was only just a clansperson, but I knew myself as Jean Menzies, a member of the Mingus clan."

- Jean Koning, 2016

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# BEGINNING

***Jean was born in 1922 and spent her early childhood in Windsor, Amherstburg, and Stratford, Ontario.*** *Her parents were working-class British immigrants who came to Canada in 1921, a year before she was born. In my early interviews with Jean, I asked her about the roots of her activism. As Emma and I listened to her consider her earliest awareness of societal injustice, we heard most clearly about the intergenerational influences of the family's women.*

*Reflecting on the role of her family, Jean also offered this: "The one thing that really informed my whole life was the fact that my mother and father, both each in their own way, always gave me unconditional love... You have to grow up knowing that somewhere there's somebody who believes that you are worth loving. It has to do with worthiness." She would later come back to her sense of belonging and self-worth as a form of privilege, in contrast to the family and community fracture that so many Indigenous people experienced at the hands of the colonial state.*

*In 1942, Jean married Tony, a Dutch soldier stationed in Stratford during the Second World War. After the war, the couple spent a year in Holland, where Jean experienced living in a different culture for the first time. She also witnessed hunger, deprivation, and societal trauma. As Jean shared with us her meticulous collection of war letters, she described this time of her life as formative to the work she would eventually undertake.*

*- May*

From Jean's files, a photo Jean labelled as: "Jean Menzies Koning, 9 years old (1931)."

## “I knew who I was”

Jean: I grew up in a home where I knew who I was. It wasn't much, but I knew who I was. I was born of a British mother and Scottish immigrant father. I was a member of the clan Mingus from Kirkney, Scotland. I was only just a clansperson, but I knew myself as Jean Menzies, a member of the Mingus clan. I visited where my father grew up in later years and was able to meet his family and see the house where he was born and all this kind of stuff. So I knew who I was and I knew where I came from and I had a sense of pride. There was something around that that made me realize how privileged I am.

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## “A powerful sender”

May: *Are there any particular moments, events, or people that come to mind when you think back to what shaped your values, what might have seeded your early awareness of social injustice?*

Jean: My grandmother, my mother’s mother, had a very strong influence on my mother. My grandmother was a wife and mother, but she was also trained as what we called a “practical nurse.” That means if a local doctor had a woman who was going into labour and they needed somebody to look after her, my grandmother would have been called to go.

I can remember my grandmother telling us about this one woman who was giving birth to her tenth child. And so, the baby would have been delivered, and my grandmother was looking after the woman, and before the end of that day, her husband was at the door, saying “I’m coming to sleep with my wife.”

And my grandmother said, “No you’re not. She just had a child. You’re not going to do that!” And so, she sent him away. The woman told my grandmother that was the first time in all the children that she had born that she had not received her husband into her bed the same night that the child was born. So a little bit of a sense of justice there!

I always remembered my grandmother telling me that. And I guess I must have been old enough to know just how unfair women’s lives were. My grandmother was a big influence on me. She was also a powerful sender, and I imagine that is where I got it from.

We lived in Sandwich - which was a part of Windsor—it’s called Windsor now, it used to be called the Border Cities at the time of the Depression, 1929-1930. And those were very difficult days. My mother always said she was so thankful my father was able to have a job through the Depression. But they knew a lot of people who had children who had no job, no money coming in. And my mom and dad were very good about, you know, sharing. That sense that whatever you have, be it ever so humble, you share it with the people who come to your door or whom you invite in.

And that reminds me, I have not offered you two tea yet this morning. I am just finishing my coffee...

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## “Saying yes”

Jean: By 1939, when the war started for Canada, I was about 16. I was very much aware of the news. By the next year, when I was 18, we were getting word of boys I had gone to

school with who were killed in the war or coming back wounded. That's when I met Tony, my husband, on a blind date. The Royal Netherlands Army Recruiting Depot came to Stratford and we read about it in the paper. January 1941: the Dutch soldiers were coming. I can remember walking down the street with my friends and saying, "Well, I don't really know much about Holland and their language, but I do know 'yah' means 'yes'." Well, I think it was about a year later, I was saying "Yes!" and getting married.

So then the war took on a much more intimate awareness for me. On May 10th, 1940, the Nazis parachuted into Rotterdam and obliterated the downtown of Rotterdam and occupied the country. They were occupied until May the 5th, 1945.

In the meantime, I had married Tony in August of 1942. We lived together for a year. In September, 1943, his unit was called back to England. By that time, there were maybe fifteen Canadian women, mostly in Stratford and surrounding areas, who had married these guys, and were kind of a community of Dutch war brides.

Anyway, it was late October, 1945 that I was able to get on a ship and get to Holland, to Amsterdam. When we married, I lost my Canadian citizenship. If you married outside your British citizenship at that time, you lost it. So I became a Dutch citizen when I married Tony. When I went to Holland, I was among thousands of people who were coming back. The others were returning to Holland from all over the world, but I had never been there before.

The winter before in Holland had been what they called the "Hunger Winter." People died from starvation. Tony's mother and father and sister had survived simply because

they had met a farm family from up north and they were able to go there on their bicycles—the only kind of transportation. They had no more rubber tires, so they cycled on wooden rimmed tires. Took them a couple of weeks to get up there. After the war was ended, they came back to their home.

It was the kind of culture shock that, in some ways, preceded the culture shock that I experienced when I went into Wikwemikong. I can't say they were alike in many ways, except that I had reached the understanding that people were different. We were all human, but still had differences, cultural differences. And you know, in those days in Holland, there was so much hurt, and so you didn't talk about things that hurt too much. German soldiers would just come into the neighbourhood and take 12 or 15 young people and shoot them in the town square. And they experienced all that, they saw that. It was not a good time. You can't expect people to be normal after that.

## "I walked across the ocean both ways!"

May: *When you came back to Canada, did you see Canada differently? Did you see your home differently?*

Jean: Oh yes! It was the end of September, and we were on a little tiny ship. It had taken us about 14 days to make that trip from Rotterdam and up to Montreal. My way of crossing the ocean was to be out on the deck, out in the air. If I stayed down underneath, I got seasick. So I walked across the ocean both ways!

But I remember this one morning, coming up on deck. I looked out and there were the trees that would have been

the Gaspé Peninsula area, as we came up the St. Lawrence. I can remember the smell of the sun on the pines. Ah, I thought I never smelled anything so gorgeous. And then when we got home, I looked in the refrigerator and there was a roasted beef in there, with maybe a few slices taken off. A whole roasted beef! I had not seen more than soup bones and sweet bread in the year I was in Holland, in terms of meat. Day after day, we ate vegetables. Potatoes and vegetables. Everything was on coupons and rationed so very much.

If I think about that, it's quite easy for me to understand that intergenerational trauma. You know, you just do not wipe out that kind of trauma in people's lives in one generation. You certainly don't wipe it out in that first generation. And a certain amount of that carries over. That awful feeling of not having control over one's own life—that's what oppression is! And Holland—that's what occupation was! Holland was occupied. It was oppressed. And if anybody should ever understand what occupation, assimilation, colonization is like, it's people who have experienced it first-hand. But not everybody can make the link.

### From Ziysah

It was amazing to hear how detailed Jean's memories were of moments that shifted her consciousness, I was particularly touched by this story she shared while touring me through an old photo album on one of our visits:

The summer after we were married, we went to Wasaga Beach. We took a picture of us in front of the lodge where we stayed, and across the sort of upstairs balcony was a big sign that said Gentiles Only. I really didn't pay any attention one way or another. I was kind of aware of it not being very nice but I accepted the way it was. I left this in my album to show my grandchildren that this was what Canada was like at the time.

