

## The Nisga'a Valley Health Story

### **Shirley Morven**

**Board Member 1998 – 2004, Chair 2000 – 2004**

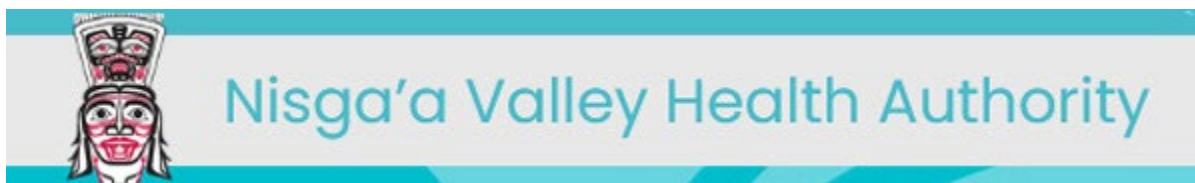
During her six years of service on the Nisga'a Valley Health Authority board, Shirley Morven helped NVHA put its financial house in order, ensure Nisga'a culture was recognized by the NVHA union, and launch preventative health programs, among other achievements.

### **A Surprise Recruitment**

Getting involved with NVHA was not something Morven had planned, but when she learned she was needed, she did not hesitate. She was in her 30s, with a Bachelor of Education and a Masters Degree in Curriculum and Instruction and was working full-time as an administrator at the Gitlaxt'aamiks Nisga'a Elementary-Secondary school. One day, while lecturing at the Wilp Wilxo'oskwhi Nisga'a Institute, she was handed a note. It told her to report to the community hall next door when class was done.

"So I went, and there was a group of young people. They said, 'We just elected you as our representative to the health board,'" says Morven. She was surprised, but said yes, and attended her first board meeting the very next day.

### **A Call for Help**



Morven was chosen for the NVHA board mainly because she was known as someone who could do good work on behalf of the Nisga'a people, and because many people remembered that in her teen years, she'd played a crucial role in the health of her community, she says.

Like her role at NVHA, that early experience was a responsibility she did not seek out, but rather was chosen for. It required a maturity many would not expect from someone that young.

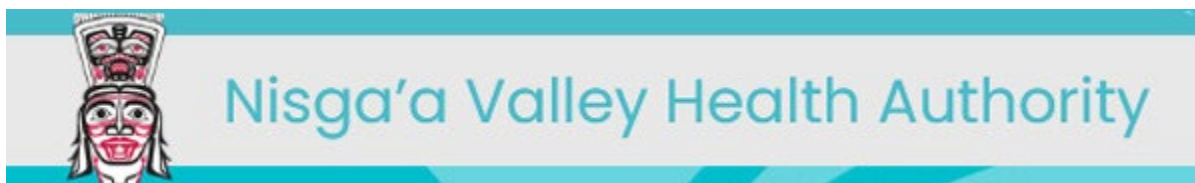
"I was at the old village while I was still going to high school. I came home for the Easter holidays, and one day there was a call to my mother asking her permission for me to help the midwife in the village deliver a baby. I went, and it was a really critical case, which of course I didn't know, because the midwife was so cool and calm and acted as if everything was routine.

"I was totally unprepared for any of this. It took a long time for the woman to deliver the child. All I did that whole time was wring out towels soaked in hot water, and the midwife would put the towels on the woman's back and abdomen," says Morven.

The labour ended tragically. After her hours of work, Morven found herself looking at the stillborn body of the baby and helping to support the exhausted, grieving mother. It was a heartbreaking moment, but Morven knew she had to stay calm and continue being helpful.

"The midwife phoned the only person in the village who had a car and told her she had to take the mother to the doctor. They said I had to go with them to be the translator, because the man driving didn't know enough medical terms to talk to the doctors. My mother said, 'You better go right now,'" says Morven.

Morven's assistance at the hospital played a vital role in getting the mother the care she needed. After that, Morven was called on repeatedly as an interpreter and support person in medical emergencies.



She remembers being called out in the middle of the night, back when the only electricity to the village was supplied by a generator which was turned off at 11:00 p.m.

“I only had a gas lamp and a flashlight, and I remember finding my way on the wooden boardwalk in the dark to go help someone,” she says.

“I guess that was the image that I projected—someone who did this kind of thing. And so that's how I started with NVHA,” says Morven.

