

Helen Bassett was an Ontario artist and an amazing woman who tried to make a difference as an individual and engage the government into fair solutions to Aboriginal land claim issues. After befriending an Aboriginal artist and learning through him about the plight of Aboriginal people, she became passionate about the issue and had special concern for advancement of Aboriginal women. In her selflessness, she specified NWAC as one of the beneficiaries of her estate in her will, which helped us sustain our post-secondary student scholarships program to this day.

In her own words:

“I would suggest that it is the moral obligation of the people of this country, and in particular the members of our legislative bodies, to OFFER a proposition which has at the very heart and core of it, a viable and honorable settlement to assure a future for our native people. It should not be made as a response to their demands, but as an attempt to make amends to a people we have shamefully abused” (March 8, 1983, An Open Letter to the Prime Minister and the Provincial Premiers).

Ms. Bassett was a commercial artist and was involved in her own sign making business. She resided, for most of her life, in Toronto and since 1967 she lived in Etobicoke, Ontario. In the course of her life, she got involved on voluntary bases in politics for the NDP and also came to know Greenpeace and actively campaigned for their causes. At some point, she befriended Joe Rosenthal, who was an artist involved in Native sketches, and through that friendship, she became deeply concerned about the plight of Aboriginal people in Canada. She developed a special concern for treatment of Aboriginal women and the chances for their advancement.

Ms. Bassett felt strongly about the land rights of Aboriginal people and decided to try and make a difference as an individual. She directed open letters to Prime Minister Trudeau and his cabinet in 1980 and again in 1983, proposing a plan that a tax be levied on all land transactions in Canada, to be assigned as royalty to the native people, in payment for the possession and use of the land. She reflected these ideas in her booklet “Native Rights”.

In 2003, just as our youth funding was severely cut and our scholarships program was in danger, we became aware that the Native Women’s Association of Canada was one of the trustees of Ms. Bassett estate as she generously bestowed 35% of the estate annually to our organization. Not having much information at that point about Ms. Bassett or the specifics of her estate, we used some of the funds for continuing our student scholarships program, from that point titled "Helen Bassett Commemorative Scholarships". Once we finally received more information about these funds, we were rather surprised to realize that Ms. Bassett original wish was for funds to be used for post-secondary student scholarships, and more specifically for women pursuing law careers.