

Ts'akë zé Kilisët

Violet Mary Gellenbeck



DOB Sept 1, 1937
Sunset Jan 4, 2024
Age 86



On January 4, 2024, Violet Gellenbeck died peacefully in her home at the age of 86. A matriarch within the Wit'suwit'en community, she will be remembered for her dedication to the cause of Indigenous peoples. Over her life, she made countless contributions to advancing Indigenous concerns, including in Native education and employment services, Witsuwit'en language and cultural revitalization, protection of Indigenous women and girls, and defence of Witsuwit'en yintah.

Born on September 1, 1937, Violet descended from the proud lineage of Kwin Begh Yikh within the Likhsilyu. Her maternal grandmother, Mary Mooseskin, belonged to a chiefly family; Mary's brothers Round Lake Tommy and Louie Tommy carried the name Ut'akhw'its. Violet's mother, Lucy Bazil-Verigin, took the name Gguhe' at 12 years of age, and upheld that name through her life.

Violet was also born in a time of turbulence and change. Attempting to adapt of the lifestyles of the newcomers, her uncles had built a farm on Kwin Begh Yikh territories by Round Lake. However, settlers coveted the land and racist land policies in the period prioritized the rights of immigrants over Indigenous peoples. Displaced from those lands, Ut'akhw'its Round Lake Tommy would establish another home at Johnson Lake, while Louie Tommy and his siblings Jack Joseph and Eva Isadore would become among the founders of the Indiantown community alongside Smithers. Violet's grandmother Mary Mooseskin and grandfather Mooseskin Jim became part of a Witsuwit'en community on Buck Flats adjacent to Houston.

While the arrival of settlers had dramatic impacts on Kwin Begh Yikh, house members nonetheless sought to integrate into the emerging economy. Violet was born at Beamont, a camp in the Bulkley Canyon where Witsuwit'en workers cut poles for the railway. Her parents, Lucy and Frank Bazil, would move from Beamont to the community at Buck Flats, then Indiantown, and a series of rental houses around Smithers before eventually purchasing their own home on Railway Avenue.

While the Bazils lived on Witsuwit'en territories, and attended the balhats in Witset, they remained distinct from the reserve community during these years. In 1946, the family was enfranchised, taking away their Indian Status. Both Frank and Lucy had attended Lejac Indian Residential School and experienced the traumatic impacts of assimilationist government schooling. Conditions there were atrocious. Two of Frank's siblings, Mary and Agnus, died in the residential schools. Enfranchised children were able to attend public schools, protecting them from conditions at residential schools, but it also meant that the family was no longer allowed to stay on reserve or access band services.

Violet was one of the first Witsuwit'en students to attend public school in the Bulkley Valley. Starting school in Houston and continuing at Muheim in Smithers, she developed a lifelong love of learning. She held fond memories of school. Education broadened her horizons and opened new possibilities for the future. Violet dreamed of being a nurse.

However, family circumstances intervened. The family did not have access to Indian health services, and medical debts had accumulated. The first of 14 children, Violet had to leave school to help support the family. Violet took a job at Sacred Heart Hospital in Smithers. She had reached Grade 7.

Sacred Heart Hospital would introduce Violet to the great love of her life, Werner Gellenbeck. Werner was born in 1933, the child of a miner in Gladbeck, Germany. He migrated to Canada in search of industrial work, which he found in Northern British Columbia. An accident brought him to the hospital. With an injured hand, he needed Violet's help to cut up his food.

This chance encounter slowly developed into a love. It was, in many ways, an unexpected romance fostered with the unlikely assistance of the hospital priest, Father Godfrey. Werner, a recent German immigrant, did not speak English well. So, he wrote letters, in German, which Father Godfrey then translated to Violet, continually admonishing that he was not an appropriate man for her to date. Violet listened to the warmth of Werner's words and ignored the old priest.

Dating Werner, Violet charted her own path. Her parents had been planning an arranged marriage to, in Violet's words, an "old guy." Always independent, Violet found her own love in the young Werner. In 1953, they moved to Prince Rupert together.