### **Leading Through Change**

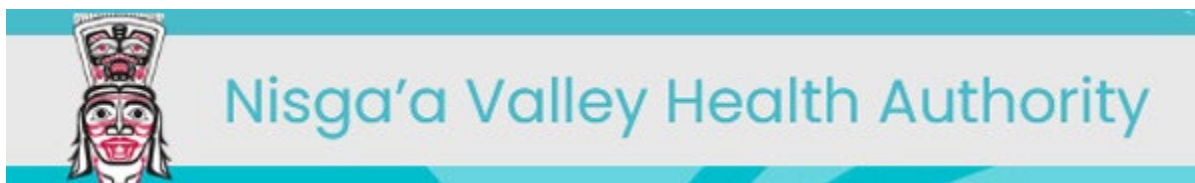
Soon after joining the board, Morven learned that NVHA was facing a major challenge: the organization had a debt of \$1.7 million.

“We had to carefully look through everything,” says Morven. They found many irregularities that needed to be corrected and many areas where professional protocols needed to be put in place. One of Morven’s first tasks was to notify the executive director and the finance director that they were being let go.

“I had never ever dismissed anybody in my life, even as an administrator at the school,” she says. “And then as a brand new person on the board I had to dismiss two people right away. But it seemed as if everybody was expecting me to do it, and it *was* necessary.”

Leading an organization through change is never easy, but Morven and the other board members succeeded in getting NVHA on a solid financial and operational footing.

### **Fighting for Cultural Leave**



Another big change during Morven's time happened when NVHA staff joined the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Morven took on working with CUPE to establish a protocol for cultural leave—a concept that was new at the time.

"I welcomed CUPE," said Morven, "because I knew that would be a big help to the executive director in maintaining employment standards."

But she could see it was essential that CUPE adapt its practices to align with Nisga'a values and culture.

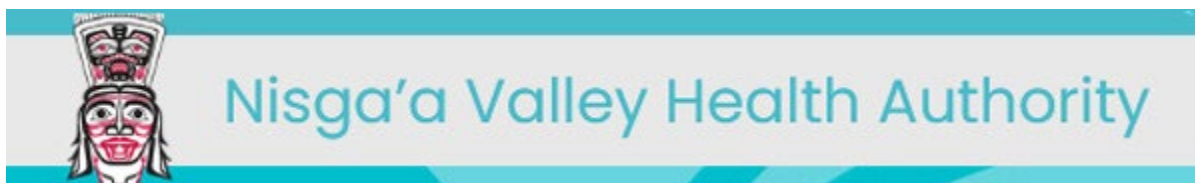
"We are Nisga'a and always our first loyalty is to our clan and to our family. This is one of our core values. We have many traditional things that go on in the valley—weddings, funerals, settlements, rites of passage—and these keep our families running smoothly," says Morven. Originally, the CUPE contract didn't provide opportunities to take time off for these activities. Morven and her colleagues stood strong at the bargaining table, and cultural leave for key personal, family, and community functions became part of the CUPE agreement.

"The other thing we started was allowing staff to continue their education while they work," says Morven. As well, NVHA started focusing on preventative health, launching its first infant and child-care programs and holding the very first Walk For Life from Laxgalts'ap to Gingolx. This set a new proactive, community-oriented direction for NVHA which has grown significantly over the years.

### **Focus on Mental Health**

Morven sees two big areas of focus for NVHA currently: mental health and lifestyles.

"As a people, we've lived through trauma after trauma after trauma, and it has manifested in a number of different chronic illnesses. So we have to develop an effective mental health program," she says. To do this, NVHA needs to gain trust in the communities it serves.



“Around the valley, there's still mistrust of counselors and other health center employees. We have to overcome this by projecting a really trustworthy image,” says Morven.

### **Focus on Healthy Lifestyles**

Another pressing goal is to improve nutrition. This will require a focus on both education and access, says Morven.

“Yes, we have plenty of protein. But some of our protein is controlled by policy. We're limited to a certain number of moose and not everybody gets moose. And it's the same with salmon—the numbers are limited, and not everybody can afford to have a fishing boat and fishing gear anymore. But the main problem is a lack of knowledge about good nutrition,” she says.

Morven knows first-hand that learning about nutrition can save a life. For years, she was overweight and struggled with diabetes. She's dealt with kidney failure as well as food poisoning. A fall put her in hospital where a doctor directed her towards information on healthy eating. She began watching videos and taking courses in nutrition and cooking. She changed her diet, lost weight, and improved her health.

“I grew up healthy but didn't actually know anything about nutrition,” she says. “Now I have two binders full of healthy recipes. I don't think I'm an isolated case.

“We all have to learn about the cause and effects of eating the Standard American Diet that we're so used to. This is work for NVHA to do,” she concludes.

Morven is gratified to see NVHA growing and becoming an increasingly integral part of the Nisga'a communities. “We are in good hands,” she says.