

Annette McLean

Tansi! My name is Annette Mclean. I'm from Sturgeon Lake, Cree Nation. We're at the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation graveyard by the lake – this is where Bella's buried, laid to rest amongst her other relatives....

Well, it was devastating. It's been a journey, 3rd year we just finished her 3rd year memorial in her home community, Lubicon Cree Band or Little Buffalo it's called. They hold a memorial. It started with her. We never had them before. The first year it was held at Big Stone in that area, second year they made the site and they fixed up for this year and it is developing into quite a location.

Initially, when it started, it was to honour our girl, Bella, she was given a name from an Ojibway Elder just before she passed. In English, it's Red Flower and she was given her colours as well, different shades of pink.

The thing about her passing was we really still don't have any details of what led to her falling over the balcony. If ever we do, you know that would be nice but after 3 years and still nothing. It seems kind of odd but the bits of pieces I know I find some times I can't even say anything because I don't want to jeopardise anything that could be developing.

On the question of how it affected me, I'd say it shook my world because it took me awhile to have my girl. I planned it to have her and made a conscious decision to select Billy Joe as her father even though he came with other children and in Bella's life I tried to expose her and her brother to her other siblings. So, when she passed, we all took it hard and I can't even describe to you the things that have happened to us in the last three years. I wouldn't want anybody to go through what we went through because my son is lucky to be alive. You know, the last time he saw Bella, he didn't think she wasn't going to come back. He took it hard. Everybody is taking it hard, and they are all taking it differently. But for me, Bella, was really blessed to have two parents who came from solid families. On her dad's side, she had both parents who were fluent Cree speakers the same as my parents and they showered her with a lot of love. So, she knew a lot of love and had a lot.

There was never any question about her being buried here. There's my mom, my nephew, he grew up with Bella; my other nephew, my sister—she was very close to Bella, she called her Becky and hell's bells. Like I said: everybody is here, connected.

I think it's the whole thing about family and those ceremonies. I have been doing quite a bit of ceremonies to help me through and I really try and take care of myself because despite everything that's happened you still have to keep on going and I work in my own community so in order for me to be effective in my job I have to be healthy so everybody knew about Bella and I always expressed my feelings when it came up right. I didn't hide it, and it doesn't matter whether I'm around somebody or in solitude, when I feel those feelings come out I let them come out and it seems like it's never ending. I sure miss her. I really miss her a lot but one of the things I do is interact with young people that are her age and through them I experience how she is, right, because my relatives. I have a niece, I go to her place, and she's standing by the sink and she looks just like my Bella – same little features of her body and everything and in that way I guess she's not far away.

The other thing would be in your belief system right that death is a part of life and that we all are going to pass and like I said just keep on going on, make the most of your life because life is short – you don't know when's the next time you might not come back right? I guess it's going home she's beside her ancestors and they're together wherever it is they are.

I don't have to worry about her as much as when she was alive—to be worrying about where she was and who she was hanging out with. Not knowing whether the people she was hanging out with were taking care of her. Let her go and be herself.

I would say go for counselling. I would say, you know, do things to help you deal with the loss of your loved one; you are not alone. Sometimes I used to think it's like a different level of lonely and there are people that have lost loved ones like you're in company right because of the intensity of that loss and you realize how short life really is – 25 years went by pretty fast – they're babies and then they're women and they have their own lives and they'll do whatever they want to do right and she did make me proud – when I look at the 25 years that she was here, she did a lot of things, she experienced a lot of things, and she was doing things that made her ancestors proud.