

## Nesmah Elkestawi

*What education do you have?*

I have a Bachelor of Science (major Biology, minor Chemistry) from the American University of Cairo, a Bachelor of Education (Secondary Sciences) from the University of Calgary, and a Masters in Educational Leadership from the University of Lethbridge.

*What is your work experience?*

I started out teaching upgrading classes (Chemistry 0115 and 0130) at Mount Royal University, then taught grade three for three years at the Calgary Islamic School - Omar Bin Al-khattab Campus. Currently, I am a high school **vice principal** and teacher at the Calgary Islamic School - Akram Jomaa Campus.

*What is your cultural background?*

I am Egyptian Palestinian... but really neither. LOL. I go by being a Muslim woman of the world. I was actually born in the USA, but lived a lot of my life in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt. I have been living here since 2007. As a result, I grew up in a western/eastern culture. I believe/hope I have had the best of both worlds.

*How has your cultural background affected you?*

I don't think my culture has an effect on what I do or why I do it; I believe my religion does in that it influences why I choose to do things. I want to make our community a better place for the world, not just for the community itself. There are so many **stereotypes** about Arabs/Muslims and I can see that they are sometimes true. The way "Arabs are" bothers me, especially because we can be horrible to each other. Instead of sitting back and watching, which I did for a good chunk of time, maybe five years, I figured I should try and help by building more well-rounded children to help mold our future into something more than what it is right now.

*How do you contribute to the community in which you live?*

I try to infuse how being a good human being is extremely important in the world we live in today. I often bring current events to the classroom, and we talk a lot about

what empathy is and how important it is in a world that is mainly online. Our school is focused on building purposeful relationships between students, between students and teachers, students and administrators, really just everyone all together. The school has been using **restorative** practices and circles to bring the community together. It takes time, but it's something the current generation needs immense help with.

*What does a day in your life look like?*

BUSY. I'm up at 6am and in the office by 7:15AM. I start off in a meeting with the other administrators to see what we have for the day, and then we're off. We're barely in our offices as we have a huge school and need to be everywhere all the time. I teach a Science 9 class from 8:45 - 10AM and then I'm either in meetings with other administrators, parents, students, or teachers. I also hang out in classes and the gym, and will walk around hallways throughout the day. Depending on the month, I might have more meetings than other "normal" days. For instance, we are gearing up now for next year, so I have a lot of 15 minute meetings with students to ensure they understand where they are standing when it comes to graduation, credits, and post-secondary class requirements.

Questions:

- Why does Nesmah say she believes she has the *best of both worlds*?
- What does Nesmah say influences why she chooses to do things?
- How does Nesmah want to help eliminate some of the stereotypes about Arabs in her community?
- How has her school worked to bring the community closer together?

## **Alejandra Mendez**

*What education do you have?*

I went to university for four years to become an English teacher and then I went back to school to acquire my Master's degree in Education.

*What is your work experience?*

I worked as an ESL teacher at all levels of education in Mexico and then I moved to Canada in 2012. I am now an English Teacher at Flexibility Learning Systems.

*What is your cultural background?*

I was born and raised in Mexico. All my family lives there. My mother and father raised me with all Mexican values, food and ideals. In Mexico, people don't really experience other cultures. We are pretty close minded that way. But we care about other people and always try our best to help. When I moved to Canada, I had the opportunity to learn about other cultures and that made me value my own even more. I am really proud to be Mexican and I am trying every day to pass it down to my daughter. I know that raising children living in another country will not be easy, but I will do my best to show them what my culture is.

*How has your cultural background affected you?*

Being from another country has helped me find ways to teach my students about other people's cultures and values. It also gives me a better understanding of what they might have felt when they first got here. They remind me every day how grateful we are, and that empowers me to continue doing what I do.

*How do you contribute to the community in which you live?*

I think I help my community by giving my students the tools they need to live in this city. They can later find a job and be more productive and that also helps the community to move forward.

