

Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George M.S.M. Biography

Dr. Elmer Seniemten George (pronounced *sen-eem-ten*) is an Elder in the Songhees First Nation and one of the few remaining fluent speakers of Lekwungen, a dialect of the Northern Straits Salish peoples. He stewards the survival not only of the language, but also the traditional teachings and the culture embedded in the words.

Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George teaches the language to younger generations and received an Honorary Degree from Royal Roads University in 2016.

Last year, he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (M.S.M.) from the Governor General of Canada for his work with Elder John Elliott in translating the Douglas Treaties of the mid-1850s into the SENĆOŦEN First Nations languages. Their work has shed light on the lack of understanding that existed between the Colonialists and First Nations when the treaties were first signed. It also provides a foundation for reconciliation and lasting relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians of today.

Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George is a residential school survivor. Born in Victoria on his family's traditional lands, he was removed from his home as a child and sent to Christie Indian Residential School in Kakawis, Tofino. He ran away from the boarding school at age 16.

Dr. Elmer Seniemten George holds an elected role as Head Provincial Elder and a lifetime role as travelling missionary for the Indian Shaker Church, a faith community blending Indigenous and Christian traditions. He performs ceremonies including weddings, funerals and baptisms in British Columbia and Washington.

Throughout his life, Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George has been relied upon to help and support others in multiple capacities, always stepping forward to do the hard work, quietly and without fanfare. He worked as a boom man and in a shake mill in the logging industry and handled backhoe operation, carpentry, plumbing and electrical work among other roles as the Songhees Band's maintenance man for 35 years. He built and designed the Songhees Big House with former Songhees Chief John Albany, and with others, rebuilt the Indian Shaker Church in Brentwood Bay. He rebuilds racing canoes with his son, among many activities that benefit the community.

In 2011, Esquimalt Nation Chief Andy Thomas invited Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George to put down his maintenance tools and take on a critical role as language instructor. He immediately taught himself the International Phonetic Alphabet, a tool he has since used to transcribe, translate and teach.

Today, his work ranges from teaching young children at Craigflower Elementary School to mentoring individuals to translation work for the Royal British Columbia Museum. He has spent countless hours documenting Lekwungen in print and through recordings to create a database of Lekwungen words and phrases, bringing Lekwungen understanding and translation to archival works, including those collected around Coast Salish lands by anthropologist Franz Boas in the 1800s. He is regularly called upon by Camosun College, the University of Victoria and Royal Roads University to advise and participate in support for Indigenous students, Indigenous education and language revitalization activities. He is also called upon to provide blessings and ceremonies for occasions of all kinds in the area.

Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George conducts protocol activities for diverse official ceremonies – he is one of a small number of individuals with the traditional authority to do this. His extensive commitment to reviving, nurturing, demonstrating and teaching Indigenous language is an organic fit for an affiliation with a library branch through its honorary naming, as the City progresses on its journey of Reconciliation in partnership with the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations.