



SDCF Chair David Thorne with the newly announced Citizen of the Year, Elder Ruth Christie.

Congratulations Elder Ruth Christie, Citizen of the Year

It's not easy to pull off a surprise these days, but the folks at the Selkirk & District Community Foundation succeeded in a big way on Oct. 5 when they shocked Elder Ruth Christie with the news that she was the Citizen of the Year.

The ruse was perfect. Christie was attending the Foundation's Vital Signs Town Hall meeting that day and was expecting nothing more than to do what she's been doing for years – try her best to contribute in a positive way to her community.

Christie sat attentively in the audience of about 100 listening to others' ideas and contributed some of her own. Then, with a break in the action, some Acting 101 took place. SDCF Chair David Thorne got a phone call that interrupted the entire proceedings, much to moderator Shirley Muir's chagrin.

Thorne, it turns out, had a special announcement and brought in the Foundation's Executive Director Bev Clegg to share the news.

"Ruth, I've got some news," Clegg said.

"Elder Ruth Christie, you are the Citizen of the Year."

Thorne, Clegg and Muir should receive Academy Awards for their performances, and Christie, well her surprise, joy, and appreciation were as authentic as the lady herself.

"You make me want to live forever," an overwhelmed Christie said.

"Thank you. I really appreciate this, and I don't know if I'm going to sleep tonight."

She shared her own secret that Thorne had sort of offered a clue as to what the day would bring earlier on.

"(David) kind of hinted at something, he said you're going to have a great day, and I said, 'I'm already there'."

For Thorne, Christie is a perfect fit for Citizen of the Year.

"Ruth's infectious laughter, smile and kindness brightens every room she enters," he said.

"Her wisdom and strength make her truly deserving of the 2024 Citizen of the Year Award."

It was Muir and Jacqueline Bercier who nominated Christie for the honour, one that Clegg admitted surprised Foundation members, simply because it didn't seem possible that Christie hadn't already received the honour.

Muir's nominating letter was heartfelt and genuine.

"It's hard to know where to start. It seems like Elder Ruth Christie has been a part of my life for years. It's been so long I frankly can't remember how I even got introduced to her. It was likely something like this, "You want to understand Indigenous history and culture in this community? You need to talk to Ruth Christie," Muir wrote.

"And I know I'm not the only one who has found their way to her doorstep on the same path of learning, truth and reconciliation. Over the years I have, as have so many people in our

community, come to rely on Ruth Christie as a teacher, mentor and guide. And even a shoulder to cry on.

“She has shared her wisdom and experience throughout this region and with people all over the world. And for that she has been recognized far and wide. It is long overdue to recognize her here.”

Bercier, an educator in the Lord Selkirk School Division, was enthusiastic in her nomination of Christie’s.

“I’ve known Elder Ruth Christie for over 20 years. She has been the unofficial guiding Elder for Lord Selkirk School Division for longer than that. She has mentored many teachers, and her wisdom and stories have helped us progress on an intentional and positive path in our commitment to reconciliation. Ruth has also been an esteemed Elder for Promoting Aboriginal Student Success (PASS) since its inception in 2000. She has worked with our young people in various workshops, lending her knowledge to the next generation, Bercier wrote.

“Ruth is someone that I have looked up to the entire time I have known her. She has this incredibly kind, gentle strength about her and her stories about her life, and the historical knowledge about the area is what I aspire to be like. Ruth has impacted this community in so many ways, we are forever fortunate that she is part of this community. Her knowledge is invaluable, and she should be honoured for all that she has given to the community.”

Letters of support were easy for Muir to come by, and came from far and wide, including one from Laura Peers, Ph.D, Emeritus Professor, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography and Curator, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford in the United Kingdom.

Peers met Christie in 1994 at Lower Fort Garry where she was a first-person historical interpreter. She was immediately impressed.

“Ruth Christie is so humble that it would be easy to underestimate the reach and impact of the work she has done across a range of contexts. It would be unfortunate if her important contributions to society were not publicly recognized,” Peers wrote.

“Her fundamental work has been forms of healing, not only as a nurse but in the setting of public history. Ruth’s commitment to supporting Indigenous communities, and to communicating the complex truths of Indigenous history to largely non-Indigenous audiences, as well as her mentoring of young adults through her role as Elder, has quite simply made Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the world a better place.”

Author and educator Mary Jane McCallum wrote about Christie in her book, ‘Twice as Good – A History of Aboriginal Nurses’ and detailed the importance of Christie’s work. In her letter to support Christie’s nomination she said:

“When she was seventeen, Ruth Christie moved to Winnipeg to train to be a Licenced Practical Nurse (LPN) at the St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg. She spent the first part of her career working in local hospitals in Winnipeg, Selkirk, Peguis First Nation, Shoal Lake and Grand Rapids. This work brought her into contact with many people who live in the area of Lake Winnipeg and the Interlake area. In...Twice As Good, (it states) that Indigenous nurses in this era were an important point of contact for Indigenous patients in what could be an hostile and racist environment of public healthcare. Indeed, still today Ruth Christie is remembered by many people in southern Manitoba for her work as an LPN.”

Dr. Ryan Eyford, Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg, also supported Christie’s nomination.

Eyford credit’s Christie with opening his eyes to a new way to view the province’s history. He met her in 2000 at her home in Selkirk and has continued a friendship with her to this day. He said his own writings have been deeply influenced by his conversations with Christie, herself an Elder in Residence at the Aboriginal Student Services Centre at the university.

“Ruth’s early guidance influenced the approach that I took in my 2016 book ‘White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West’, which is very much an attempt to bring together Indigenous and immigrant histories. Her lesson that it is important for non-Indigenous people to learn about Indigenous history is one that guides my ongoing teaching and research at the University of Winnipeg,” Eyford wrote.

“As her curriculum vitae attests, Ruth has influenced or contributed to the work of several scholars and authors including my colleague Mary Jane McCallum’s path-breaking work on Indigenous nurses (Ruth’s earlier career) in ‘Indigenous Women, Work, and History, 1940-1980 (2014), and David Alexander Robertson and Wai Tien’s 2014 graphic novel’ The Land of Os: John Ramsay’.

Congratulations to Elder Ruth Christie, this year’s Citizen of the Year.