*What does a day in your life look like?*

I wake up early every day. I get dressed and get ready to go to work. I also get my daughter ready and then take her to her day home. I drive to work and then start my day. I teach a drop-in class in the morning, so usually I spend time planning my day when I get there. After lunch, I teach the highest-level class. At 3 o'clock all students go back home and the teachers stay to plan for the next day. I pick up my daughter at 4:00 and then head home. We get home and chill out for a while, then I start cooking dinner. When my husband gets home from work I go to the gym and then we eat supper. We clean the kitchen and make lunches for the next day and then everybody takes a shower and goes to sleep. We take turns getting our daughter ready for bed. Then we start all over again the next day.

Questions:

- Where did Alejandra live before moving to Canada?
- How did moving to Canada influence Alejandra's perspective of her own culture?
- What is the main *tool* Alejandra gives her students to help them live in Canada?

## Micheal Ward

*What education do you have?*

I was born in Calgary, Alberta, but I was **adopted** by a family in Kelowna, British Columbia. Now I live in a small town in Alberta called Nobleford. I did my grade school in Coaldale, Alberta. Coaldale was not a very tolerant place to live, as the community did not value **diversity**. After grade twelve I took two years away from school before my mother asked me to go to University with her. I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of Lethbridge. I continued on my education journey and eventually finished my Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Calgary.

*What is your cultural background?*

Being an adoptee, I lived 38 years without a defined **ethnicity**. I only knew my color. When I turned 39, I applied for my adoption records. Finally, after 12 years of working with people of so many beautiful ethnic backgrounds, I now knew my ethnicity - I am French and German.

*Where are you employed?*

I am part of the Youth Settlement Services team at Lethbridge Family Services, in the **Immigrant** Services Department. I help youth and their families understand the education system in Lethbridge. I provide many services to these families: school orientations, out of school activities, **networking** opportunities, ongoing educational supports and support for parents to work with schools as a team.

*How do you contribute to the community in which you live?*

I do this work because I feel passionate about the value and importance of youth and diversity in our community. My father was a police officer and my mother is a social worker. As such, I was raised to appreciate social **justice**, **equality** and **fairness** for all.

*What does a day in your life look like?*

My schools start at 7:55am, so my day begins at 8:00am. I usually go to the Immigrant Services office first thing to check emails and see if I missed any calls from

teachers, youth or community agencies. Once I return those calls, I usually visit one or two of my schools each work day. When I go to schools, it allows teachers and youth to access me directly for support. Most of my day is filled with assisting those people with the supports they are requesting. My day usually ends at one of the schools so I can see many of the parents I work with, and see if they need any help. I feel that each day is a success if I go to a school, help a teacher, help a youth and help a parent. Once I do all those things, I feel that my work day has been a success.

Questions:

- With whom did Micheal attend university?
- How did Micheal get to know his ethnicity? What is his ethnicity?
- List three services Micheal provides to families.

## Roy Pogorzelski

*What is your cultural background?*

I am Metis from Saskatchewan and my family comes from the **communities** of Green Lake, Meadow Lake and Batoche in the north.

*What education do you have?*

I have a Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Studies and a Bachelor of Human Justice from the University of Regina and a Masters of Science in Cultures and Development Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit of Leuven in Belgium.

*What is your work experience?*

I spent four years with the City of Lethbridge as the inclusion consultant representing the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against **Racism** and **Discrimination** (CCMARD) initiative and the Vibrant Lethbridge's poverty reduction **initiatives**. I represented Lethbridge at the Cities for All Woman's Initiative and assisted in collaborating on the creation of a National **Equity** and Inclusion Guide for Municipalities, which turned into an Inclusion Policy for the City of Lethbridge in 2016.

I also co-chaired the Reconciliation sub-committee and was instrumental in the creation of a Reconciliation Implementation Plan (2017-2027) for the City of Lethbridge in response to the TRC Calls to Action. I was also selected to represent UNESCO Canada at the International Coalition of Cities Against Racism and Discrimination (ICCAR) for meetings on inclusion in cities in Nairobi Kenya. I am also very involved in the community sitting as a member of the U of L Senate, as a Board Member with the YMCA Lethbridge, President for the Rotary Club of Lethbridge Mosaic, member of the Board of Directors with the Chamber of Commerce and am an appointed Board of Director for the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF) and sit as the CRRF advisor to the National CCMARD committee.