About that same time, I was visiting a friend in Stratford, and I said something about a Jewish person that was derogatory that I had picked up in conversation from my mother. And my friend's mother took exception and said, "What's wrong with that?" Her son was going with a Jewish girl. I kind of backed myself out of that and felt badly about it.

It's important to know I've been there, done that. I've gone through the process, and it is a process you have to go through if you are a thinking kind of person. But many people get stuck because they don't think beyond what they see. And they don't think in terms of relationship. It's important to know I've been there, done that. I've gone through the process, and it is a process you have to go through if you are a thinking kind of person.

> But many people get stuck because they don't think beyond what they see. And they don't think in terms of relationship. I feel badly, it was a terrible way for me to be, but it also means that when I am talking to people who are out and out racist and I think: We are all capable of that. We don't have to think of ourselves as better or righteous. If I say I love Jewish people, that just does not cut it. You've got to go through a process from your mind to your heart. (July, 2023)

Perhaps Jean was particularly keen to share this story with me because of my Jewish identity. It was strange to think of my own grandmother's family spending their summers on Georgian Bay not too far from where Jean stood in the photo. I was humbled by Jean's honesty and how she harnessed her memory of her own bias to strengthen her compassion.

Jean continued on to another story:

> Around that same time, I was reading about a terrible famine. Children were dying by the dozen in East Africa.
>
> When I talked to my mother about it, she said, "Well, our children are alright here."
>
> I said, "Yeah, but those kids are not."

And she said, "You don't mean to tell me you would care about those children! You need to care about your own."

And I said, "Of course I would, they're all children together!"

And so you can see in that time how I was beginning to become affected by the way Canadian society lived and thought and so on, and the way I was beginning to formulate things in my own mind. (July, 2023)

From Jean's files, a photo she labelled as: "Jean and Tony Koning wedding, Stratford ON, Aug 22, 1942."

# BECOMING

***When Jean and Tony returned from Holland, they lived in many different Ontario towns.*** *Their first child, Stephen, was born in 1950 in Stratford; Valerie was born in 1952 in London; and Philip was born in 1956 in Huntsville.*

*The family settled into life in Huntsville for over a decade, and Jean described these years as very happy ones. Tony worked as a bookkeeper and accountant. Jean was the primary caregiver for their three children; she also taught dance classes in the evenings, became a square dance caller, volunteered, and co-founded an organization for people with disabilities. When Tony began studying to become an Anglican priest, Jean supported the family by working with the Muskoka Children's Aid Society (MCAS).*

*I asked Jean about what drew her into her volunteering and working with vulnerable children during this time, and whether she drew a connection between this early advocacy work and her later solidarity with First Peoples. She reflected that she always felt called to support children and families. She also credited MCAS training she received, which she considered unusual for its time: unlike the colonial practices she would later encounter in youth protection services in Manitowaning, this training prioritized keeping families intact.*

*- May*


From Jean's files, a photo of Jean and Tony at the Huntsville Hospital Ladies Auxiliary Spring Dance, 1964.

## "That sense of what's fair"

Jean: So we moved to Huntsville. And those years, 1955 to 1966, eleven years, were the longest I ever lived in one place until now. We were an average post-war immigrant family, very much involved with the Anglican Church, bringing our children up in a small town. But as a wife who didn't work, I was always engaged in what would now be referred to as volunteer work, I guess, but I never thought of it as that. I just thought of it as being active, a part of things.

I became involved through friends that we knew who had a disabled child at that time, and I was a founding member of the Huntsville and District Association for the Mentally Retarded. We wouldn't use that terminology now, but that's what it was then. What we did is we set up a place where they could come for schooling or drop-in or whatever. What really amazed me was how mothers and fathers were bringing their children or young adults who had never really seen the light of day. You could be very isolated in Muskoka in the country in those days, as you could anywhere in rural Canada, I expect.

It was astounding to realize how those children had been treated, you know? It felt so unjust! I very much responded to that sense of what's fair. I was such a big mouth and, you know, always into everything, always in some sort of position of leadership. I talked louder than anybody else, perhaps. I suppose that being involved with supporting people with developmental disabilities brought to light that sense of needing to watch for people who weren't being properly taken care of.

## "No way was I cut out to be a minster's wife"

Jean: Over this time, Tony became very much involved in church life. He came home to me one day and he said, "What would you think if I became a Dominee?" That was the word he used, which is the Dutch word for Minister. I said, "Well, I thought you were always so happy to be an accountant." And he said, "No, to tell you the truth, I really always wanted to be a Dominee."

Very quickly, I did some mental calculations. I thought that if I told him I did not want him to, then for the rest of our lives, he could say, "Well, you didn't want me to." I was quite happy with him being an accountant and I was happy living in Huntsville. By this time, I was also into the Rotary Review. I choreographed with another young woman, danced on the stage and all. We had a marvellous time, I was thoroughly enjoying myself in Huntsville.

So anyway, I said, "You better do whatever you think."

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**"It was my whole approach, you know? Talk about rebellious!"**

**- Jean Koning, 2016**

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No way was I cut out to be a minister's wife. A couple of times, we had to go to see this dear sweet archdeacon's wife. There were about thirty of us young women whose husbands were going to be ordained, and she was trying to tell us what to expect, you know, how to behave, how we dressed. If I didn't say it at that meeting, I certainly said it on the way home. I said, "Well, I don't give a damn what the parish says. I'm going to dress the way I want to." It was my whole approach, you know? Talk about rebellious!

Another time, I can remember, after Tony was ordained, Tony was talking with another priest, who said, "Well, I don't see how you can have a woman priest. I mean, if she has to get moved from one parish to another, she can't do that because of her husband's job."

So that was how the thinking had to change. Of course, today we have bishops and archbishops in the Anglican Church who are women. I mean, the whole structure has totally changed. But even so, there are men who will not accept those women priests of any level of ordination.

## "They just missed the boat completely!"

Jean: While Tony was studying, I worked for 16 months with the Muskoka Children's Aid Society. We knew the local director and chief supervisor of the staff very well; Tony had been working with them as an accountant. Tony had to go down to Toronto to spend a year in Wycliffe College, which cut down our income. They said: "Well, Jean, we're going to lose one of our staff, so would you come and work for us as a childcare worker?" This appealed to me because I really liked working with children. I've always really loved children and felt very much at home and at ease with them. So anyway, that's what I did.

While I worked there, I got all sorts of what I call "in-service training" as a childcare worker. I was very lucky that extremely good people trained me in children's aid work. They came from England, and they were way ahead of what was happening here in Canada in terms of protection work and preventive work. I was taught that you never took a child away from a family unless you kept

them in touch. That was the background that I took into my work for the Manitoulin Children's Aid.

I did not have academic training and education in social work, and I kind of think it was a good thing. Because even now when I look at the problems that the Children's Aid, anywhere across the country, has with First Peoples, their first problem is that they are academically trained to do social work. If that doesn't include understanding how families operate within different cultures, then they're totally lost! They just missed the boat completely with the First Peoples! And that's what I saw happening at the grassroots when I later went to work for the Children's Aid Manitoulin.

