



Respect Works Here

Community Champion

Jenelle Brewer is a hard-working, dedicated, intelligent, resilient and, at times, surprisingly vulnerable woman, who is not used to the spotlight. Nominated as a Community Champion, she reluctantly accepts the honour, not for herself, but as an opportunity to be a role model for her children and community.

Jenelle grew up the youngest of six kids on the Okanagan Indian Band reserve. Her dad is Syilx and a descendant of Hereditary Chief N'kwala who was raised on the Reserve and worked hard his whole life, and her mom, in Jenelle's words, is an "Island girl" ... that is a second-generation Irish-Canadian from PEI. Jenelle speaks lovingly of her parents, who at 87 and 92, are still important guiding influences on her life.

"My mom is my mentor," Jenelle says.

"She got an education and came all the way out here to teach on the Reserve. She embraced and respected the new culture she was immersed in and so we were raised as Okanagan."

"It's interesting growing up First Nations but looking white. I get questioned about my authenticity," she says.

"On the other hand, I hear what people really think, because they haven't identified me as First Nations."

"I identify as Syilx," Jenelle continues. "I know who I am."

Jenelle left Vernon as a youth and had hard years where she struggled to make sense of things that had happened in her life. The intergenerational impact of residential schools and the systemic abuse of First Nations people has had its impact.

"I feel it in my emotional, physical and mental well-being as well as in my confidence as a parent," she says. "I guess because I look white it doesn't mean I don't suffer the effects."

In 2003 Jenelle returned with her two children to get a fresh start.

"The Reserve is my home, my roots," she says. "I don't know how people live without roots. I like to move around but I have to come home."

Jenelle spent two terms on the Band Council before studying business.

"One of the benefits of going to Okanagan College is that the professors are so supportive. They really invest in your education," she says and her pride in her achievement is evident, as she recalls what it took to attain that goal. "It's really tough being a single mom and going to school. It took six years, but I did it."

Originally planning to be an entrepreneur, after graduation Jenelle applied for a position at the Okanagan Indian Band office.

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"I come from an amazingly supportive community and wanted to apply some of my knowledge and contribute," Jenelle explains. "I quickly progressed through a variety of positions. My roles within OKIB have provided the opportunity to build on my leadership and management skills."

Even with her busy schedule, Jenelle still finds time to volunteer. "That's my 'me' time," she laughs. "I get to get out and see people. We have a lot of great organizations that support community."

But even with volunteering and career, Jenelle prioritizes her time with her two children, now teenagers, and is passionate about giving them the roots and community she relies on for her own strength.