In 2016, I received a Human Rights Champion Award from the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights, in 2016 his business Pogo Bros Inc. took home an award for best event/festival of the year for Oktoberfest YQL from the Best of Southwest Tourism Awards, in 2017 I was awarded a Friends of Diversity Award from

Diversity Magazine in Calgary, in 2017 CMARD Lethbridge was awarded a “From the Heart Award” from the Downtown Awards for our work in creating a welcoming and inclusive downtown, I was named the overall winner of the Top 40 under 40 by the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce and in 2018 was awarded an outstanding dedication award to students by the University of Lethbridge Student’s Union.

I have worked in business, non-profit, government, internationally and as a **consultant**. Currently, I am the Director of Indigenous Student Affairs on the University of Lethbridge campus where I am also a sessional instructor for the Dhillon School of Business and Indigenous Studies Faculties.

*What does a day in your life look like?*

I wake up at 7am, hop into the shower, turn the radio on, then I make some hard-boiled eggs for breakfast. At 8am, on certain days I head to a Board meeting for the Chamber of Commerce and then drive to my office at the University of Lethbridge where I answer emails, set up meetings and ensure that my staff are supported. At lunch, I normally go to the gym after eating vegetables and fruit, I ride the bike for 30 minutes and watch Impractical Jokers on You Tube. The afternoon is full of more meetings and lots of paper work. At 4:30pm every Wednesday, I go to my Rotary Club meeting where I am the President, so I have to run the meeting. Sometimes I order chicken wings (as it is wing night) and then order a pint. Following the meeting, I normally head to another meeting, or in the summer I go to play baseball in the evening for our Good Times team, which is the comedy club that I run in the community. Then I go home and eat a late-night snack and then I head to bed to get a good sleep for the next day

Questions:

- How many degrees does Roy have?
- Why did the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination (CCMARD) win the *From the Heart Award*?

## Sheldon Day Chief

*What is your cultural background?*

I am a member of the A'apaitstipii Weasel Clans, from the original treaty Running Antelope Clan. I was born in the village of Cardston in 1960 and I am a residential school survivor.

*What education do you have?*

I attended the Standoff Kindergarten School at the age of four years old and then grew up in the St. Mary's Catholic Residential School from six years old until I was 17 years old. I left the boarding school with a grade nine education, but my reading, writing and comprehension skills were well below what was needed to succeed in mainstream society. Before moving on to furthering my education, I took the opportunity to relearn my Blackfoot language and the traditional **protocols** of my Blackfoot culture. I rekindled my spiritual connections to my ancestors, to the universe around me, and my responsibility as an A'apaitstipii to all living beings. I took the same passion for learning into furthering my education; I earned my high school diploma by attending upgrading courses through a satellite program from Lethbridge Community College. I completed my first three years of university towards my Education, Aboriginal Law and Native American Studies degrees, but then I was abruptly disqualified from fully using my federal government financial credits because of my political views and the personal jealousy of the Tribal Education Superintendent of the Blood Reserve at the time. Despite personal and professional setbacks, I continued to pursue diverse education opportunities. For example, I received my Correctional Officers diploma with distinct honors, earning the historic Helen Huntly Award for excelling in both the academic and physical fitness aspects of the correctional officer training. This award is given to the top student from all institutions across Alberta. In 2006, I earned my personal counseling certificate through the Signet Center/Victory Church and the teachings of Graham Bretherick, registered psychologist. Moreover, in 2010, I attained my class one driver's license and my small business certificate.

*How did your experience at residential school influence you?*

My personal take away from my experience in the residential school and research conducted on the relationship between Canada and First Nations people (*Nitstipii*) was that educating the *Nitstipii* was not Canada's priority. Their only goal was to kill the Indian in the *Nitstipii*. My experiences in the residential school taught me many of my personal traits I carry today. When I attended the boarding school system, I felt very oppressed and silenced in many ways. I couldn't speak my

language or learn my culture on any level. I was punished, and because of that I was confused about who I was and how I saw my First Nation's background and heritage. It also taught me how to take care of myself both physically, mentally, and emotionally even though most of the emotional and physical aspects were, in my opinion, towards the negative end of things. For example, I learned how to physically take care of myself, learned how to fight, learned how to stand up for those that couldn't, and learned how to keep my physical/person clean and everything else within my personal space. It made me more determined to learn who I was as a First Nations person by asking myself, why was the boarding school so determined to suppress my knowledge of who I was, my culture and my history? Today I know that very reason....

