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Preparing for Adäka

Full roster planned for seven-day festival

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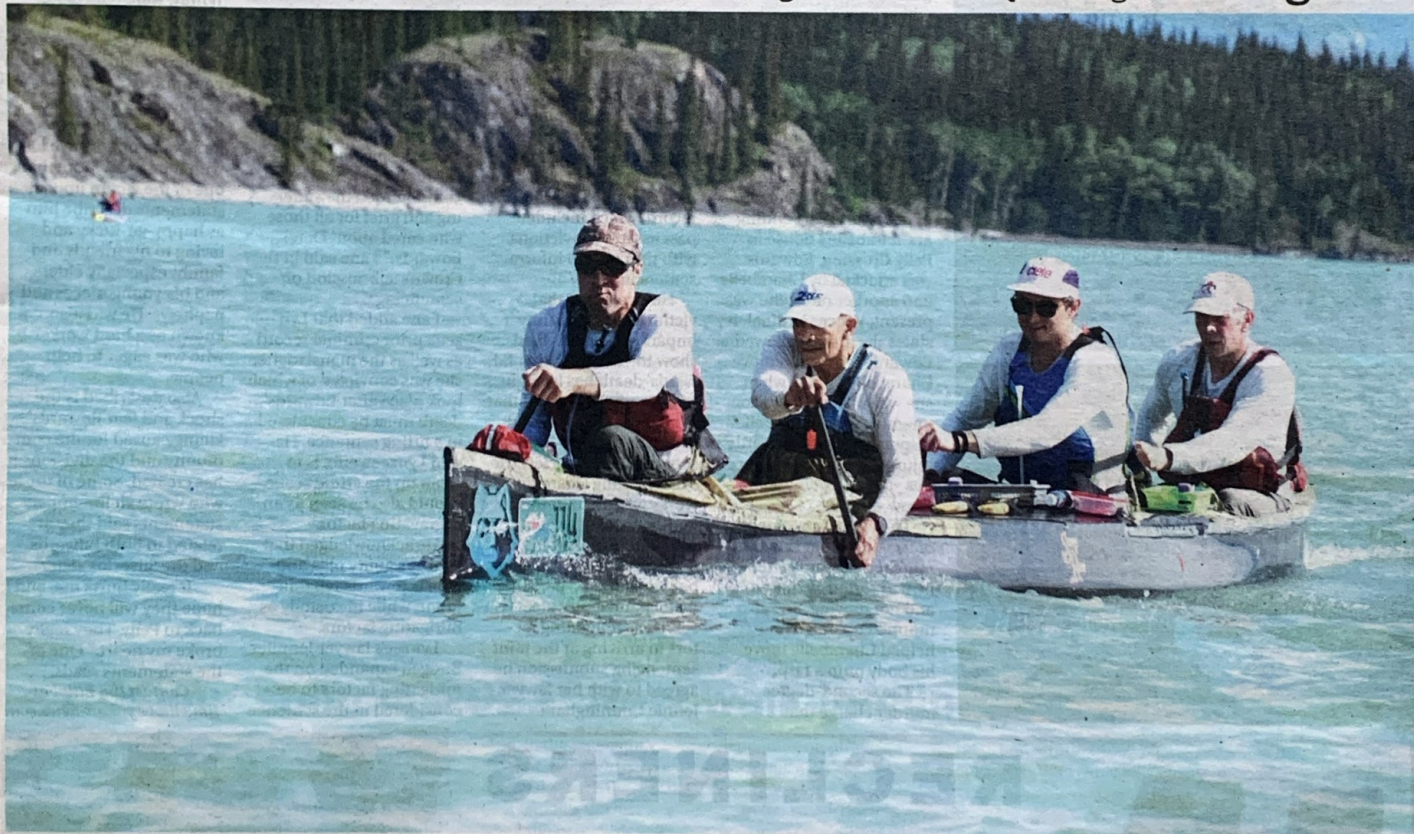
'Nicole would have loved this'

Joy Seeker Festival remembers Nicole Edwards

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Paddlers flying to finish line

Skilled paddlers on fast water could break records reaching Dawson: River Quest organizers Page 30



Four-person canoe team Something Else Entirely made up of Eric Brault, Robert Spinks, Mike De Abreu and Sebastien Courville paddles up Lake Laberge on the first day of the Yukon River Quest on June 22. Something Else Entirely led the whole race into the final checkpoint at Thistle Creek arriving around 6:30 a.m. June 24. (Jim Elliot/Yukon News)

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LIFE

Joy Seeker Festival honours life of Nicole Edwards



Magan Carty
News Reporter

In honour of the life and music of Nicole Edwards, a festival of joy took place outside Mount Lorne Community Centre on June 18.

This event, deemed the Joy Seeker Festival, was organized by Edwards' family, friends and musical colleagues. All were welcome to gather and share in the joy.

On this bright and sunny afternoon, performers of all ages took to the stage to sing songs, tell stories and share memories about Edwards. While there were tears, there was also laughter and many hugs. Festive banners hung around the gazebo, giant fish puppets swam through the dancing crowd and the smell of BBQ filled the air.

