



Stó:lō Tourism Commission

*Warm your heart and enchant your senses among the Stó:lō, the people of the River.*

### **Profile: Maxine Prevost**

**By Todd Curran**

Although you would never know it today, there was a time when Maxine Prevost was ashamed of who she was and where she came from. Then she met a carver who would change her life forever.

Maxine is currently the coordinator and curator of the Shxwta: selhawtxw program at Sto:lo Nation. The Mission-born leader manages a staff of two guides, a receptionist and several number-crunchers, who have committed themselves to growing and promoting the educational insight provided by the Shxwta: selhawtxw program.

The program offers guests the first-hand experience of traditional and modern Sto:lo life. What had originally started as an alliance between the Chilliwack School District and Sto:lo Nation to integrate Aboriginal studies into the grade four curriculum, quickly grew to a wealth of information for people from elementary school to beyond university level. “They started bussing them (the students) in from other districts,” says Maxine, “and as interest grew, so did the program.” Utilizing a hands-on teaching method, tourists, community groups and students of all ages learn about weaving, storytelling, fishing, language, food and carving. “We educate others on our relationship with the land, and the resources the land provides us with,” Maxine says with pride. “Since the Shxwta: selhawtxw program began in 1994, I’ve seen a dramatic change in the way First Nations people are viewed. I think a lot of that can be attributed to the hands-on knowledge of us.”

Maxine was treated poorly in her early school days, and was subjected to multiple humiliations because of her First Nations status. Although she was not alone in her torment, the abuse affected Maxine in the worst possible way. It manifested itself as a shame and loathing for something she could never get away from; herself. Maxine went about her life for a while, confused about who she was but too embarrassed to acknowledge her heritage. “I was struggling!” Maxine proclaimed in a shaky voice. This anguish continued until the day arrived when Maxine took her first crucial step on a journey that would reconnect with her culture. That step was a carving course under the guidance of renowned carver Francis Horne.

Horne’s guidance was more than a turning point for Maxine; it was also a true awakening. “Being involved really made me want to share who I was and learn about the ancestors and who we are as a people today. Carving did this. Before that, I didn’t even realize that my uncles were carvers!”

Maxine’s husband Peter is also a carver, and when their daughter was going through her own difficult time, they did what any carver-parents would; they gave her a mask. The

29–6014 Vedder Rd.

Chilliwack, B.C.

Tel: 604-858-0009 Fax: 604-858-3829



## Stó:lō Tourism Commission

*Warm your heart and enchant your senses among the Stó:lō, the people of the River.*

mask is a hummingbird and mosquito, so Maxine and Peter posed the question, “Would you rather be a hummingbird, or a mosquito?” Their daughter was resolute, “A HUMMINGBIRD!” she replied. Maxine and Peter’s daughter now has a traditional song and dance to perform while donning her mask. “She chose to be a hummingbird as an inspiration for all people,” Maxine says with glee, “and just being able to revive the legends and stories inspires me. That, and knowing that the masks I carve and the stories about them will be passed on to my children through teaching. These will be here for my family long after I’m gone.”

Maxine and Peter don’t just work together at home; their partnership extends from presentations for school children to international events. “Peter carves while I tell the stories that go with the masks,” Maxine says. The husband and wife team were interviewed on television while promoting Aboriginal tourism at the World Travel Fair, they have carved a totem pole together, and are known to perform traditional dances in regalia.

Although carving is an ancient craft, female carvers are a more modern addition, “But there are more women carvers today than when I started,” says Maxine. It is only then that I recognize Maxine as a link between the ancient and contemporary. When translated to English, the name of her program, Shxwta: selhawtxw, means “the house of long ago and today.” What a perfect spot for someone who honors her culture by continuing the ancient traditions, as well as creating new ones.