



Deborah Lee Simmons

October 2 1962 - October 28 2022



Deborah Lee Simmons was born in Ajo, Arizona, in 1962, to Hilah (teacher) and Norman (biologist) Simmons. Followed two and a half years later by brother David, she began her teaching career early with this new sibling who, though not the best student, thrived under her tutelage. It was not long before she started ‘organizing’ her family. We were an unruly lot but that did not stop her from trying.

In ‘66 the family packed the station wagon and moved to Ft. Smith in the Northwest Territories, an idyllic little town on the banks of the Slave River. Early formative experiences include the summers spent on the banks of the Keele River in the Mackenzie Mountains where Deb was first introduced to the Northern “bush”. Norman was doing research on Dall Sheep for the Canadian Wildlife Service supported by three Mountain Dene families from Tulita, a town on the Mackenzie River. Their guidance was essential to the success of his research, providing expert knowledge on the land, its wildlife and its people. The Simmons clan was treated like family and had the unique opportunity to learn about the traditional skills, stories and philosophies of the Sahtú Dene. These experiences likely inspired what would ultimately become Deborah’s mission in the North, namely to support and strengthen Dene culture, language, and self-governance; and to ensure the participation of the Dene people in the management of their natural resources.



The year 1973 brought her brother Daniel into the fold. In 1975 the Simmons family moved further north to Yellowknife on the shore of Great Slave Lake and a few months later her sister Sarah was born.

During this time, Deb distinguished herself both as a top student and through her many extra-curricular interests such as cross country skiing, camping, and canoeing, the latter a favorite family activity. Her mother Hilah surrounded the family with music and Deb learned piano and played french horn, then flute, in the Sir John Franklin High School band. Between these pursuits she could almost always be found with a book in hand. She was an absolutely voracious reader. In school, Deb befriended the quirky, talented and interesting kids, a trait that would continue throughout her life as evidenced by her sprawling network of unique individuals. Her love of languages inspired her to do a French immersion semester in Caraquet, New Brunswick. At graduation, Deb was second in her class and selected as Valedictorian.

Deb's post-secondary career was the ground of her true flowering as a thinker, writer, activist, and teacher. She was a committed socialist with a vision to build a just society for all by advancing and amplifying the voices of the dispossessed. Following the completion of her PhD Dissertation on the political economy of Indigenous resistance in the Social and Political Thought program at York University in Toronto, she went on to teach at the University of Manitoba.

After this stint in academia, Deb returned to her childhood roots with a job as a social science researcher in the Sahtú region, working with some of the same families that her father had worked with decades before. Picking up the baton from him, she advocated for the full participation of the Dene in conservation and land management. Her principled commitment to indigenous self-determination brought her, ultimately, to the position of Executive Director of the Sahtú Renewable Resources board. In this role, she was able to effect lasting change, notably by having the co-management of natural resources recognized as a right within the framework of land claims agreements. Along with her tireless struggle to have indigenous rights recognized by the legal authorities that would rule the

land, she championed Dene ways of knowing and being, namely by integrating Dene language and oral histories through all projects in which she was involved.

Her colleagues within academic, professional, and activist circles have spoken beautifully of Deb's tireless work ethic, commitment to her ideals and innate good nature (see below). Her capacity to organize and network, along with her joyous and kind spirit, drew many to her. Though always gentle, she was never deterred. This magnetic energy surely emanated from her huge heart.

Deborah was a pillar of her family and will be sorely missed. She is survived by her mother Hilah, her partner Morris, her siblings and their children. She was a fun and loving auntie not only to Ruby and Sadie, (Sarah), and Noah, Hilah and Remi (Danny), but also to Morris' niece Jennie and to many young people in the Sahtú on whom she made a lasting impact. In her life, cut far too short, Debby passionately planted many seeds that already are blooming. May she be remembered not only for her legacy but for the irrepressible joy and passion she brought to bear throughout her life.



