

Eleanor McMullen's Story

Christine DeCourtney, Kay Branch, and Karen Morgan

Christine DeCourtney (corresponding author): Cancer Program Planning and Development Manager, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 4000 Ambassador Drive, Anchorage, Alaska, USA 99504; cdecourtney@anthc.org

PK Branch, KM Morgan: Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Anchorage

Eleanor McMullen is an Alaska Native elder from a Sugpiaq community in the Prince William Sound region of Alaska. She was raised in the same community as her grandmother. When she was 12 years old, her mother told her she had to go and take care of her grandmother. This is her story of the experience:

My mother was working at the cannery, and a big shipment of fish came in and everybody was working, and she couldn't go take care of my grandmother. I had no idea how sick my grandmother was or even that she was sick. I got up out of bed like my mother told me and I went to grandmother's house.

She lived in a one-room little cabin by herself. She burned wood in her stove for heat, and I went down to see her. She was in bed. She asked me why I was there, and I said that Mom told me I was to come and take care of her, and I still didn't know what to do. She told me to sit and be quiet. So I did and saw that she had no heat in the house. I told her I was going out to pick up some little pieces of wood so I could start a fire in her stove because it was chilly in the house.

I started her fire and put the tea kettle on to boil because I knew she would want tea soon. She told me she had company coming, and she wanted me to bathe and dress her. She had a little suitcase on a shelf by her bed; she wanted me to get it down. It was clothes she wore to Communion. She always wore the same clothes. I said, "But Grandma, these are your church clothes." She didn't speak English, but she understood it. She spoke Suqstun, and I didn't speak Suqstun, but I understood it. I bathed her and dressed her and combed her hair. She had really long hair and always wore it in a bun.

She wanted me to help her stand up so she could look out the window. So I stood her up and she looked out. She said, "There they are, they're coming down the hill." And I said, "Who's coming, Grandma?" because I didn't see anybody. She told me it was her husband and her son that had passed away. I didn't want to argue with her

and tell her nobody is coming. She said to make sure the tea kettle's boiling. Someone had brought her *akuktuaq* [yeast rolls]. They were wrapped up in a towel on her counter, and she said to put them in the warming oven of her stove so when they come they'll have tea and bread.

She had me put her finest tablecloth and her finest china cups on the table — four of them. I thought, "Well, this is kind of spooky," so I went and sat behind the wood stove because I didn't know what to do. And Grandma said, "Now you can go open the door." I went and opened up the door and nobody's there. I left the door open, and she's greeting everyone. I went and shut the door, and she told me to pour tea in the four cups.

She always had sugar cubes or she cooked sugar, burned it up, and then broke it into pieces. You put them in your mouth and sip tea over it. That's what she had, and she had me put them in a saucer. She was not drinking with them but wanted to sit on the edge of the bed, so I helped her. I said, "Nobody's here, Grandma." I finally gave up on that idea, because she was bound and determined that they were there, and she was talking with them.

I continued sitting behind the wood stove because I thought that was the safest place for me. After a while, she said, "Now it's time, they're leaving. Just clear the table off." I looked to see if the tea had gone down in the cups. It hadn't moved. I poured the tea back in the teakettle and thought later on I'd have some tea myself, so I did that and wrapped the rolls back up and set them aside.

Grandma said it was time for her to lay down now. So I went over and laid her down and she died. I had never experienced death. I just assumed that's what it was. She lay down on the pillow, and she had me prop her up on the bed, and she died.

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