

Brianna Decontie

Maniwaki, QC

Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg

15 years old

Peter's Story

It was July, the summer of 1983 on the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin Reserve. Peter Decontie, an Elder's Helper, was asked by Frank Cote, Recreation Director, about having any ideas of where to take the kids for summer camp. Peter replied, "Well, a good place to take them would be Desert Lake. They have camping lodges for the younger ones for safety, and it's also not far".

Peter was indeed willing to take charge. So Friday came around and Peter set off to go talk to Liz Maclean to make the arrangements. After leaving the main highway and arriving onto a dirt road, he came to a toll-gate run by the ZEC. A ZEC representative demanded, "In order for you to pass, you need to pay a fee." Peter got upset and did not agree to this, since this was his ancestral land. Peter said, "Now, I demand you open this gate!" and after some more arguing, the ZEC representative finally let Peter through.

This trip was planned for elementary and high-school age youth. It was a change for the younger people to visit their ancestral land and to do some fishing and site seeing. Also, there were plans to bring the elders from the community to teach the young ones the culture and the language. It was also a good opportunity to learn about the traditional territory; at one time the area was the Commonda family fishing and trapping area.

Peter was at Desert Lake for a few hours arranging the trip for the students. On his way back, the toll-gate man stopped him again. This time he took down Peter's information such as his status card, license and vehicle registration. Peter told the man, "I advise you that Monday of next week, we will be back with a bus load of students and the Director of Recreation and also volunteers who will work at the camp".

Upon Peter's return, he spoke with Frank and the Director of Education, they had a discussion with the Chief and Council. They reported the encounter that Peter had had with the ZEC representative. In the end, everyone agreed that they should go ahead with the camp. But, when Monday morning came, the same thing happened. The ZEC representative insisted that they pay a toll. The adults declined, so he took down all of their information before opening the gate.

After being settled at the camp for two days, the game wardens showed up at the lake. They also took all of the adults' information except for Peter's, who had gone back to the Kitigan Zibi Reserve. The game-wardens came to find Peter in the community days later to take down his information. Peter asked, "Are you laying charges?" and the game-wardens replied, "I am writing a report to take down to the headquarters and they will decide what happens."

Eleven months later, Peter and the four other adults involved received a subpoena to be in court. The four others were charged with fishing without a license and trespassing on the land of their own ancestors. Peter was only charged for trespassing because he was not seen on the waters. Before the court appearance, Peter and the others who were Frank Cote, Freeda Cote-Morin, Ben Decontie and Russell Tenasco, met with the Chief and Council. After discussing everything that had occurred, the Chief and Council decided to support their case and offered to take care of all financial matters in order to fight for their rights as the Anishinabeg Peoples. After listening to the Chief and Council, Peter inquired about the elder's involvement in the case. Peter told them he would take it upon himself to talk to the elders and work with the ceremonies; "For I cannot stand in front of the judge without my elders help and ceremonies of this case".

Someone suggested that elders testify in court to show the ancestral hunting territory. William Commonda, Dick Tenasco and Albert Brascoupe would testify in court to show that the land was once their family's territory. The lawyer suggested that they also get historians to testify. They contacted an archaeologist, an historian and a cartographer. Their first court appearance was in Maniwaki, Quebec in 1984. Their plea was not guilty, because they did not feel it was right being charged for fishing and trespassing on their own land. In the end, the court

ruled that they were guilty. It was decided by the lawyer along with the Chief and Council that they ask for another hearing in a different court. Sometime after the first appearance, they were subpoenaed in Gatineau, Quebec. Once more they were found guilty in the court of Gatineau, Quebec. Together, the Chief and Council with the lawyer appealed this decision.

Time passed on and the adults involved with the case were subpoenaed to appear in the Quebec Superior Court of Montreal. The plea was not guilty for the same reason since the beginning, to fight for the rights for the Anishinabe Peoples. In the end, the same result happened as in all the other courts; they were found guilty of all charges which were for trespassing and fishing without a license. Unhappy with this decision, the Chief and Council along with their lawyer applied for the case to be heard at the Supreme Court of Canada. After being accepted to hear the case, they were asked to be in Ottawa, Ontario on June 16th, 1996. With nine judges hearing the case, things were very much different for the Quebec Prosecutor. He was no longer in the province of Quebec having his own way with the judges. Once the court hearings had ended, the lawyer and her assistant, along with the Chief and Council and the community elder witnesses felt pretty good about what when on in the court-house. They knew that the court decision would only be out in a few months.

After 13 years of fighting for their rights as Anishinabe People, they finally received an answer in October 1996. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of The Cote-Decontie case. Therefore, this meant that the Anishinabe won the rights to fish and hunt without a license. Peter declared, "Our Aboriginal title to the land is intact." Soon after Peter and elder William Commonda left the court house, William announced to Peter, "Tomorrow we leave for Bear Bute, South Dakota, because the Native people there need us the way that we asked our elders to help us".

Author's Statement

Kwey, my name is Brianna Decontie; I'm an Algonquin from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Community. What inspired me to write this story was my grandfather, Peter Decontie, because he is a very important person in my life. He has been more than a grandfather to me; he's been like a dad. My grandfather is my role model; I look up to him for all his accomplishments in life.

My grandfather has been the one who has taught me about my culture. He teaches me about how to be thankful to the Creator and Mother Earth. I've learned about medicines used in ceremonies or to heal the body. My grandfather is very knowledgeable. I enjoy listening to his stories and through them I have learned so much about him.

For several years now, my grandfather has helped Elder William Commonda with sacred ceremonies. Together, they have traveled the world to places such as Japan, Mexico, Washington, South Dakota and many parts of Canada. They share their knowledge and teachings of the Algonquin culture. Through their travels together they have met some prominent people.

My grandfather inspires me for all what he has accomplished. I feel so lucky to have him in my life. I appreciate all what he's done for me for all these years.