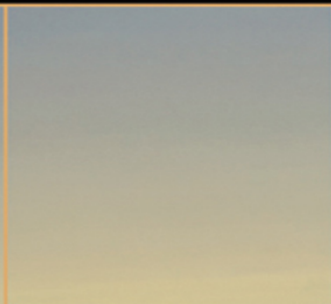
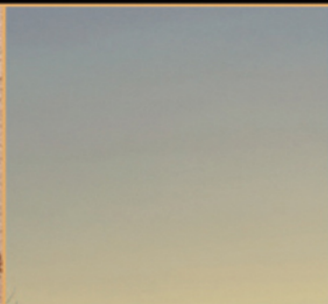




# Native Women of Courage

NATIVE TRAILBLAZERS SERIES



Kelly  
Fournel

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fournel, Kelly, 1976-

Native women of courage / by Kelly Fournel.

p. cm.

ISBN 9780977918324

1. Indian women—Biography—Juvenile literature. I. Title.

E98.W8F68 2007

305.48'897—dc22

[B]

2007028538



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Cover design: Warren Jefferson

Interior design: Aerocraft Charter Art  
Service

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Published in the United States by

7th Generation

P.O. Box 99

Summertown, TN 38483

888-260-8458

[www.bookpubco.com](http://www.bookpubco.com)

Printed in the U.S.

ISBN 978-0-9779183-2-4

eISBN 978-1-9390536-5-7

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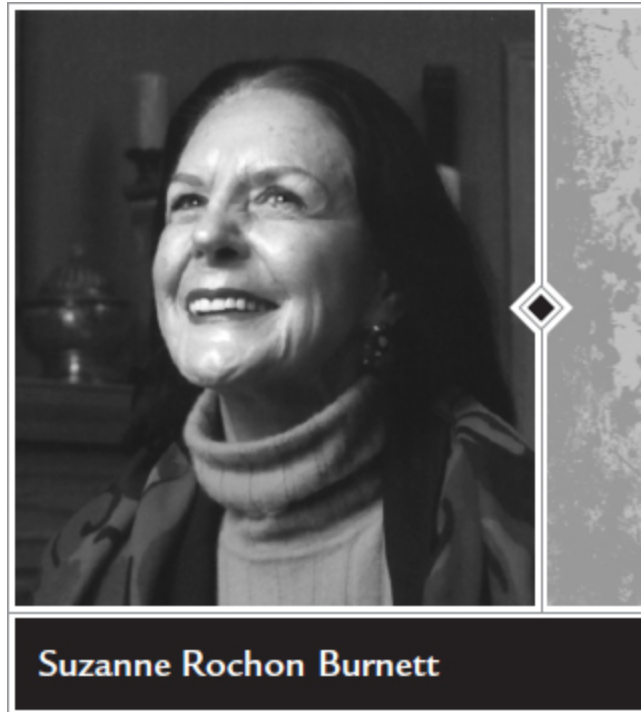
Sandra Lovelace Nicholas



## Suzanne Rochon-Burnett

**S**uzanne Rochon-Burnett—affectionately called Suzy by her family and friends—was born in St. Adèle, Québec, on March 10, 1935. The tiny girl spent the first six months of her life in a Montréal hospital battling health problems. Suzy grew up on a family farm in the Laurentian Mountains, where she learned from her family that having a generous spirit was just as important as being able to work hard.

From an early age, Suzy witnessed what it was like to run a small business. Her father, Acheille, was a mechanic with his own garage. Her mother, Jeanne, brought extra money into the home by producing knitted goods. At the age of seven, Suzy became the courier for her mother's business. It was Suzy's responsibility to drop off wool to local women who would knit her mother's designs, then pick up the various knitted pieces and bring them home, where they were assembled into sweaters. The finished items would later be sold to tourists at local ski hills.



Suzy was a Métis—a person who is a part of a distinct culture that was created out of the unions of First Nations people with French or British settlers who had come to Canada. Before Suzy left home to start school, her parents told her to not talk about her First Nations heritage with the teachers or the other students. They were afraid that when their daughter left the protection of their loving home, she would face the racism and prejudice that were regularly experienced by First Nations people. Her parents only wanted to protect her from discrimination, but their instructions left Suzy wondering what was wrong with being Aboriginal.

The nuns at the school were strict teachers who demanded good behavior and attention to one's lessons. Children who didn't comply were often disciplined with a rap across the knuckles, and Suzy's knuckles endured their fair share of "discipline." She said it was the treatment she received at school that caused her to develop a rebellious streak. Nonetheless, by the time she had finished school, the high standards of the nuns had resulted in Suzy's trademark ability to speak flawless French. These hard-earned,

impeccable speaking skills would prove to be beneficial soon enough.

