

Researcher specialized in aboriginal justice

Her work continues to be instrumental in understanding and developing healing and sentencing circles



Carol La Prairie spent most of her childhood in Yellowknife, where she experienced segregation between white settlers and the native population.

NOREEN SHANAHAN

Criminologist Carol La Prairie argued against the naive assumption that all first nations cultures are familiar with traditional ways. Rather, her research indicated that most aboriginal peoples in Canada have little or no knowledge of their own traditions. She stressed that operating under this assumption could be counterproductive when it came to implementing justice programs.

"How 'traditional' can restorative justice be if [it depends] on knowledge or practices which are no longer in place, having fallen victim to historic state policies of 'civilization' and 'assimilation,' modern technology and MTV?"

She also pointed out significant differences between rural and urban aboriginal experiences. Since 70 per cent of the modern aboriginal population lives off reserve, policy makers should dismiss assumptions about what 'indigenous culture and tradition' actually means to individuals seeking justice, she said.

La Prairie, one of Canada's leading criminologists, died in Vancouver on Dec. 15 from leukemia.

She was a senior researcher with the Solicitor-General and the Justice departments. Her work was often controversial and highlighted the fact that high rates of crime and violence, both on and off reserve, suggest deeper problems related to the destruction of traditional aboriginal ways of life.



La Prairie in the 1960s with sons Peter, left, and Mark.

Early in her career, La Prairie spent a year doing field work while buckled into a police cruiser. She spent another year living on a Cree reserve in Northern Ontario.

"Carol travelled throughout James Bay to meet with our people on issues of justice, policing and customary law," said Cree Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come. "In 1991, she concluded a multivolume report on her findings, which we consider a living document to this day."

"It's not surprising to me that the James Bay Cree, in looking for someone to help research and think about what they were doing, brought Carol in to lead their investigation," said Antho-

ny Doob, a criminology professor at the University of Toronto.

"They were looking for ideas and solutions, not simplistic answers that sounded good and did nothing."

La Prairie held four degrees, including a PhD in sociology. She authored groundbreaking reports, essays, and books including *Will the Circle be Unbroken? Aboriginal Communities, Restorative Justice, and the Challenges of Conflict and Change* (co-authored with Jane Dickson-Gilmore.)

La Prairie spent most of her childhood in Yellowknife. Her father, Peter Pitcher, was a mining engineer at the Giant Gold Mine. The family was among the first white settlers in what was, at that time, a fly-in community. In a memoir about Yellowknife she recently wrote for her grandchildren, La Prairie praised the sparkle of aurora borealis while also bemoaning her early lessons in segregation. "There was an old town where mostly Indians lived - as they were called then - and a new town where all the hotels, businesses and schools were."

In 1956, she left Yellowknife after winning a NWT scholarship to the University of Alberta. "I probably didn't really deserve it because there wasn't much competition," she wrote, "I think I was the only student in the class of nine who passed."

She lived with her grandmother in Edmonton and launched herself into her career as an activist for social justice.

She graduated in 1959 with a BS and was accepted into medical

school but declined. Instead, she obtained a bachelor of social work at the University of Toronto a year later and in 1961 became a probation officer at Juvenile Court in Toronto.

That same year, she married Leon La Prairie and within eight years was the mother of four children. Meanwhile, shuttling between daycare and Robarts library, she obtained a master's degree in criminology in 1974. The focus of her research was urban policing and field work included rocky rides in cruisers with Ontario's Peel Regional Police.

In 1976, La Prairie left her husband and moved to Vancouver with the children. Thus began the next phase of her life as single mother, full-time employee with the B.C. Attorney-General, and PhD student at the University of British Columbia. She graduated in 1984 with a doctorate in sociology.

La Prairie could have chosen a straightforward academic career, said Christopher Murphy, a sociology professor at Dalhousie University. Instead she chose a career as a policy researcher.

"It allowed her to act on her belief that empirical research should serve as a basis and argument for criminal justice reform and progressive policy development." One of her most important contributions was in restorative justice, in particular debunking assumptions when it came to establishing programs for aboriginal justice.

Restorative justice involves the voluntary participation of both

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the victim and the offender in discussions with members of the community. The goal is to restore the relationship, fix the damage that has been done, and prevent further crimes. In the aboriginal context it refers to sentencing circles, healing circles, and victim impact statements.

In 1980, La Prairie packed up her kids again and moved to Ottawa, joining the federal Solicitor-General's Department as a senior researcher. Toward the end of her decade there she spent a year with the St. James Cree.

"Whenever an organization or people embark upon a journey to build something of significance, you need a starting point. We consider this a starting point for the Cree system of justice we are building today," Coon-Come said.

As the former executive director of the Native Council on Justice and founding member of Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto, Carol Montagnes often crossed paths with La Prairie.

"One of the things I really admired about Carol was that she'd do the actual field research. For instance, she worked here in Toronto with aboriginal street people, interviewing them, getting their points of view about their interactions with police."

After a brief time working for the Saskatchewan Justice Department in Saskatoon, she returned to Ottawa in 1992 and continued working with the Department of Justice. She stayed with this department, although moving among Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver, until she retired in 2004. But even then she didn't slow down. Instead, she did contract work with the Attorney-General of B.C., evaluating the Vancouver Community Court.

In 2006, while volunteering at a children's orphanage in Nanyuki, Kenya, La Prairie was diagnosed with leukemia. She returned to Vancouver by Medevac and was given six months to live. She succeeded in living another four years and spent her time volunteering and visiting her children who were scattered across the globe.

La Prairie leaves her children Peter, Mark, Gillian and Douglas and grandchildren Bridget, Henry, Owen, Bryn, Thinley and Karma.

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