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> "I was taught that you never took a child away from a family unless you kept them in touch. That was the background that I took into my work for the Manitoulin Children's Aid."
>
> - Jean Koning, 2016

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# UNVEILING

***In 1966, Tony was ordained by the Anglican Church and the family moved to Manitoulin Island, where Tony worked for the Algoma Diocese.*** *Jean initially worked for the CAS in Manitowaning, which is where she began to witness the workings of colonial power and violence on First Peoples. Jean resigned from the Manitowaning CAS after one year, both because she was needed at home and because she could not support the permanent removal of children from their families and communities. Despite attempts to report these practices to authorities, Jean described feeling helpless to change them. She later she came to understand that she was unknowingly implicated in the currents of the devastating Sixties Scoop.*

*In 1969, Jean co-founded the organization Voices of Manitoulin Women with Josephine Manitowabi, which supported Indigenous women's advocacy for their children's access to education. She also wrote for the Anglican Church newsletter, often about what she was coming to understand as the harmful impacts of the Indian Act.*

*In 1970, Jean's daughter, Val, who was by then a teenager, survived a life-threatening car crash. The accident, caused by an inebriated driver from a nearby reserve, left Val with a permanent brain injury. Jean tenderly told me about Val's accident, describing this time as the hardest of her life. She also thoughtfully reflected on the tensions within her family, as she persisted in writing and speaking out about colonial*

*injustices, even as she supported Val through rehabilitation. Jean understood that alcohol addiction was a direct result of colonial violence.*

*Through this time, she developed deep friendships with members of the Anishinaabe community in nearby Wikwemikong—some of these relationships became life-long, even extending through the generations. Jean opened herself up to learning the Ojibwe language and to witnessing the beauty beneath the colonial harm.*

*- May*

From Jean's files, a photo of Jean and Tony during their Manitoulin Island years. Jean's label: "Note the long gloves—gold in colour. Is that my bra strap showing? Or maybe slip? Ugh! Between 1966-1977?"

## "I saw power at work"

May: *In those early adult years—married, becoming a mother, working for the first time—was there a moment you would describe in a turning point for you?*

Jean: Yes! So, Tony gets ordained, and we're sent to Manitowaning. When I look back now, I realize that was a huge turning point. It took me into a totally different world.

The first thing was coming face to face with First Peoples, geographically, because we lived across Manitowaning Bay from Wikwemikong, which was this really large reserve. The move also took me within the workings of the Church. The Diocese of Algoma picked me up, because of my experience with working with children, to be the director of what we called the Junior Girls Guild.

So I became involved within the inner workings of the Anglican Church of Canada. That took me into the corridors of power where I began to see how organizations manage their corporate lives in such a way that they amass a tremendous amount of power. Sometimes not necessarily in money at all, but in influence, their authoritative stance, and so on. I saw power at work.

Because I worked at the grassroots, I also saw the power oppressed people have. I didn't realize it at the time, but if I look back now, I realize that that was how I became a social activist, if you want to put words to it. But it was just the way my life went, it was just the process of my life. I never thought about it in those academic terms.

## "We were human beings together"

May: *Do you want to reflect back to a moment or event when you first became aware of the injustices facing Indigenous communities? When you first became aware of that or politicized around that?*

Jean: Well, it was probably when I was asked to go on staff with the Manitoulin Children's Aid Society in 1966. Within the week, I was in court as an observer. The Ontario Court came over once a month and held their court session in the Band Office or the community centre at Wikwemikong.

The first week I was there, I met up with the probation officer, who said, "You see that woman over there? She has a number of children. You see, she is standing there talking to her mother. Her mother is an alcoholic; she's an alcoholic. She's gonna go back home with her mother and within a month she is gonna be back here." Because, of course, they drink, get into trouble, the police are called, and they end up in court.

I can't imagine now why I did this. I went over and said, "I'm Jean Koning." I said, "I'm wondering if you'd like to come home, I live here in Manitowaning." Her mother was saying no, but this young woman said she would come with me.

So I took her home to the Anglican Rectory in Manitowaning. She didn't say very much. It was a big house; I had a room for her to move into. I had never been in this situation before. I had no idea, you know, just playing it by ear, as it were. She said, "I have no cigarettes." So I asked my son, Phil, to run over to the store. (This was a long time ago, as you can tell.)

Phil went over to the corner store and came back with a pack of cigarettes, which I gave to her. And she started to cry. I thought, "Oh, that's strange." Because my teaching from school and so on had been that Indian People don't cry. I put my arms around her, and I said, "It's gonna be okay, we'll figure something out." But my thought was: she's a woman, and she's got children just like me. When you're hurting, you cry.

It seems silly to say, but all the stereotypes that we got from our schooling just fell away like that. That was my first awareness of the fact that that woman and I, no matter what our backgrounds, we were human beings together. We were female human beings together. You know, I couldn't separate myself from that.

The things that she and I went through over the next four years were so massive, both good and bad. I can tell you of the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of that particular woman. We have a good relationship. I didn't think of it as injustice at the time, I just kept seeing the differences. Her life went that way, my life went this way. It's only now when you ask me something like this that I'm thinking that was the beginning of my understanding that there was an injustice, as I came to know her story.

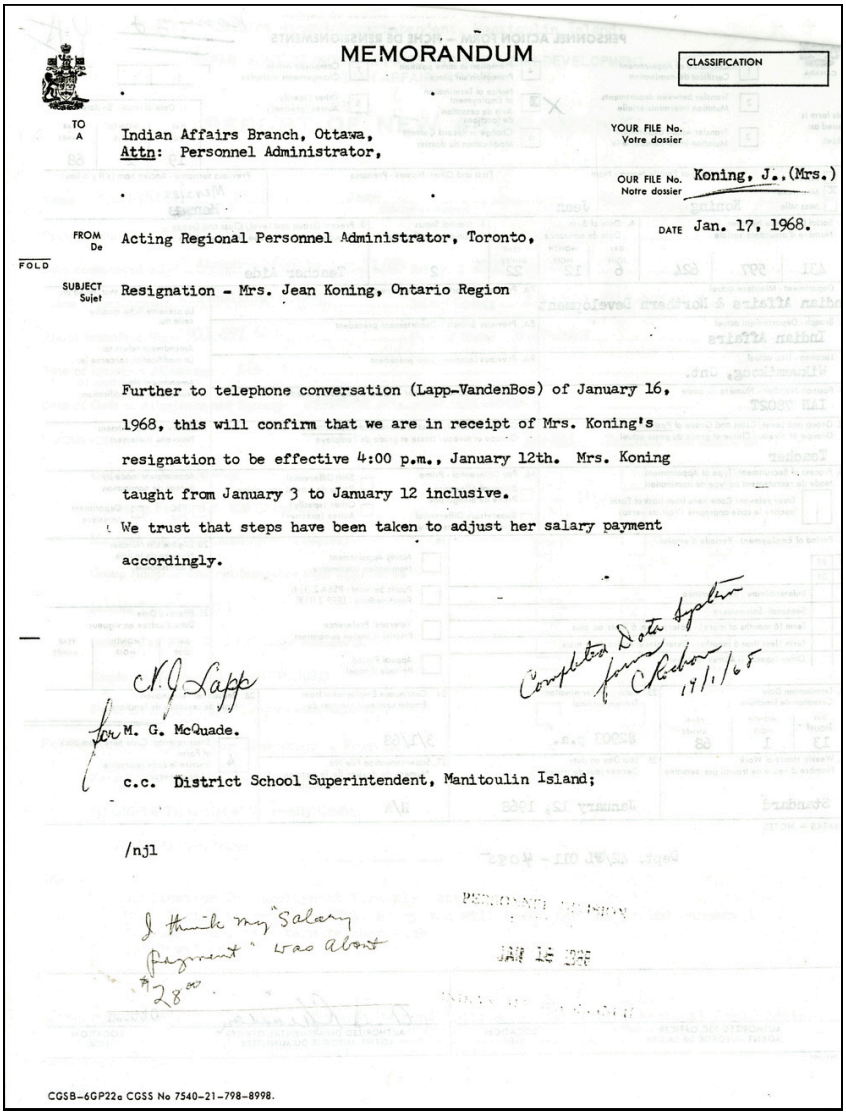
That must have been my first connection with First Peoples that made me understand that we are simply human beings who share exactly the same kind of human feelings and thoughts, no matter what our backgrounds.

