

nikosis, kiwanêihtamin? tânita ohci kiya?

(My boy, are you lost? Do you forget where you come from?)

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Introduction

How have our lives been shaped by the words and languages around us? How have words created connection and meaning to our families and communities and the natural world around us? **Kevin Bouvier** explores these themes in the following literacy narrative based on his experiences growing up in Northern Saskatchewan. Kevin submitted this piece for *WRS 101 Exploring Writing* as part of his first year in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program.

Keywords: Cree, Indigenous, language learning, language loss.



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

nêhiyâw napesis, kîwetinohk ohci kiya. I could still hear it clearly, one of the very first memories of kukom. It was at this moment that my identity was revealed to me while cradled in kukom's arms. I could feel the unconditional love coming from her round brown eyes as she gazed down on me, an unexplainable love that wrapped around my being and penetrated right into the heart. These words and the affection within them would change my whole life direction and send me on a journey to find that ***little Cree boy, who was from the northern bush.***

The soul and spirit that embodied kukom were truly a gift from Creator. She was a beautiful human, kind and full of love. Her heart was pure. kukom was an authentic ***nêhiyaw-iskwêw.*** Her face was full of a life lived in hardship, but also in love. Her hair was curled greyish white, almost like how Queen Elizabeth II wears it on the twenty-dollar bill. Her skin was warm and worn; she was no taller than five-and-a-half feet. Her voice was soft but had such effectiveness that no teaching would go unheard; I could still smell the tea and tobacco coming from her breath as she spoke. This was the collection of who was the ***Cree Woman*** that I loved so much. Caroline was the name she was given, but I never once addressed her with it; to me, she was always, and will always be, kukom.

My first early years were encompassed by kukom's teachings. Cree was my only language and was taught to me from birth. Everything I learned in those years was given to me in Cree, and everything I did revolved around the ***nêhiyaw miyo-pimâtisiwan.*** It was clear to kukom, and would be made clear to me, that this was going to be my life, the ***Cree traditional way of living.***

nikiskisin my first day of school. My teacher was a white lady from Southern Saskatchewan. She was a farm lady and was very kind. I remember her walking up to me and introducing herself, but from my ears' perspective, it was just a bunch of funny noises and a smiling face that greeted me. My initial reaction was to laugh because that's what my kukom and I would do when we heard anything other than Cree. I remember the teacher's face turning red, and she took me by the hand and led me to my desk; my journey with English had begun.

I quickly excelled at English as my school years progressed. I practiced every day, doing mounds and mounds of worksheets and routines, sounding out every word. I ordered books through the school, taking in anything and everything that I could get my hands on in English. There was no stopping me; everything else was secondary and forgotten! I got good grades and lots of attention for my newfound language. I participated in school plays, took on big speaking parts, and hosted many events so that I could practice speaking in public and

show off that I was becoming proficient. I had so much pride in myself, but it was at this point in my educational journey I noticed, what seemed to me at the time, something important was still missing. But what was it?

My high school years flew by, and I graduated in the spring of 1999 at the age of 15. I was young and had acquired a new language; it seemed to everyone I was off to great things. Armed with the language of the South, I would not have too many issues moving forward. Still, feeling something missing, I was off to Edmonton for my first job as an intern at the Royal Bank.

As I was saying my goodbyes to my family, I came to the most important person in my life, my kukom. As I hugged her, I felt a strange feeling, something I had never felt before. kukom's goodbye had a hesitation, a pause. As I stepped back to look at her, I saw some tears, and I asked, "kukom, what's wrong?" At first, she said nothing, but she would not let go of my arms. She took a deep breath and said, "**nikosis, kiwanêyihamin? tânita ohci kiya?**" I became defensive and hurt; kukom never spoke to me like that. She was always so proud of me, present at every event, and there for every award. I immediately answered, "NO! I am going to become something, kukom, something in the big city. I know who I am!" I left after that, feeling sad and scared because I never spoke to kukom like that. Why would she ask me, "**My boy, are you lost? Do you forget where you come from?**" Strong words from kukom, but they would prove effective.

I stayed in Edmonton for about six months, working, but in the back of my mind, kukom's words and her face constantly played, over and over. That feeling of something missing was back. It was early spring when I decided to go back home. I needed to put to rest the uneasy feelings and, most importantly, fix things with kukom.

After returning home and speaking to kukom, everything I felt and everything she felt became clear. kukom felt she was losing the little boy she raised—**nêhiyâw napesis, kîwetinohk ohci**. She invested everything she knew as a Cree person into me, and she saw it slipping away. All the time I spent learning and living the English language, I was losing my Cree language and life. It became secondary, almost not important. It was time for the **little Cree boy, who was from the northern bush**, to show himself again.

It was here that my career path changed. My life goals changed. I needed to find that little Cree boy again and give him his voice back. I have worked in the educational field since and have made it my mission as an **askiy-nêhiyawêwin okiskinohamakew** to teach everything kukom taught me to the children of my community. I run Cree Culture camps year-round, using the Cree Language as the foundation of my programming. Just like kukom, I have become a **teacher of the language of the land**.

Her legacy of living the ***nêhiyaw miyo-pimâtisiwan*** has survived; her investment in me came full circle. The ***Cree Way of Life*** will continue with the children of my community. kukom's words will be heard from the mouths of my children and grandchildren for generations to come.



ᓇᓂᓂᓂ nohkᓂ (My Grandmother) Caroline Gardiner (1930–2003)