Prince Rupert were the happiest years of Violet's life. She married Werner in 1955. They had three children in Prince Rupert: Bernie in 1956, Ingrid in 1958, and Gordon in 1962. Violet worked in the salmon canneries, Werner in the pulp mill. Initially, they lived in a two-room cabin, but over time they saved up money and bought a bigger, two-story, three-bedroom home.

In 1966, they took their first vacation, travelling south and visiting Bellingham, Vancouver, Victoria, and Port Alberni. They loved the island and decided to move, finding an old house in Ladysmith built in 1906. They lived there from 1966 until 1971.



On Vancouver Island, Violet returned to her long-delayed dream of education. In 1968 and 1969 she took the practical nursing program in Nanaimo and did a practicum at Duncan General Hospital. She then went on to work at Ladysmith Hospital in 1969 and Saltair Hospital in 1970.

In this period, Violet also began to get politically involved. In 1969, she began to attend meetings of the British Columbia Association of Non-Status Indians (BCANSI). Legal enfranchisement had deprived non-Status Indians of accessing rights under the Indian Act, including reserve residence and band services and funding. However, non-Status Indians continued to suffer from poverty and discrimination. BCANSI sought to improve access to education and employment, as well as fight discrimination in the Indian services. Violet participated in these campaigns and began public speaking on these issues.

In the fall of 1971, the Gellenbeck family relocated to Terrace. Violet continued organizing with BCANSI and also became involved with another Indigenous rights organization, the Union of Native Nations (UNN). She was a founder of the Kermode Indian Friendship Center in Terrace, serving as organization president for several years.



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Tragically, through these years, Werner struggled with addiction. This eventually led to his premature death in 1980. His loss was a sadness that Violet would carry through the rest of her life.



She channeled her love into work to improve the lives of others. She took a position with Canada Manpower in 1979, working as a Native employment specialist. In 1983, she took a promotion and relocated to Vancouver to expand the scope of her work. However, life in Vancouver was isolating; after three years, Violet took a demotion in order to move to Kelowna where she could be with her daughter Ingrid.

Following the organizing of BCANSI and UNN and other groups, the Canadian government revised the Indian Act, enabling disenfranchised families to regain their status. In 1986, Violet got her status back. This allowed her to live and work on reserve. Subsequently, she decided to move to Witsset in 1988.

She took a position as Moricetown Band Manager. Violet wanted to bring the knowledge that she gained working for Canada Manpower to support the Witsuwit'en community. While she was a strong leader with passion for the role, it was not the right time in the community for her style of leadership and she left the band office. Later she took a position with the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en Government Commission, directing economic development initiatives for the eight member bands.

She remained an active member of the Witsset community. She was a consistent defender of band members, particularly vulnerable women and children, helping ensure that the community was a safe space.



Simultaneously, she was involved in major Aboriginal title litigation that would transform Canadian and international conversations about Indigenous rights. Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Witsuwit'en hereditary chiefs, alongside their Gitksan neighbors, took the government to court claiming unceded ownership and jurisdiction over their traditional territories. The case was known as Delgamuukw, Gisday'wa, named after the lead Gitksan and Witsuwit'en plaintiffs. Delgamuukw, Gisday'wa advanced the hereditary chiefs' claims on the basis of Indigenous legal traditions.

In the case, hereditary chiefs took the stand as experts on their own legal traditions. Violet's mother, Gguhe' Lucy Bazil, was one of the Witsuwit'en witnesses and Violet played a vital role in supporting her. The Delgamuukw, Gisday'wa case radically transformed Aboriginal policy in Canada and led to modern treaty negotiations.

In 1993, the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en hereditary chiefs split into two organizations to negotiate their respective claims. Violet served as Executive Director of the Office of Wet'suwet'en, working closely with and taking guidance from hereditary chiefs such as Gisdewe Alfred Joseph, and Wigidimsts'ol Dan Michel, and Sats'an Herb George. Later she would serve as chairperson of treaty negotiations for four years.