This celebration was a testament to the kind of life Edwards led and how much she meant to her community.

"Nicole would have absolutely loved this," said musician Caroline Watt in between songs of her set.

"Her energy is here. She wants to make sure we are all alert and present."

According to Watt, Edwards loved words and finding the deeper meaning in things. She left behind a rich musical and community legacy.

Edwards obtained medical assistance in dying after a 20-year battle with severe scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease that caused her chronic pain and fatigue. Also known as systemic sclerosis, scleroderma is the result of overproduction and accumulation



Musical colleagues of Nicole Edwards opened the celebration of life with a cover of her original song "Love, Serve and Uplift" as the audience sang along. (Magan Carty/Yukon News)

of collagen in the body's tissues.

"My state of health prevents me from participating in life," she wrote on her website. "It's rewarding for me to be able to still share and connect through my music."

Edwards' love of music kept her shining, seeking joy and inspiring the community she loved until her passing on Sept. 8, 2021. Her prime vocation remained community service through the arts.

In 1998, just one year after moving to the Yukon, Edwards founded BYTE (Bringing Youth Towards Equality). Her youth advocacy work and dedication to the music industry earned

her a Meritorious Service Medal from the Governor General in 2016.

BYTE still lives on today, empowering and promoting youth, making it one of the oldest organizations in the Yukon that caters specifically to young people. Their facilitation team also travels to some areas of Northern B.C. and Northwest Territories to deliver innovative workshops. They aspire to help northern youth develop a sense of openness and belonging.

In 2018, The Nicole Edwards Leadership Fund was launched as part of the 20th anniversary of BYTE. Youth aged 14-25 who live in the Yukon, Atlin or Mackenzie Delta region can apply for up to \$1,500 to help build their confidence, skills and passion. Recent recipients have used the money to shoot a music video and fund camera equipment for a hiking documentary by which they spoke the Tlingit language exclusively.

BYTE is currently led by executive director Josi Leideritz and program director Casey Albert. They were both in attendance at the Joy Seeker Festival.

"This event is such a beautiful image of Nicole projected," said Albert.

"All her closest friends

organized it and are up on stage. You can sense her spirit."

Albert remembers Edwards as an "inspiration," a "driving-force" and "trailblazer."

Leideritz remembers Edwards as "very caring," a "powerhouse," and "deep and a forward-thinker."

"She saw a need in the Yukon for youth work and just went for it. She also created the first safe space for LGBTQ youth," said Leideritz.

Edwards came to the Yukon to create a job for herself but, after her diagnosis, couldn't do the job she created. Leideritz and Albert are committed to continuing what Edwards started.

"We are really honoured to be invited and receiving such generous donations. To get this kind of support at an event like this is really special," Albert said.

"And I just heard them announce they need to make more room for the dance floor," added Leideritz.

"That pretty well sums up the event."

Among the musical acts was a newly formed youth band, the Skellies. Juniper Deline, 10, and Alexa Lawrence, 11, performed two original songs: "SOS" and "Footsteps". They are in the

process of writing their third, which is called "3 a.m."

"We always come up with the titles first, then write the lyrics and then find the tunes," explained Lawrence.

Deline said it brought her and her bandmate joy to play in front of people. Lawrence's favourite part was when she could hear the audience clapping.

This was the duo's fourth time performing in front of a live audience. They had previously taken to the stage in Haines Junction and at Whitehorse Elementary School. The Skellies hope to record an album one day soon.

"We want to travel

places and perform on a big, big stage," said Deline.

Edwards was an inspiring figure in Deline's life. She would often practise new songs for her and then ask what she thought. According to Deline's mother, Edwards' influence clearly rubbed off.

The Skellies think Edwards would have loved their lyrics, especially the part that goes: "I don't know what scares me most... Is it my mom, or is it a ghost?"

Music wasn't the only feast for the senses at this celebration of life. The festival environment continued indoors where there was a silent auction, photo collages of Edwards and memory books to sign. Copies of her CD "Genre Bender" were scattered out amongst many tables for free. "Take one," the post-it notes on top said.

There was a tickle trunk of her most iconic clothing pieces and buttons with her picture for guests to wear throughout the day. There were "feely Nicole hearts" made of felt for everyone to take a piece of her home.

Tangible reminders of Edwards' personality and influence were everywhere. Memories of her happy energy rippled out to all in attendance, proving what she prayed for is true:

"That these three simple things I will do

"Love, serve and uplift one another.

"Love, serve and uplift one another."

To learn more about BYTE and the Nicole Edwards Leadership Fund, visit yukonyouth.com

Contact Magan Carty at magan.carty@yukon-news.com



From left, Juniper Deline and Alexa Lawrence of newly-formed band the Skellies. They performed two original songs at the Joy Seeker Festival (Magan Carty/Yukon News)



From left, Casey Albert and Josi Leideritz of BYTE, the youth advocacy organization founded by Nicole Edwards in 1998. (Magan Carty/Yukon News)