## “I couldn’t believe what I was seeing”

Jean: This woman who had directed the Manitoulin Children’s Aid for years, she used to take 10 or more children from one family. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. She saw the parents were not taking care of their children because of alcohol or unemployment or all of those poverty issues. So she would just take them and put them into homes all across Ontario, maybe beyond. Those kids never made contact again with their families. Those are the Sixties Scoop children who have grown up to be in exactly the same kind of positions as the kids who came out of residential schools. This is why you have the intergenerational damage.

I didn’t know anything about the Indian Act and all that legal side of things at the time. I was a woman who had just been asked to work for Children's Aid, which was heavily, heavily invested in working with Indian people on Manitoulin Island. There were five reserves on Manitoulin Island, and Children's Aid covered the care of children in that whole area. And of course, there were children being raised in those homes by parents who had been raised in residential schools, who therefore had been raised in an institution where they had been taken away from their traditional cultural way of raising children.

It took me about one week of working at Children’s Aid to figure out that residential schools were the whole crux of the matter. You need to look after children who were being born to, and therefore in the care of, parents who had come through the residential schools without any knowledge whatsoever of how they lost their traditional knowledge of how to raise children. That’s what was wrong.



MEMORANDUM

CLASSIFICATION

TO / A: Indian Affairs Branch, Ottawa,
Attn: Personnel Administrator,

YOUR FILE No. / Votre dossier

OUR FILE No. / Notre dossier: Koning, J.,(Mrs.)

FROM / De: Acting Regional Personnel Administrator, Toronto,

DATE: Jan. 17, 1968.

FOLD

SUBJECT / Sujet: Resignation - Mrs. Jean Koning, Ontario Region

Further to telephone conversation (Lapp-VandenBos) of January 16, 1968, this will confirm that we are in receipt of Mrs. Koning's resignation to be effective 4:00 p.m., January 12th. Mrs. Koning taught from January 3 to January 12 inclusive.

We trust that steps have been taken to adjust her salary payment accordingly.

N. J. Lapp
for M. G. McQuade.

Completed Date Stamp
17/1/68

c.c. District School Superintendent, Manitoulin Island;

/njl

I think my "Salary Payment" was about $28.00

PERSONNEL DIVISION
JAN 18 1968

CGSB-6GP22a CGSS No 7540-21-798-8998.

From Jean's files, a memorandum to Indian Affairs Ottawa indicating Jean's resignation from teaching at the government school in Wikwemikong, Ontario, in 1968.

I hadn't really thought about residential school before that. And then I went into these homes. The parents would be off drinking, trying to drown their sorrows. That's what was happening, the state was saying, "You can't take care of your kids, therefore we're going to take them away without any consent."

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"There's something happening here that's very wrong. And we have to listen to what the First Peoples have to say."

- Jean Koning, 2017

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I just said, "Look, I've not been trained like that." My training was that you never took a child away from a home without very good reason. And most of the time, the first thing you tried to do was to repair the family, so if you had to take the child into care for a while and put the child in a foster home, then you made arrangements so that you kept the child in touch with the family that they were going to go back to. See what I mean? You didn't destroy the relationship completely. And the whole purpose of taking the child into care was to help the family get back on their feet so that they could take the child back. It was a rehabilitative kind of thing, not this cut-off and that's the end of it. I mean, that's terrible! I refused to do this.

But I had to work within the Children's Aid legislation and I had no power. I was a very, very small voice. I started writing and talking, saying to people, "There's something happening here that's very wrong. And we have to listen to what the First Peoples have to say." There's a part of me that can agonize over the fact that I could be seen as a part

of that Sixties Scoop. I had very little clout there. It was a forgotten part of Ontario as far as government goes. But I did everything I could to try and keep families together.

After I had been working for the Children's Aid for a while, I got so upset by what I saw happening that I refused to report to work. I got in touch with the people down in Toronto in the Ontario government. And I reported to him everything that I was doing. And I know that that's all recorded somewhere in the province of Ontario and in the Department of Indian Affairs.

### From Ziysah

Jean told me several stories from her time in Wikwemikong that were about learning to listen.

> "I remember this guy. This man came to the door. Young, Aboriginal. He and his wife had six or seven children more, maybe. Anyway, he came to the door. And I knew he wanted to talk to me, otherwise he wouldn't have been there. So I invited him in and showed him to come and sit in the living room. And we smoked in those days, so he did so. He sat there, lit a cigarette, and he was sitting smoking, and I'm chatting away, you know, trying to make him feel at home. I'm talking about the weather and so on. And I suddenly realized that I was talking but he would just sit in there. I didn't even know whether he was listening or not, smoking his cigarette.

> And I thought to myself, "OK, Koning, shut your mouth and just listen." So I did that. I'm sitting here. He's sitting on the couch smoking a cigarette. And I just waited. And it was just silence. I didn't say a word. When he was ready, he started to talk. And he told me what the problem was. That was my personal learning: to shut your mouth and just listen, even to the silence. Because silence is important to First People." (August, 2023)

## "I wanted to tell the side nobody wanted to talk about"

Jean: I went to work learning about the Indian Act, learning about the culture, the language. I started writing. I wanted to tell the side nobody wanted to talk about.

With the Voice of Manitoulin Women, I had the good sense to know that if I was going to sit down with First Peoples to find out what the Indian Act was all about, when I came together with those women, it made sense for me to listen to what they wanted to do. It just made sense. Because I knew where I was with all of that, but I didn't know where they were. As I listened, I began to understand that there's another point of view besides the one that I've got, that I was born and raised with and so on.

During that time, I began to send out a Christmas letter every year, detailing what was going on in our family, and I also wrote about what I was seeing and learning in my

work with First Peoples. And I sent it to all kinds of people: all the people I'd square-danced with, all the people in Huntsville, all my family, everywhere. I would get enough responses that kind of indicated, "Well, Indians, who's that?" that I knew I was dealing with racism this high.

All those people that I knew out there, who were close to me, none of them could see or understand what I was seeing. And they weren't paying any attention to me when I tried to say to them, "Look, things are happening here! This is terrible what's happening." They never listened. So, the first thing I learned was that nobody's going to listen to me, nobody really gives a damn. And I think that's why I've been so aggressive and angry.

Sometimes, in those days, what would happen would be that there would be racist columnists who wrote in the paper. And they would be writing about various things that were happening because there were always activities, blockades, arguments, fights, different struggles. And so, these right-wing columnists would write and I would answer. I would send a rebuttal. Occasionally I would write because of something I saw in the news or something.

I suppose I fell into writing because if I couldn't talk to somebody, I had to write it. I wasn't thinking about educating or anything. It's just the way I am. I'm a gabby type! I don't keep it in, I let it all hang out. I'm a very powerful sender and I almost blow people over unless you're strong enough. There's no Mother Teresa about me, I'm just out there like that. And I regret that in some ways. But I decided, that's the way I am! It's just me, I can't help it. I can't be anything else!

