

In memoriam

Susan Sammons (1953-2011)

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Susan Sammons

(1953-2011)

Susan Sammons, who had just retired from Nunavut Arctic College, passed away in the early morning of May 29, 2011 during a stay at her summer cottage near Winnipeg (her original hometown). She had suffered health problems over the preceding months, but nobody expected her to leave so suddenly. She is survived by her husband Peter Kusugak and their children Nanauq and Kukik.

I first met Susan in the fall of 1982 on the occasion of the 3rd Inuit Studies Conference in London, Ontario. She was completing a Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Michigan, and had driven from Ann Arbor with her thesis supervisor. I remember a small youngish blond-haired woman wearing a red beret and, I think, a red coat. She appeared to me to be a person highly determined to make her mark in the field of Inuit language and linguistics.

I had no direct contacts with Susan for some time afterward, except for a phone call from her a couple of years later. She was asking technical questions about Inuktitut and told me she was now living in Rankin Inlet with her husband Peter. I also happened to read her Ph.D. dissertation on *Inuktitut in Rankin Inlet* (1985) during a sabbatical visit to the Alaska Native Language Center (University of Alaska Fairbanks). I found it interesting the way her thesis combined linguistic and sociolinguistic data in order to draw a complete picture of language use in Rankin Inlet.

Then, in late 1988, I heard again from Susan. She was inviting me to teach a course on Inuit dialects at the Nunatta (Iqaluit) campus of Nunavut Arctic College. She had moved there with her family some time before, and had been put in charge of administration and development of the college's translator/interpreter training curriculum. Under her direction, this program would soon expand into a more encompassing one of Inuit language and culture. During the following decade, I went back to Iqaluit several times on teaching missions, and at Susan's request I prepared a series of textbooks on Inuit dialectology, language history, sociolinguistics, and community organisation, published by Nunavut Arctic College.

Over the years, this led to wider collaboration between the Inuit language and culture program and Université Laval. Between 1994 and 2006, Susan and I conducted three consecutive SSHRC-funded research projects on discourse and identity in the Baffin (Qikiqtani) region of Nunavut (see Dorais and Sammons 2000, 2002; Dorais 2006). At the same time, Susan developed a long-term collaborative venture with

professors François Trudel and Frédéric Laugrand from Université Laval, and Jarich Oosten from Leiden University (The Netherlands). The projects they devised—some are still in operation after more than a dozen years—consisted first in inviting elders to the college’s classrooms, where, with the support of the local teaching staff and invited scholars (including famous names such as Jean Briggs, Bernard Saladin d’Anglure, and Michèle Therrien), they dialogued with college students on various topics pertaining to Inuit culture. These questions and answers were later published in book form, in Inuktitut, English and, occasionally, French. Classroom discussions were later expanded into culture camps held on the land, mostly in Kivalliq, which generated written as well as audiovisual documents. Other research projects were undertaken in collaboration with Susan Sammons to interview people who had played an important part in Inuit political development and the inception of Nunavut, in order to write and publish their biographies.

These research activities did not prevent Susan from being involved full-time, seemingly 24 hours a day, in teaching, administrative, community, and family activities. On top of her regular course load (that extended into academic and personal student counselling), she welcomed to Iqaluit, and became a volunteer advisor to, dozens upon dozens of visiting students and professional scholars. She set up academic exchanges with Leiden, Paris, and several other places, brought or sent her students to various scientific meetings, edited and published a number of English-Inuktitut thematic lexicons, and organised scholarly events in Iqaluit, such as the 9th Inuit Studies Conference (1994). Besides her work at the college, Susan was intensively involved in community life. Among other activities, she played an important role in the Northwest Territories (and, later, Nunavut) Interpreter/Translator Society. In 1993, she edited a special issue of *Meta Translators’ Journal* on “Translation and Interpretation in Northern Canada.” And for several years, she held the position of Justice of the Peace at the Iqaluit courthouse.

