

# Listening to a Distant Drum

## Sr. Mary Celeste Goulet

Pastoral Leader/  
Director of Child Development Centre, LOFC

Sr. Mary Celeste Goulet's early years in Guelph, Ontario, Canada were notable for two things: her inability to speak until age 10 due to a respiratory illness, and her love of children. Both of these unique qualities foreshadowed the plan God had for her.

"I would take all my sister's dolls and put them in my brother's carriage and walk up and down the street. I told my mom I wanted to have 500 children when I grew up! She laughed and said I had better grow up to be a sister then," Sr. Celeste recalled.

Sr. Celeste had an aunt who happened to be a Catholic sister. When she sent her a Valentine's Day card featuring Donald

Duck that said, "I want to fly away with you," Aunt Bertha's reply to her niece was, "No, you have to stay on earth and take my place." As Sr. Celeste grew and discerned the religious life was her path, she chose the Felicians because it was the only nearby order that had an orphanage. Children were the joy of her heart and would become her life's work.

In 1973, during a 30-day retreat, Sr. Celeste received a clear



message from the Holy Spirit. "During the very last meditation on the last day of the retreat, God said, 'I want you to work with the native people of Canada.' It was so clear, it stayed in my mind," she remembered. "My director told me to keep praying about it, that if it was meant to be, through prayer I would know."

Just a few years later, Sr. Celeste was on her way to Tulita, a remote area 125 miles south of the Arctic Circle, to work with the Dene First Nations indigenous people of Canada's Northwest Territories. "I was super shy, and it turned out to be a gift from God. I listened more than I talked. People would tell me their problems and we would pray together, so I got to know them fast."

With a background in early childhood education, she knew her service would involve working with the Dene children. She went to each family's home and explained the difference between daycare and preschool, asking the people which they preferred. Their choice of the preschool gave Sr. Celeste time to do parish work in the morning and teach the children in the afternoon. Tulita was the first small community to have a preschool and served as the model for surrounding towns.

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## LEADERS & FOUNDERS

**The first school had a “honey bucket” for the toilet and an oil stove. “I had to start the fire every morning so it would be warm by the time the children came.”**

Sr. Celeste’s curriculum includes the basic things one would expect, but in a land where cultural heritage is celebrated and children are important for a family’s survival, she incorporated many other elements. Students learn the North Slavey language and traditions from local teachers and elders. Field trips teach children how to find animal tracks, walk in show-shoes, and snare and cook a rabbit. She even created illustrated books of Dene cultural stories that are used in schools throughout the Sahtu region, collaborating with elders and local translators, as well as young illustrators.

by the Dene people whose sacred land, Great Bear Rock, had burned. In gratitude for her solidarity, the community voted to rename the child development center after her, and accepted Sr. Celeste as an elder.

“You are respected in a different way when you’re an elder,” she explained. “All the young people shook my hand; they were proud of me and what I represented in the community. I could see this in their eyes.”

Because the one priest serving the entire Sahtu region is only able to come to Tulita three or four times a year, Sr. Celeste doffs her preschool teacher hat to don many others. She presides over baptisms, first communions, weddings, and funerals and leads communion service on Sundays. She brings communion to

The community also “feeds the fire” which Sr. Celeste explained is like incense to God. “When they set up camp they throw a match in the water, asking God to bless the hunt and give them luck. They respect the land and animals, thanking God and the animals for their gift.”

As if preschool director, stand-in priest, and elder isn’t enough to keep her busy, Sr. Celeste has initiated many programs over the years in response to her community’s needs, including adult literacy classes, support for victims of drug and alcohol abuse, counseling, job coaching, and drop-in centers for the supervision and care of at-risk populations of the community. She is also a refuge for women and children whose domestic lives are unstable.

It’s no surprise Sr. Celeste has won numerous awards for excellence in child care and education, improving the lives of women, their families and communities, and for missionary work. The one she recalls as the happiest, and saddest, is the 2016 St. Joseph Award for Outstanding Missionary Work given to a person who has demonstrated dedication to missions and has greatly influenced people. Her younger brother died the day before she received the award. “He was so excited for me and had always been supportive. He came to Tulita to visit me, and though he is very quiet, when he went back home they said he couldn’t stop talking about it.”

Spending the first 10 years of her life listening instead of talking prepared Sr. Celeste for the role she was destined to fill. The hundreds of children she has educated in her four decades in Tulita manifest the desire of a young girl’s heart to have 500 children. And each time she takes communion to homebound elders, she carries her late Aunt Bertha’s rosary with her.

**“The Ministry of Presence is not to give people what you think they need, but to truly be with them and walk beside them.” 🌻**

**“When a baby is born, and its fist is closed they are said to have a drumstick in their hands beating their heart into life.”**



Though the community valued the work Sr. Celeste was doing for the children, being accepted by the Dene people didn’t happen overnight. It took well over 10 years and a natural disaster.

In 1995, extreme heat and dry conditions caused a forest fire that threatened the town. To escape the blaze, everyone had to be flown to another town. After the fire was contained, and all went back to Tulita to assess the damage, Sr. Celeste cancelled her scheduled summer vacation to the Felician convent in Ontario to stand

the homebound and leads prayer at the beginning of Dene ceremonies.

Drumming is a significant and symbolic component of Dene heritage. “Playing drums is their prayer,” Sr. Celeste explained. “When a baby is born, and its fist is closed they are said to have a drumstick in their hands beating their heart into life. Funerals begin with a drum song, calling the angels to come meet them to take them to heaven.”

Photo of sacred Bear Rock by Angela Gzowski