# CONFRONTING

***In 1975, after nine years on Manitoulin Island, Tony was offered a job with the Huron Diocese, prompting the family to move to Oldcastle, Ontario.*** *With their children becoming young adults, Jean had more time for her journalism and solidarity work. She continued to draw on her position and contacts to support Indigenous struggles; she worked with organizations bringing Indigenous people and settlers together in meaningful dialogue; she deepened her relationships; and she spoke out against colonial violence.*

*In these conversations, Jean often lamented about what she witnessed from her role in the Church in the 1980s and 1990s. In Oldcastle, Jean began working with Project North and writing for the* Huron Church News, *largely on issues impacting Indigenous Anglicans within the Diocese. When Tony's work took them to Thedford in 1983, Jean was asked to support Indigenous struggles at Ipperwash as an Anglican Church person. When Tony retired and they moved to London in 1986, Jean worked for the Diocese office on communications and continued to support Stony and Kettle Point communities in the Ipperwash land claims.*

*In 1991, Tony suffered a stroke. Jean cared for him at home for four years until he had to move into long-term care, where he passed away in 1999. During those years, Jean continued to work for the Diocese and with First Peoples as much as she could. In 1998, survivors*

*of the Mohawk Institute Residential School filed a class-action lawsuit against the Anglican Church of Canada, the federal government, and the Diocese of Huron. Jean became involved with the apology process. She advocated for the Diocese to accept full responsibility for the Mohawk Institute and to take leadership from Indigenous communities about how to proceed. But the church took a different approach.*

*Jean described these years as a time of growing public recognition of Indigenous resistance, with the Ipperwash and Oka crises, and the years leading to Canada's national apology and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.*

*- May*

Oct 84

by Jean Koning

**Walking tall**



The truck and sign advertise the Walpole Island Band's latest development project.

**Local initiative and development mean independence for the people of Walpole Island.**

The printing on the shiny red half-ton truck parked in the driveway proclaims with a flourish: '**Walpole Island In-**

(14 are Band members), in the production of plastic and die-cast molds for the automotive industry as well as for household

members in 10 years.
What is the secret of the Walpole Island Band's success?
Chief Tooshkenig said he has

From Jean's files, one of many articles she wrote during her time in Huron County. Published in *Living Message: The National Magazine of the Anglican Church of Canada*, October 1984.


From Jean's files, a photo of Jean that she labelled as: "Jean Koning, Ipperwash Inquiry, Forest ON, July 2004." Published in the *London Free Press*.

## “I never started, it just took me over!” E.C. Row Expressway

Jean: One Saturday morning, I got this phone call from a professor of archaeology. The City Council of Windsor was building this E.C. Row Expressway that was to cut right through Windsor, and this professor felt that they had reached a particular land that was a prehistoric burial site. And he said: “People should know about this because you shouldn't be disturbing burial sites.”

I had some contacts with the newspapers, including the *Windsor Star*. So I phoned this reporter at the *Windsor Star* and I said, “Do you realize that the City is going to start constructing over a burial site?” He said, "No, I never heard that." So I told him what this guy said.

Well, all hell broke loose! I went through one of the most hectic, fear-producing weeks I've ever had in my life. All of a sudden, that went public into the paper. Of course, Indian people picked up on it, the Chiefs, the Council picked up on it. The City engineer was mad as hell, as you can imagine. And I was the fall guy with all of that. No way I was asking for that, but I knew enough to know that interfering with burial sites was a real no-no.

I had no idea where that would take me for the next two years. It led to our blockading, holding up that construction for two years. During that time, we discovered things. Like for example, it came to light that pioneer farmers who had settled all across Essex County, when they were ploughing their fields by hand, they would find bones, skulls. They’d take them home and put them on their mantels and that sort of thing. No concept whatsoever.

## “It’s always the women who stand up” Kettle and Stony Point

Jean: There was a place before the Second World War, a reserve called the Kettle and Stony Point. During the war, the community was displaced. They were forced to move from their territory and give it over under the War Measures Act to the Defence Department for training soldiers, with the promise that the land would be returned to them when the war was over.

Well, 50 years later, the war was over, and the land still hadn’t been returned. It became the Ipperwash situation—they still don't have their land back the way they want it. So in those years, we were living in Thedford outside of London, in the mid-80’s. This took a goodly chunk of my passionate energy out of my life, I’ll tell you.

The Anglican priest at the Kettle and Stony Point reserve, who was a dear friend, said to me, “Jean, the Stony Point people are trying to assert their right to the land. As an Anglican woman, would you like to go and sit in with them, to support them?” So that's how I was connected with the first group of Stony Pointers who were fighting for their land.

I used to go with a pen and paper in hand to make notes if I wanted to report on something. But I came to realize that that made me look suspect, so I stopped doing that. But when I came home, I would sit and write about what I had seen because I knew it was a dreadful part of our history that really had to be recorded in some way. I had not yet reached the stage in my development and understanding of how to relate in a good way to First Peoples, so I did not know enough to say, “I have some

writing skills which I could use to help you, but you tell me how you want those used." It just didn't occur to me at that time.

I remember it was the women—it's always the women who stand up—they take their kids, and they stand up, and they say, "We're not putting up with this anymore."

One time, this young man came, and he said: "My Elder said that I should ask you to do this." He told me where I had to be, and what time, and so on, on a certain day at Kettle Point. I knew this Elder well enough that if he thought I could do this, then I was going to do it.

I had no idea exactly what I was getting into. I don't know where Tony was at this time, busy doing his work I guess. So the time came for me to leave Thedford and go over to Kettle Point for this rendezvous. I met with the young women and their kids, and we went into the band office. We were prepared to stay the night, so we had sleeping bags and stuff. I think it was winter, it was cold, I remember I had overshoes on of some sort. So anyway, we're getting settled down to sort of spend the night, and all of a sudden, the next thing we know, there is a whole kind of mob of Kettle Point people.

They came into the building. I can remember the only thing I could think of was, "I'll phone the newspapers." So I phoned a guy that I knew, and I was talking to him on the phone in the band office. I happened to look out the window, and this woman was standing out there with a baseball bat. She was mad! So I'm telling this guy very quickly, "There is something going on here, you should send some people." And that was all I could do, and I hung up, and I went in.

There were a couple of local Kettle Point Police who came. The tension was building, it was like a standoff. I didn't get home until 5:00 the next morning. Other people came up too, and there was a lot of consultation. We all knew how lucky we were that we had gotten out without any bloodshed.

But I wasn't looking to be in a standoff. I just knew it was not right that my friends who cared for me and nourished me were fighting for what should have been theirs. It was complicated in the community, and I made mistakes along the way. But when I was asked to help, I did. And if it was connected in some way to the Anglican Church or we had people there, I had to get involved and do what I felt was right.

If Tony ever said anything about what I was doing, I just said to him, "Look. You preach the gospel. I listen to you preaching, sometimes four or five times a day. I hear what you're saying, and when I go out and see people in trouble, what am I supposed to do? You know, you tell me what I'm supposed to do, and I'm doing it! You know, it's your fault!"

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"It was complicated in the community, and I made mistakes along the way. But when I was asked to help, I did. And if it was connected in some way to the Anglican Church or we had people there, I had to get involved and do what I felt was right."

- Jean Koning, 2017

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## "We should have been doing the repair work" The Mohawk Institute

Jean: In 1986, Tony retired and said we should move to London because they had good medical facilities. He had no idea that he was the one who was going to make use of them as much as he did. In some ways, that move was good for me because I was quite involved with the Diocese still. I was still working with the Huron Church News and doing communications with the Diocese.

But by then, the Diocese of Huron had been hit with this lawsuit for the Mohawk Institute, the residential school. I was involved with that legal process through what was happening with the Church, with the Diocese, also what was happening with the people of Six Nations. So that was how my involvement continued there, and I worked with a group called ADHAWK and another group called LAIC. It was extremely emotional. And there were some very, very bad times at church.