After graduating from high school, Suzy attended the local business college in St. Jerome. She studied English, shorthand (a method of writing quickly by using abbreviations or symbols for words or phrases), and typing. Because her generation was brought up to believe that if women chose to work outside the home, they were limited to jobs such as nursing, teaching, or secretarial work, Suzy set her sights on finding employment as a secretary. Her first job interview was with the owner of the local mill, and Suzy was quite excited about the possibility of working so close to home. Her hopes were dashed when the mill owner rejected her for the job. He felt that Suzy had too much potential to work in such a small town.

Suzy tried to keep her spirits up and soon heard that St. Jerome was going to have a new radio station. In the 1950s, broadcast journalism was heavily dominated by men, but Suzy was not intimidated by being in the minority. If anything, the discrimination she had faced at school, combined with strong support from her family, strengthened her belief that she could accomplish whatever she set her mind to. Suzy not only got an on-air job at the station, but by the age of twenty she also was writing regular newspaper columns, hosting two radio shows, and managing public relations for the station.

Suzy's years at school with the strict nuns had finally paid off. Her ability to speak French clearly and flawlessly helped her distinguish herself during the early years of her radio career. Her professional reputation was growing, but because she was determined to keep on challenging herself, she took public relations and marketing classes at McGill University in Montréal. This was a huge accomplishment for anybody, but especially so for a young Métis woman living at a time when society heavily favored the career advancements of men over their female counterparts.

With the growing success of her career in journalism, Suzy started traveling to Paris and Montréal to cover newsworthy events for different radio stations. Travel allowed her the

opportunity to meet other successful women working in journalism, and these new female acquaintances were generous with their advice and support. Suzy started to branch out; she balanced working in broadcasting with modeling. One of her modeling jobs took her to New York City, where she appeared in television commercials.

As Suzy's confidence grew, so did her desire to own her own business. By the early 1960s, she decided to do something entirely different. She combined her interest in art with her desire to be her own boss and purchased an old lodge in the Laurentian Mountains. She renovated the lodge and turned it into an upscale inn and art gallery; her new business was a huge success.

One day, a friend talked Suzy into standing in for her on a date with a man from Ontario. His name was Gordon Burnett, and he owned a radio station in Niagara Falls. After getting past some initial awkwardness and misunderstanding, because Suzy's English was not all that good yet, Suzy and Gordon quickly became an item. When they married, she sold her inn and the couple moved to St. Catharines, Ontario. After the birth of their daughter, Michele-Elise, Suzy stayed at home until it was time for Michele-Elise to start school. Then she decided it was time to return to broadcasting.

Suzy produced a French-language show called *Chanson à la Française* from a small studio in her home. This one-hour show, which focused on French artists, was so popular with listeners that it soon grew to two hours, and eventually to a four-hour show. The Ontario Ministry of Culture was so impressed with Suzy's show that they sponsored and distributed the program to radio stations across Ontario. With so many new listeners throughout the province and an established listener base in Quebec, Suzy was offered the chance to be the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's knowledgeable authority on all things dealing with French culture for their prestigious daily show *Morningside*.

By the mid-1980s, Suzy had channeled her passion for the arts and for raising awareness of First Nations' issues into the creation of a company that would promote Aboriginal artists and their concerns. This new company, Kakekalanicks Inc.,



would serve as a consulting firm for various media outlets, with the aim of educating people about the continued exploitation of Aboriginal people and their art. Suzy also brought awareness of Aboriginal issues to the television industry. When she volunteered as a board member for TVOntario, the province's educational public television broadcaster, Suzy introduced a new policy that would help journalists work with First Nations people of Ontario and allow Aboriginal representation on the station's Advisory Councils.

In 1995, Suzy purchased a country music radio station in Welland, Ontario, and became the first Aboriginal person in Canada to own a private, commercial radio station.

Despite her busy life, Suzy always found time to give back to her community by volunteering with various organizations, such as TVOntario, the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canadian Native Arts Foundation. For her years of helping others within and outside of First Nations communities, she received many awards, including an honorary degree from Brock University, the Eagle Feather (Canada's highest First Nations honor), the Governor General Confederacy Medal, the Order of Ontario, and the Order of Canada (Canada's highest honor). Perhaps Suzy achieved so much because of her motto: "You have to keep trying. . . . Even if you fall flat on your face, you're still moving forward."

In 2004, Suzy left the broadcasting field to focus on her health. She had developed an incurable lung disease, but true to form, she wasn't going to give up without a fight. In February 2006, Suzy became the first woman to be inducted into the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business Hall of Fame. Her acceptance speech focused on the pride she felt in being a part of such a grand community of people, the love she felt for her family, and the fun she'd had over the years. Despite her obvious challenges with breathing, Suzy conveyed to her audience that she was still a woman of strength and integrity.

Six weeks later, Suzy lay dying. As her beloved daughter and other members of her family watched her fade and labor

with her breathing, Suzy summoned up the energy to say, “I came into this world fighting for my life, fighting for my people and our culture. I am now leaving this world not needing to fight. . . . I’ve accomplished what I was set out for.”

On April 2, 2006, Suzanne Rochon-Burnett died from lung disease. Her legacy of love, strength, and determination continues to inspire others to lead lives filled with respect and compassion.

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