The treaty negotiation process stalled due to a government treaty framework that aimed to force Indigenous peoples to abandon their responsibilities for the majority of their territories. The Witsuwit'en hereditary chiefs were adamant that reconciliation was not just about money. It required negotiating a shared land management process that recognized the chiefs' responsibilities in stewarding the yintah.

Stepping back from the treaty process, Violet focused on caring for her aging mother, Gguhe' Lucy Bazil-Verigin, and helping preserve her knowledge and teachings for future generations. She remained active in traditional governance through the bahlats. After the passing of her mother's cousin Eva Isadore, Violet took her name, Kilisët, in 1990. She carried that name with honour. She also supported others. A skilled seamstress, she made regalia for other chiefs, including Lhom'imggin Alphonse Gagnon and Wigidimsts'ol Dan Michel. She preserved traditional medicines and continued to learn new skills, like Tlingit weaving.

Although Kilisēt retired from the workforce, she never stopped contributing to the community. She was an active researcher collaborating in numerous projects. She helped establish the Witsuwit'en Culture and Language Society, working with the Bulkley Valley School District to create Witsuwit'en curriculum. She collaborated with anthropologist Melanie Morin in the creation of *Niwhts'ide'nī Hibi'it'ën: The Ways of Our Ancestors*, a textbook introducing students to Witsuwit'en people and their history. She guided geographer Tyler McCreary in his research for *Shared Histories: Witsuwit'en-Settler Relations in Smithers, British Columbia, 1913-1973*, a book that acknowledged the history of Witsuwit'en families in Indian town. She worked with linguist Sharon Hargus to publish *Witsuwit'en Hibikinic*, a Witsuwit'en-English dictionary.

Kilisēt continued working on Witsuwit'en language and cultural revitalization projects until her final days. For the last year and half of her life, Kilisēt advised UBC PhD student, Sarah Panofsky, on the project "Ts'ienī Kwin Ghinen Dīlh (Everyone Coming Back Home to the Fireside)." In the project, she guided and mentored a research circle of Witsuwit'en hereditary chiefs, frontline workers, and social service leaders. "Ts'ienī Kwin Ghinen Dīlh" renews and develops distinctly Witsuwit'en approaches to caring for vulnerable children and families, helping facilitate the exercise of Witsuwit'en jurisdiction over child welfare. She also sought to reintegrate families disrupted by the intergenerational effects of residential schools and the foster care system. She described the work as dedicated to "those people, children growing up that are lost out there, just to bring them back to the point of knowing who they are."

Kilisēt was a consistent and powerful voice for Witsuwit'en and other Indigenous peoples. She had friends across the Northwest, including among the Carrier Sekani, Gitksan, Haida, Nisga'a, Tsimshian, and Tlingit. She also worked to build bridges with the settler community, sharing Witsuwit'en traditions with them and always eagerly learning lessons about the different cultures of immigrants to the yintah.

Through her life, Kilisēt was an advocate for those at the margins, such as the unemployed, women, and children. The legacy she leaves us is one of deep commitment to upholding Witsuwit'en traditions and laws. She was persistent, some might even say stubborn. She fought for things to happen in the right way, according to *inuk' niwh i't'en*. But her actions were guided by her love and respect to each person's fundamental human dignity. Let us grieve her loss but also never forget her. Let us use her life as a lesson for how we conduct ourselves. Violet always said it best. Let her words be a message to guide us into the future.

Today as we work together, we're not making things up new to teach our people. What we're doing today is we're following the knowledge passed down to us from our ancestors and we're making it stronger so that our Nation becomes stronger.

Let's come back together because this work that we're doing is very important. It's not for us, it's not for us to use in the future. But it's for our children, for our children's children—your grandchildren, their children—your great grandchildren, and those babies not yet born, that's who you're working for. That's who you are going to leave the yintah to.

