

Woman of the Drum

A Tribute to Jean Becker and Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak

"Drums have spirit. They are not just objects." Jean Becker

"Woman of the Drum" honours, with an original choral piece and Indigenous songs, one of Waterloo Region's long serving Indigenous community elders: Jean Becker. Originally from Labrador of Inuit and English ancestry, Jean formed the drum circle Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak in 2003 as a way for Indigenous urban women in the Kitchener-Waterloo area to re-connect with their culture and teachings, and to find community and their voices through song. For many, the shared experiences of the drum circle have been transformational.

In addition, Jean has devoted her energies to improving the opportunities for Indigenous students at both the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier. She has worked to promote cultural understanding and to engage the community in the process of healing the relationship between Indigenous and Settler peoples. Her life is an embodiment of the Seven Anishinaabe Sacred Teachings: Respect, Truth, Courage, Wisdom, Honesty, Humility, and Love as the way to be in right relations with oneself and others.

The poem, upon which the choral work is based, emerged out of gratitude for Jean's life, following a sudden health crisis in 2007 requiring an urgent liver transplant. Fortunately Jean, who had dedicated her life to serving others, received the gift of life from a donor. This near loss and remarkable recovery prompted a poem in celebration, a poem to recognize Jean's inspirational role in the community. She is "The Woman of the Drum".

The Choral Composition by Owen Bloomfield

The piece is in two parts: the drum circle's traditional songs and a semi-composed section for traditional Western choir. The drum circle will choose a song of their own to sing at the opening of the piece. The settler singing group will then respond. Their section is scored with an open consideration to what the drum circle chooses to sing. Rhythmic, phrasing, tempo, and tonal choices will be made by the group listening and taking their cue from the drum circle. The settler group needs to meet the drum circle on the drum circle's own terms. They must listen to what is being given and incorporate what they have heard into their own musical decisions.

When I started to compose the piece I was keeping in mind the guidelines of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I wished to create a space for dialogue and respectful listening. When the piece was completed, and it went through discussion and rehearsal, the space created by the songs and singers led to an understanding of the Anishinaabek teaching of the Sweetgrass Braid. Simply put, when we all come together we cannot be broken. The braid is stronger than its individual parts.

For more information on the creation of this project go to owenbloomfield.com/blog

See poem "Woman of the Drum" overleaf.

Woman of the Drum

For Jean Becker and Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak

Woman of the drum.

You bend the hoop of your life around us.

Woman of the drum.

You shape teachings into circle wisdom.

Woman of the drum.

You stretch your laughter blue sky taut.

Woman of the drum.

You lace sorrow into a handhold for beauty.

Woman of the drum.

You beat the heart song of the deer who gave her breath.

Woman of the drum.

You dance stories with the language of your limbs.

Woman of the drum.

You sing healing the way spring sings rain.

Woman of the drum.

You vision bloodstream into spiritstream.

Woman of the drum.

You journey with medicine music.

Woman of the drum.

You rhythm our broken lives into song.

Woman of the drum.

Together we sing our passage.

Woman of the drum.

Woman of the drum.

Rae Crossman

Read a more detailed account of Jean Becker's formation of the drum circle published online by *The New Quarterly* along with the poem: <https://tnq.ca/woman-of-the-drum/>