What we should have done is said, "We've made a mistake as a Church. We don't need to fight this. We know that it's a fact: What we did was not good." We needed to go to the First Peoples and say, "Look. We made a mistake. We are sorry. How can you help us to make the right changes?" That's what we should've done, just man to man, woman to woman, sort of thing. But instead of doing that, we went all through the lawsuits. The lawsuits become a totally different kind of instrument to solve what are seen as problems. But they don't do much for building relationships.

I have some in files there, correspondences about this time. It was a bad, bad time. We should have been looking inside ourselves and understanding the bad we had done. And slowly, very slowly, we should have been doing the repair work to make those relationships right again, if even possible. But that is not how it went.

Jean Koning

by Jean Koning

"Living Message" April 1985

Seventeen years ago writer Jean Koning was employed as a child care worker on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. She recalls some of her impressions as she visited an Indian Reserve for the first time and experienced culture shock.

FAX copy

# The adoption of native Indian children

## Impressions

*He sat silently in my car, his shoulders hunched against the hopelessness which seemed to pervade his fourteen years of life. In a few minutes he would go back into the house to face his alcoholic father, listless mother and six younger brothers and sisters. What sort of future*

*be Indian. Wherever you go, whatever you do, always hold your head high and be proud of your Indian heritage. It's what makes you a very special person - to your people, to me, to the Creator."*

*He got out of the car and went into the house, still without*

The onslaught of family breakdown caused by alcohol overuse and the resulting poverty and neglect of family responsibilities. But even more appalling was the number of children who had been removed not only from their homes but also from the Reserve and placed in non-Indian foster or adoption homes

From Jean's files, an article in which Jean writes about the family breakdown she witnessed two decades earlier in Wikwemikong, as children were removed from their homes and communities. Published in *Living Message*, April 1985.

# REFLECTING

***Five years after Tony's death, Jean moved to Peterborough to be closer to her daughter, Val.*** *In 2008, she helped to found the Kawartha Truth and Reconciliation Support Group (KTRSG), which brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members in conversation around the national TRC process and its recommendations. Jean also joined the Indigenous-led Sacred Water Circle, which includes long-time friends and colleagues who had also ended up in Peterborough.*

*As Jean moved through her 80s and 90s, she supported food security and anti-poverty work within the community. She advised various groups, attended events, and educated fellow non-Indigenous Anglicans right until the final months of her life.*

*From about 2014 on, Jean was engaged with us in Aging Activisms, connecting with intergenerational groups of social changers and sharing reflections on her own life's journey. Many of the conversations included in this section were very emotional, bringing Jean to tears over what has been lost to ongoing colonial violence and injustice.*

*- May*

Jean with Shirley Williams, Aging Activisms symposium, Peterborough, 2015.

Emma Langley surprises Jean with a birthday cake, Aging Activisms workshop, Peterborough, 2016.

## On Privilege

May: *Jean, I want to go back to what you said about the young woman you brought home with you in your early days in Manitowaning. You said that, at the time, you did not yet understand her situation in terms of injustices she faced. It was just that you were both women, and your life had gone in one direction, whereas her life was going in another. Have you come to think about this differently now?*

Jean: When I came to be part of the TRC group that we have here in town, we came together, white and First Peoples, to listen to one another. I suppose a talking circle like that gives you a chance to do some reflection and I began to see some differences that you could call injustice.

I grew up in a home where I knew who I was. It wasn't much, but I knew who I was. I was born of a British mother and a Scottish father. I grew up on that, knowing that I was a very important person, I suppose. You don't think about it in those days, but looking back, I was a very important person because I knew who I was, and I was proud of who I was. My father was Menzies, he grew up in Kirkcaldy. I visited and was able to meet his family and see the house where he was born. So I knew where I came from, and I had a sense of pride.

But that young woman didn't have that. We took all that away from so many First Peoples. And there was something around that that made me realize how privileged I am, and if you want to call that white privilege, then okay.

I also realized that my whole upbringing as a small child, pretty well into my teenage years, I had a grandmother, my English grandmother who lived with us until she died.

She had a very powerful influence on me. She was probably a very powerful sender too, probably where I got it from. I realized that she had really instilled in me a sense of the British empire. I had received that into my psyche too. And in some ways, I don't totally decry that because it has enabled me personally to be able to stand up when people were not just challenging me, but I mean, really trying to hurt me. Like it gives me a kind of a courage, I suppose? But on the other hand, I began to see, yes, if I look back, even my 50 years of dealing with First Peoples, I was very much the white privileged person.

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## On Unlearning Supremacy

Jean: If I think back, I didn't think of myself as being, you know, “I'll tell you what to do.” But society put me in that position. Being a childcare worker, you have power. Being the head of Project North. Being a clergy wife, with a big mouth. All those kinds of things put me in the position of sort of being out there, in front. I am also very impulsive. You probably can tell that. I talk, I respond. What I've come to see is that when you're like that, by God, you're right in line for the fire. And I did get shot down so many times. But I've learned to say, "Okay, you know. That's good for me. I need to be humbled."

And if you extrapolate that, if I may, there's a part of being British that meant that you figured you knew what was best. And British people have a whole way of thinking. When they came here, they couldn't believe that First Peoples could possibly know what they knew. Or believe what they believed. Or could possibly live in the good way

that we lived as British people. It was built into us by virtue of being British. So, you've got generations of that. We are slowly having to learn that being British is not the be-all and end-all. There are all kinds of very beautiful, wonderful people, of all sorts of colours and conditions, and God knows we are all meant to be a part of Creation's garden of people.

## On Learning to Listen

Jean: The first time I heard this put to me directly from a First People's person, it was a woman from Walpole Island. She was trained as a nurse and responsible for looking after the community's health. And she was at this meeting where there were First Peoples and Anglican people, and there was talk going back and forth. At one point, she said, "You know, you white people think that we Indians are dumb. Because when you talk to us, we listen. And then we think about what you've said. And then we give you our answer."

"But," she said, "you don't listen to our answer because you think you already know, and you think that our pause to listen makes us less intelligent."

I mean, why do we do that? I'm the worst offender! I knew I was the worst offender because while the Indian person is sitting there trying to tell me something, I'm thinking, "Oh yeah, well this is what I'm going to answer." I haven't listened to what they've said, so how can I comprehend?

That's the problem with Canadian people all across our history. As white people, we think we know better. There's no way that that person of colour can possibly tell me anything that I don't know better. And it's born into us,

and it's something we have to learn to deal with, to change. "We think we know what's good for you." We came here and said that to the First Peoples. We never listened! We never thought they had anything to teach us. And I look back over these 50 years and I say, "Oh my God! We've really missed the boat!" Because they have so much to teach us.

And now, I look to the First Peoples to hopefully give leadership so that there will be a world for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to still live in. I mean, why don't we get that?

### From Ziysah

In the last few months of Jean's life, I was experiencing a deep depression as we witnessed the unfathomable violence unleashed on Gaza in retaliation for the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. At a time when everyone seemed to either take on a polarized position, or to shy away from speaking on the subject at all, Jean's perspective always grounded me. One time, I asked if she thought it made sense for people here to care about what is happening in Palestine. She said:

> "We are intricately tied to what's happening. We can't stand apart form it … How can we separate ourselves? We have been created to be together." (October, 2023)

Another time, she brought the subject back to her concept of hope:

> "Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost children to the violence suffered as human beings, not as politicians or capitalists and money-powered people. That's where my hope and my prayers lie, with people who feel like that. People like you, people like me." (December, 2023.)

## On Heart Work

Jean: When I came to Peterborough, and when the National Truth and Reconciliation process was starting up, I would hear all these women talking about being allies and so on. I had already been through 40 years of being present to First Peoples. For me, it was like standing beside family and saying, "Dammit, we're gonna fight this together!" I was totally immersed, I guess, and I became more and more immersed. Right from the beginning, it became a heart trip for me, not a head trip.

