

Biography of famed Firth sisters designed to help adult learners

'I cried on every page'

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Northern News Services

Published Friday, February 20, 2015

SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

The last project Sharon Firth created with her late twin sister Shirley Firth-Larsson is one that will have lasting benefits to those learning to read.

It's a biography, entitled *Hard Work and Dreams; Skiing Around the World*. The former Olympic cross-country skiers told their story to the NWT Literacy Council for a new series of books called *Northern Biographies*.

Firth's sister passed away in April 2013.

"She knew that she just had a few months left, but she still dedicated her story to helping people," she said of Shirley. "It just shows that you never give up. You never know who you could inspire right to the end."

After reading the 75-page paperback as soon as it was finished Feb. 10, Firth said it brought back memories of the amazing life she and her sister shared.

"I cried on every page," she said. "It's very powerful, and it's something that Shirley and I shared. No one could take it away from us. It's our story, it's about us and we're sharing this with everyone. It's a real keepsake."

The Firths, originally from Aklavik, are considered among the premier northern skiers of the last half-century, and have competed in four Olympic Winter Games.

The book is based on separate interviews the sisters gave to the NWT Literacy Council in January 2013. With the input of the sisters, the council took the interviews and put the story into narrative form.

"When we were asked to do it, we both knew this was our last dual thing we would give out to the public and to give of ourselves right to the end," recalled Firth. "It's not about us, we're not selfish people. We're put on the Earth for a

purpose. We have to find our purpose in life, and how we can give back to the communities and help each other in a positive way."

The book traces their lives from the early days of growing up in the Beaufort-Delta and down the path that took the sisters to the Olympics.

"We talk about our earlier years living off the land and how we got into cross-country skiing," explained Firth. "How skiing shaped and formed us for the rest of our lives, and how we continued to help and inspire young people and women and groups of all ethnic backgrounds."

The weekend after she received the first batch of books, Firth decided to take some to a ski competition in Fort Smith the following weekend.

"Because it was hot off the press, I asked the literacy council if I could start handing them out," she explained. "We're going to do the launch in April, but why not get it into the hands of people right away?"

She said the young skiers' reactions to the book were amazing to see.

"They were so thrilled and so inspired," she said.

"Because they knew of me and Shirley as twins and doing our career together, and we're still helping right to the end, especially with Shirley being sick. She never gave up hope and she never stopped inspiring people to her last days."

Firth said she and her sister were thrilled to be asked by the NWT Literacy Council to do such a book "because it's always good to encourage and inspire people, especially adult women, to get into literacy."

Helen Balanoff, project manager with the NWT Literacy Council, explained how the Northern Biographies series was built with input from adult learners.

"Some of the learners said to us, 'We read about people from all over the world, but there aren't very many books about Northerners that we can read,'" she explained, adding the people the council consulted also suggested the names of Northerners they would like to read about.

"The Firth sisters were up there at the top of the list along with a few other people," she noted. "So we started with the Firth sisters."

Balanoff said the story has received gotten positive reviews during pilot testing in some adult education classrooms.

Another biography about Francois Paulette of Smith's Landing First Nation is at the printers, while another is being worked on about Chief Jimmy Bruneau, the famed Tlicho chief who died in 1975.

Balanoff said the idea for the books is they will be of high interest for adult learners, while featuring vocabulary at an appropriate level.

"It's good for young people in schools, as well," she said, "But the actual target group is adult learners."

The project is the work of the NWT Literacy Council in conjunction with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Hard Work and Dreams; Skiing Around the World will be officially launched during Adult Learners Week in April.