My culture has given me back everything I've lost back then, and more. Traditional knowledge of how passionate my ancestors were to teach our youth and our children who we are, so they can take back their lives from knowing who they are as *Nitsitapii* - the real people of this land.

I've taken the teachings of my late grandparents and parents and they're message to me to teach all those that want to know who we are as a people so that one day all the negative stigma towards the *Nitsitapii* would be erased, and that we can live as equals with all nations that may come to our territories....

Those teachings and the ones I learn from my ceremonial elders on a daily basis allow me to understand when my grandfather told me, "My boy, you can never say that you are *A'apaitstipii* in the flesh until *Apistotookii*, our Creator, takes you home. Even then, when you leave this physical world, we will be waiting for you to help you continue your journey of existence in the spirit that is designed for you by *Apistotookii*...."

*How did your cultural background influence what you do today?*

I was taught by my grandfather, my parents and the ceremonial elders that our spirituality and ceremonial ways are our curriculums to life. I have taken the lifelong teachings of my grandfather and my parents and turned them into my personal best practices in networking, giving workshops in historic information regarding relationships with Canadian society and First Nations peoples. I've been involved with our traditional way of life where I've been a traditional powwow and ceremonial lead singer and translator for ceremonial conductors/hosts from Blackfoot to English. I continue to create opportunities to share my traditional Blackfoot culture and my knowledge with all who want to learn our ways through cultural awareness workshops and programs. Due to my continuing pursuit of

traditional knowledge, today I pride myself in claiming that I am resourceful and well versed in my traditional protocol(s) of building positive relationships to promote partnership with First Nations and mainstream society. Finally, my ultimate dream is to create a tourism project, a Traditional Blackfoot Tipi Village to promote and show case my knowledge of my Blackfoot history and contemporary powwow song and dance. My ultimate goal is to help people better understand those from all walks of life in hope of creating and promoting safer, healthier, and more prosperous relationships.

*What does a day in your life look like?*

A day in my life is quite complex as I carry my family's leadership roles in pretty much everything ceremonial. I am also very involved in my personal life with work, ceremony, and social activities. I do help care for my children and grandchildren financially, even though it's from a distance, and of course I need to take care of myself as I live within the city of Lethbridge and it's expensive. Along with all that I'm faced with everyday activities; I choose to stay connected to teaching both on and off reserve with political subjects and social aspects regarding mainstream society's relationship with First Nations people. Also, my main passion is to create cross cultural awareness to break down those barriers of racism and misconception by teaching First Nations culture, especially my traditional Blackfoot ceremonial and social teachings through song, dance, story- telling and the history of our ancestral territory.... In the end, there is so much more to my life that I sometimes hardly have time for myself, my home upkeep, and even thinking of creating and having my own personal relationship with a significant other. I find being single keeps me very active, versatile and transparent. I don't know if that's the word to use, for myself and for all that is within my everyday life these past 15 years.... *Aho*

Questions:

- Why did Sheldon feel oppressed and silenced at the boarding school?
- What are some ways Sheldon builds positive relationships to promote partnership with First Nations and mainstream society?
- What is Sheldon's life goal?

## Les Vonkeman

### *What is your background?*

I was born in 1969 to a woman I don't remember. I was born at the height of horrible government legislation called the 60's scoop. The government took me away from my family, flew me away from the community in which I was living at the age of two years old and adopted me out to a **Caucasian** family of Dutch heritage living in southern Alberta. I attended a private Christian school and grew up in a loving, hardworking farm family. Other than one man who was supposed to teach me, but tormented me for my grade five school year, I rarely encountered direct racism or discrimination. That grade five year defines who I am today, as it taught me a lot of lessons on resiliency and overcoming difficulties.

### *What education do you have?*

I finished grade twelve in 1987 but because of my lack of self-esteem – partly due to that grade five teacher who told me I would never amount to anything - I didn't think I could follow my dream of becoming a police officer. It took thirteen years of self-development until I was able to apply to Lethbridge College for the Criminal Justice Program. I was fortunate to complete the first year of the Criminal Justice Program and got a summer student practicum position with the Lethbridge Police Service. I knew I needed to work hard so that I was noticed by those who did the hiring, as my dream included working for the Lethbridge Police Service. My hard work paid off and I was asked to submit an application during the very next recruiting drive. I was selected to become a police officer.