And I think, since the TRC, you have a lot of people who are starting to learn. The first thing you have is your head says, "oh my God, something happened here, I have to know what that is. I better find out about that." But it's not until you get to the heart that that you really begin to understand and comprehend exactly what's been going on all these years, and what that involvement has done to us as people, to them as people. And that's something so much deeper than just sort of saying, "I'm your ally, how can I help?"

But, everybody has to make that journey in his or her own way. This happens to be the way my journey went.

## On Witnessing Change

Jean: For years, I've walked alone, in the midst of people who don't even know about Indians. But all of a sudden, I'm now finding everywhere I go, people are saying they know a little bit, or they're discovering a little bit, you know? And I realize this is growing and spreading! And I'm thinking, I've spent 50 years getting all this stuff! And all of a sudden it's just coming in on them? There's so much that can come at you all at once. How can people manage that in their minds? Because with me, it's been such a gradual process over so many years.

I first met this friend of mine, going back 10 or 11 years, who has always been involved in social action, homelessness, all this kind of stuff. Whenever I go to any of these meetings, I'm there on behalf of First Peoples. I'm there to see if the First Peoples' voice is being listened to or being given a chance. And that becomes very evident. So my friend saw this, and afterwards he would attempt to debunk everything I said about the First Peoples. And I'd say, "Yes, but you know, look at it this way," and so on. So I don't know how many conversations we had over the last 10 years after falling off after meetings... until my friend has done a complete turnaround.

He kept listening, and what I said was enough to start him beginning to think, "Maybe there's a different way to look at this." And so I've watched the window of his mind actually open. And now you'll see him everywhere where

First Peoples are, he's very supportive. Now, that hasn't just come from me. Once you start to listen to other people, both Native and non-Native, your understanding begins to grow exponentially.

There's a whole different kind of awareness. I mean, since I began my journey 50 years ago, women have gone through the feminist movement. You know, there's so much more awareness. Whereas we were sort of isolated, insulated, all those years ago. And the other thing is the growth and development of the First Peoples themselves. That's tremendous. The pride is coming back now. People are learning their languages, claiming back their ceremonies and spiritual practices. More and more know who they are and they are proud of it. This is a change I am so happy to be seeing.

### From Ziysah

> "We must learn to listen to the First Peoples, they have some very important things to say to us."

Jean must have said this in some way, in some form, every single time I saw her. In the last year of her life, she began to make addenda. For example:

> "We must listen to the First Peoples tell their story *in the way they want to tell it*. Not to listen to them and tell their story to somebody else. There's more to listening to First Peoples

than just listening with your white man's ear. You have to listen, you have to try to listen from their point of view. What are they saying from where they are, psychologically and culturally and traditionally? … It's also a part of being in relationship. Recognizing two human beings. How do they interconnect in relationship? In the long run, I think it's good for humanity to have to go through this kind of struggle. If we learn how to do this better, I think we'll become human beings." (September, 2023).

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## On Reconciliation

May: *I wanted to ask you, Jean, about the idea of "reconciliation." What does it really look like to reconcile in practice for individuals and then for us as a society?*

Jean: Reconciliation is a word that you have to be very, very careful about. Reconciliation means that we have arrived. We are not reconciling. We're not even beginning to think about reconciling, for God's sake. We've got to do all the hard work in between!

You've got to start listening. And you've got to start trying to put yourself in that position to have some understanding of what the hell that was all about. You know, what were we doing to those children? And you've got to come to terms with what that does to you. And if you don't have anything happening inside of you when you

start to hear that stuff... You've got to go through your own pain, if you have any feelings at all as a human being. My God, what have we done, what have I done, am I responsible? How do I deal with that?

I will not use the word "reconciliation." I don't want people to talk to me about reconciliation. You're not ready, folks. Sorry. If that's judgmental, so be it. You are not ready. And you will know when you're ready, but only after you've done the work. You've got to be willing to be open. You've got to be willing to give, to change, to give way to another way of thinking and so on. That's awfully hard.

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"I will not use the word "reconciliation." I don't want people to talk to me about reconciliation. You're not ready, folks... You've got to be willing to be open. You've got to be willing to give, to change, to give way to another way of thinking."

- Jean Koning, 2017

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May: *What about for you personally? Have there been moments for you personally where you've been reconciling around relationships with First Peoples?*

Jean: Gosh, that makes me cry.

I go through moments of reconciliation every time I meet with First Peoples. And realize how beautiful they are. And how much we miss when we bypass them. Or ignore them. And how much warmth and love and beauty there is in having relationships with First Peoples. Good relationships with integrity.

Sometimes, I think my tears have dried up, but then all of a sudden, it just comes over me again. We've missed so much. My sadness is for what we've missed. How wonderful it is that there are any First Peoples anywhere who are willing to engage us in any kind of relationships.

And that's reconciliation. Reconciliation is not push a button and balloons or fireworks or something. It's a slow growing together. A slow back and forth kind of building as we yearn to listen to one another and care for one another. And yes, the past is horrible, but life has to go on. Life goes on in the little children that are born and then grow up, and we can only hope that their children and my great-grandchildren will be able to find a new way. That's where reconciliation may happen.

You and I will only be sowing the seeds which will move toward ultimate reconciliation. But it's a growth process. We're so push-button-minded, you know. If we just do it right, everything's going to change. It doesn't. We grow just like your plants in the garden.

### From May

Jean would often tell Emma and I how validating it was for her when we asked questions about her life and listened deeply to her answers. It was a very intimate and special time for all of us. Although the quotations shared throughout this book are edited to be stand-alone stories, these were often much more natural conversations, which we would cycle

in and out of while also making tea. Sometimes the "aha" moments around our big questions came about in these small, playful moments outside of our formal interviews, often while the recorder was still running.

This conversation was recorded in October 2016 during a break in a life history interview. It captures our dynamic and resonates with what Jean had to say about connecting the personal and societal dimensions of reconciliation.

Jean: You both have tea, don't you?

May: Yes, please.

Emma: Please. Yeah. Thank you for sharing all of that. It's very-

Jean: Well I have to say, you sure know how to hit the buttons here.

[Laughter]

May: We weren't really trying to hit your buttons, Jean!

Jean: I know! But you're very good at it! Whatever's going to come out of this, I don't know, but I hope it's as good as the interviewers, because I have been on your side of things often enough to know where you're coming from. You're very good.

May: Well, luckily, we have a good person to work with here, because we don't have to say too much and you fill in the blanks.

[Laughter]

Jean: Well, I guess I gear myself that when you come, I'm gonna let you have it with both barrels.

[Laughter]

Jean: Isn't it funny how much our situation, the ordinary things in life, inform the very deep?

Emma: Yeah.

Jean: Reconciling efforts that we undertake. You both take tea?

May (to Emma): And that's your thesis statement?

[Laughter]

Jean: And Emma likes milk and sugar?

Emma: Yes, that's right, please.

Jean: And May?

M: Black, please.

J: Clear.

[Laughter]

## On Faith

May: *How have you sustained this? How have you kept going in this work for so many years?*

Jean: Well, I think I go back to the beginning, my belief in God. What I call God is some form of divine love. It's not this old man in the sky with a long beard or whatever, but there's some divine power. I call that power 'love.'
So there's that power there that I feel I work with, I'm sustained by it, and that is very important to me. The ground of my being, perhaps. It's where I come from. It's my faith.

Because I believe that I was put here for a purpose, my life is not totally meaningless. When I think back over the things that have happened to me in my life, I realize I would not have survived without that power which is beyond me, but nevertheless a part of me. And that is that sense of the power of love. I use the word "love" in its best sense, meaning that as we love and care for one another, so we are working out this love in our lives.