All this was done with humour and a smile—most of the time at least. It also left Susan enough time for family life. Summers were generally spent with Peter and the children at their cottage on Lake Winnipeg, and/or visiting relatives in Rankin Inlet, but Christmas holidays were often devoted to family trips to faraway places: the temples of Angkor, Easter Island, etc. One explanation for Susan’s efficiency at managing her daily life, and that of many others, was her highly developed sense of organisation. I remember having once brought my 14-year-old daughter for a few days to Iqaluit, where I was teaching a course. Susan had organised for her a complete, almost hourly, program of activities to do while I was teaching. The activities included, among others, a guided tour of the town, an outing on a skidoo, a visit to an Inuktitut elementary classroom, and a family meal at her home, followed by an evening of parlour games to which she had invited some of her students and colleagues. This kind of planning was customary with Susan. It did not only denote her skill for organising things, but also her (and Peter’s) supreme sense of hospitality. Because of all these professional and personal qualities, Susan Sammons will be regretted by hundreds of individuals—Inuit as well as non-Inuit—in many countries.

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I remember Susan Sammons

Susan's formal obituary outlines her achievements. I would like to add some context by comparing her working conditions with mine. I started seriously working with Inuktitut in 1969. For the next 40 years I led a charmed life in the bureaucracy. Of course I always had a titular boss to whom I reported, but they all, for the most part, left me alone to carry out my work as I saw fit. It was not until the creation of the Government of Nunavut in 1991 that I found myself enmeshed in a typical governmental bureaucracy—smothered in marshmallows and nibbled to distraction by goldfish.

Susan's experience was a complete contrast. It started off well enough. She was given the task of training Inuit interpreters and translators, and provided with an adequate budget for that limited purpose. She managed that program so parsimoniously that within a year, with no increase in staff or budget, she was able to offer a 1-year course in Inuit Studies, the only one of its kind in Arctic Canada, which became a popular success among Inuit students. Many of its graduates now hold senior positions in government departments and Inuit organisations.

But that wasn't all. Susan made connections with North American and European academics involved in Arctic studies. She set up courses where young college students met with elders and interviewed them on traditional topics, such as traditional childrearing practices, traditional law, the change from shamanism to Christianity, etc. Then the program's staff published a series of books on these themes, a total of 20 volumes up to the present, which have sold well under the college's imprint. She arranged an exchange with Michèle Therrien, who was in charge of Inuktitut courses at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris. Every spring, an

Inuk staff member from Iqaluit would spend time in Paris assisting the course. In return, every spring a selected student from the Paris course would pursue a project in Iqaluit. There was also a connection with established academics, who worked with staff and students to produce published research.

The college, of course, was delighted with the prestige that came with all this activity. Every public event was furnished with an increasing shelf-full of publications, and every flattering mention by the press was welcomed. Remember, all of this was carried out within the constraints of a budget provided for simply one 2-year course to train interpreter-translators. For seven years the budget remained unchanged, apart from the normal percentage increase. The strain on Susan's staff was obviously intense, and it all came to a head in 2002.

From 1995 to 2002 my wife Alexina Kublu was Susan's only staff member, and shared the burden of all this intense activity. I was very aware of the evening and weekend hours spent on extra duties of translating, editing, and proofreading. Frankly, she often came home exhausted, occasionally to the point of tears. Nonetheless, the two of them made a united team, with bonds that were social as well as professional. In 1998, coincidentally, Susan had persuaded Kublu to become a fellow Justice of the Peace. In the spring of 2002 a new government position was created, that of Senior Justice of the Peace for Nunavut. This was a career step upward, with a commensurate increase in salary, and significantly fewer demands on her time. Kublu had kept Susan informed, and Susan made no effort to dissuade her. But the partnership had worked so well that Susan finally told the college president she could not continue with the Inuit Studies course without an increase in staff and budget. His response: "Well, cancel it then."

This kind of response has been typical of most southerners hired as presidents of Nunavut Arctic College. I do not have anything to do with them anymore, but none of the ones I dealt with showed the slightest commitment to Inuktitut. I stepped in at this point. I phoned Jim Bell, the editor of *Nunatsiaq News*, and he questioned the president on the situation. The president's response? This was a "glitch" caused by the decision of a staff member to leave the program. What a crass and obvious attempt to shift blame! I had great fun writing a letter to the newspaper describing the whole situation as a "Seven-Year Glitch."

There was a strong reaction. Although this issue should have been a college responsibility, a Native organisation finally moved in to fund the program. I forget how it all ended. I do not know whether the college ever did come through with better funding. The administrators ran NAC like a second-rate community college tucked into a remote corner of a minor province. Susan saw her responsibilities as echoing the name of the institution, the Arctic College for Nunavut. She created an international reputation for it, on her own.

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