### *What is your work experience?*

I spent the first 10 years on the streets as a patrol officer. I learned how to talk to random strangers, tactical communication, and many other skills that help me today in my role as the Diversity Liaison Officer.

My Diversity Officer role is about building relationships with the multitude of different diverse groups that make up our community. I was raised to look out for those who struggle in life. The Indigenous people are over represented in almost every negative facet of our society - jails, social services, and suicides are just three examples where Indigenous people are over-represented.

Early in my career, I noticed that almost all the Indigenous people we encountered struggled with addictions. I remember having a propensity for alcohol but actively tried to control how much I consumed when I went out. I saw the Indigenous people I was repeatedly dealing with as being weak, as they wouldn't even try to control themselves. Those we encountered usually drank until they were blackout drunk; it usually caused familial problems and I wanted to understand why.

*What are some job-related initiatives you have undertaken?*

As Diversity Officer I have been given the opportunity to learn about my Indigenous culture like I had never before. I have asked thousands of questions to some very patient Indigenous Elders and Indigenous people who have become my friends. I have learned about addictions and why Indigenous people struggle. Although there are many other diverse groups in our community, I have a passion to help my Indigenous people overcome the struggles they face. I now understand the root cause of most of the problems Indigenous people face are unresolved trauma caused by horrific governmental legislation of the past. Based on many discussions with the professionals, I have developed several programs for our community.

One program is called the *l'taamohkanoohsin (Everyone comes together)* tipi in the park program, which was developed for two reasons. Firstly, people struggling on our streets and in our community advised that they wanted a cultural connection. Secondly, a tipi in Galt Garden Park was a focal point and drew many people from our community to come see what was happening. This interaction allowed mainstream society to see our homeless people as people, and this built bridges of understanding. Our local McDonald's restaurant has been instrumental in sponsoring the coffee and snacks for the participants since it started in January of 2017. During cold wintery months, an Elder and myself have driven around with McDonald's coffee and engaged those on the streets directly.

I also started a *Games Night* at the shelter as it's my belief that everyone wants to feel important and accepted. Families who are connected frequently engage in activities such as card playing, rummy, bingo and other games. I asked many other people from our communities who have a heart for the homeless people to join me on this initiative. We have attended the Lethbridge Shelter every Wednesday evening for several years. During this time, we discovered several shelter clients who

had amazing talents, such as one man who was an amazing violinist. We found and donated a violin to him to continue playing at our game night events.

Another program I run is called *Blackfoot Perspectives Tipi Camp*. This is a two-day, one-night interactive camp on the Indigenous reserve land, designed for our community to learn about the beauty of the Indigenous people. Most people, from mainstream society only see the Indigenous people who struggle with unresolved trauma and addictions, as they are most visible on our streets. They don't see the beauty of the Indigenous culture, but this camp allows the participants to have their questions answered and participate in ceremonies. It also teaches the root cause of the addictions we see on Lethbridge's streets and this understanding builds advocates for the Indigenous nation. Understanding and acceptance will help our community be more cohesive and safer.

One last passion I have is sharing education with people who are at risk of victimization - elderly people, new Canadians and any other **vulnerable**. I frequently attend places where our elderly gather and present information on **scams** and elder abuse.

*What is your ultimate goal?*

I know that I am not the expert in all things and in all my initiatives I try to collaborate with someone or some organization working in those fields. I do my work and hope it makes a small ripple of change in our community. I also hope that many of those I collaborate with will also make a ripple and eventually together we can make a wave of change for our whole community.

*What does a day in your life look like?*

A day in my life is sometimes not long enough, as I am always looking at supporting different organizations and individuals doing good work in our community. I am frequently meeting people to find out how we as a police service or as a community member can help each other. I receive countless requests for help, but unfortunately, I cannot help everyone.

Questions:

- What happened to Les and many other Indigenous children during the Sixties Scoop?
- What is Les's role as a diversity officer?
- What opportunity allowed Les to learn more about his Indigenous culture?
- What program, run by Les, helps the community to learn about the beauty of the Indigenous people?