I believe that ultimately there is that power that is there to care for us. And that's what still carries me, will carry me to my grave I'd expect.

I better make a cup of tea. Have you got time?

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## On Hope

Jean: If the window gets opened ever so slightly, the heart gets opened ever so slightly, I believe there's good that will enter. I believe in the goodness of Creation enough that in most cases, people really do want to be good. They really do.

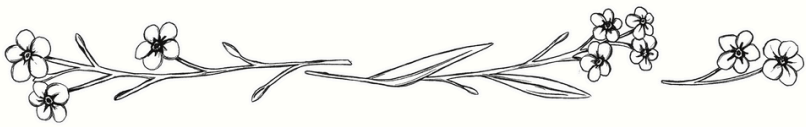
I mean, we all have the potential for being good in our lives. There are so many influences that try to change that into bad. But if you count on the fact that there is goodness in every human being, then you can hope that, in a period of time, there will be enough people within whom that sense of goodness will begin to prevail in a way that will start to make changes in the world.

The one thing in my future at this moment that is important to me is the four letter word "hope." When all else fails, I still have hope. Because I do believe in people. I believe in human beings.

"We may only work in the timeframe that's been given to us to be part of this Creation. We don't really know where we came from and we don't really know where we're going. But that's my excitement that mixes with the hope."

- Jean Koning, 2023

*from Ziysah's audio files*



# ONE BEAUTIFUL LIFE: A SONG FOR JEAN

Emma Langley

Jean and Emma at a climate justice rally organized by the Youth Climate Action Club (including May's and Ziysah's children), across from Peterborough City Hall, 2022

This song is a letter to Jean. I wanted to say, "Thank you" and "I love you." It is a song of gratitude for a friendship that has profoundly shaped my life. It shares glimpses of memories of this friendship forming. Jean to me felt like a friend, a mentor, a teacher, and a grandparent all at once. The song touches on how generously and vulnerably she shared a reflective process near the end of her life, modelling that listening to oneself is deeply interwoven with listening to others. It is ultimately about the love and power of an ancestor—how her ongoing presence in my life continues to guide me, a beacon. It is about one beautiful life, powerful in its singularity, and almost unfathomable in its reach and connection to so many others.

I am so grateful that I was able to continue to grow my friendship with Jean and to have many more visits and conversations with her after the research project ended. The end of the song jumps ahead several years to one of these visits, which happened at Christmas time, about a year before Jean passed, and shortly after her 100th birthday. It was in sitting with the memory of Jean's goodbye, "Go and have a beautiful life," that the idea came to me for the chorus "And one beautiful life / leads me to mine." Jean had a way of alluding to her mortality every time I saw her, in laughter. This carried a different sentiment—a finality, a grace, and a sending off.

A final note: the song came out in 3/4 time. At first, I wasn't sure why. One night I was working on it, listening back, and found myself waltzing around the kitchen. Jean always said to find time to dance, even in the kitchen after dinner. And there I was! Thank you, Jean.

I love you.

# One Beautiful Life: A Song for Jean

Sitting with you in the afternoon
Winter light in your living room
Time is still as sips of tea
And your love is a story you wrap around me

You're looking back, you're looking in
With stillness, at this life you have lived
Do you know the light you give
Do you know how you've blessed me and I carry it

And one beautiful life
Leads me to mine

On our last visit, I was leaving your place
You knew, and you left me with this parting grace
You held my face, with tears in your eyes
You said go and have a beautiful life

And one beautiful life
Leads me to mine

**Listen to Emma's song here!**

# CLOSING

May Chazan

## Onward, with Hope

Jean was a prolific and powerful "sender," as she liked to say. She wrote and spoke to all who could be persuaded to listen. I hope this book has offered a glimpse into Jean's "beautiful life," to quote Emma's song title.

I hope that it has honoured the intangible gifts so many of us have received through the intergenerational magic of radical visiting: slow time, deep care, grief, joy, meaningful friendship, mutual learning, and true reciprocity.

I hope it has inspired knowing smiles and small surprises for those who knew and loved Jean; and has offered those who may not have crossed paths with Jean a chance to listen.

Visiting with Jean reminded me often of the importance of visiting our elders—whether our connections are through blood or through community; whether we can visit over tea or only in our imaginations. I hope you may be as inspired as I was to listen carefully with an embodied knowledge that we are here on colonized land.


Jean in her apartment during a visit with Ziysah, Peterborough, 2023.

"The only words I've ever really said that mattered a tinker's damn are: We must listen to the First Peoples. They have things to tell us. And now I'm saying: We just have to simply listen to one another. Whoever they are, whoever we are."

- Jean Koning, 2023

*from Ziysah's audio files*

"We are beginning to discover one another—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—as human beings who share this Creation together. It's not going to stop. It's happening in so many ways. My story is just a little part of this transformation that is happening."

- Jean Koning, 2023

*from Ziysah's audio files*

# MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

For more about Jean's legacy, Aging Activisms, or any of the works referenced in this chapbook, scan the QR codes below, or visit www.agingactivisms.org.

Find most of the contents of this chapbook and the project's accompanying installation here.

This is where you will also find:

- Videos of Jean sharing her reflections (via Ziysah's files).
- Alex's illustration of Jean's journey with Aging Activisms.

Find a recording of Emma's song, "One Beautiful Life: A Song for Jean" here.

Check out Aging Activisms for more information on our varied storytelling projects.

Listen to Ziysah's poem, "February."

Read Emma's thesis, *"I will not use the word reconciliation"—Exploring Settler (Un)Certainty, Indigenous Refusal, and Decolonization through a Life History Project with Jean Koning.*

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Jillian Ackert** is a printmaker, writer, photographer, and gardener, currently living on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg Territory. She navigates the world as a white settler and disabled person, and as an artist driven and inspired by connections cultivated over cups of tea, by the water, with the trees, and at community art gatherings and drop-ins.

**May Chazan** is a parent, professor, and community organizer committed to the work of making beautiful queer, crip, decolonial, and intergenerational futures in these uncertain times. She is grateful to be living and learning in Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory with her two spunky teens, as people of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.

**Jenn Cole** is mixed ancestry Algonquin Anishinaabe from unceded Kiji Sibi watershed territory. She is Assistant Professor of Performance and Gender at Trent University and Artistic Director for Nozhem First Peoples Performance Space.

**Alex Hodson** is a visual artist, performer, activist, animal-lover, and believer in intergenerational spaces. She is in her first year of high school in Peterborough. Alex has been part of Aging Activisms since before she can remember, most recently performing a song at the culminating library event in 2023.

**Emma Langley** is an educator and accordion enthusiast who loves exploring possibilities for creative self-expression through puppetry, song, and connection to nature. Born in Kingston, Ontario, they are of mixed European ancestry. Emma had the gift of taking part in Jean's life history work from 2016-2018, and came to this project wanting to share their deep gratitude for this experience and for Jean's friendship.

**Ziysah von Bieberstein** is a parent, poet, editor, cultivator of community, and unsettled settler on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory. Ze is grateful to the inheritances and contemporary cultures that hold space for their Ashkenazi, queer, activist, and neurodivergent ways of being.

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“Visiting may seem on the surface to be a passive and apolitical activity, but it is, in fact, political, re-centering authority in a way of relating that is itself rooted in a cultural, spiritual, and social context … In seeing visiting as political, we can reconsider our conceptions of politics, who can do political work, and how political work has historically been done.”

- Janice Cindy Gaudet,
“Keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way”

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www.agingactivisms.org