

Charlaine Samson's story of

Bessie



Bessie Enwood was born on July 2, 1949, in the fishing village of Burnt Island, Newfoundland. She was the 5th child of 11 born of Hubert and Susana Enwood. The 11 kids, from eldest to youngest were Albert, Harvey, Eva, Audrey, Bessie, Phyllis, Hubert, Golda, Marina, Bruce and Deanna.

Although my Poppy Enwood worked for the CN railway out of Port-aux-Basques (now a 20 min drive but back then it was an hour boat commute), the family had to fetch their wood and carry their own water. I've heard stories of annually emptying the feathers out of the beds to air them out after a long winter and making quilts out of remnants of my Nan's dresses. As the eldest got older they helped with the "youngins". The girls shared a bed – 5 at a time. There wasn't much complaining. Even at Christmas, the girls would share a gift or two, same for the boys. For Christmas about 10 years ago, I gave my mom her first doll, one she never had to share. It brought tears to both our eyes.

As family they would go berry picking, one of the main staples of the house, and Nan would make blueberry grunt. My Pop would haul in enough nets off his little boat to keep the family fed in off season: salting rows upon rows of salt cod, saving the cheeks for a stew, and the tongues to fry in a flour coating. Pop would also bring in mussels, wrinkles and of course lobsters, and the odd squid that found its way into the net.

Finishing her grade 8 year, Mom dropped out and moved up to Port-aux-Basques, to work as a nanny for a local business man and his wife. It was not uncommon to drop out of school to help contribute to the family. After a few years, mom found her way to St Johns, as it was said, "to the other side of the rock". She worked for a few years for The School for the Deaf (later mom would teach us kids the basics of sign language). Although only a housekeeper there, she loved it. She became good friends with Doreen, dancing and shopping. Mom was always a keen dresser: matching purses, gloves, cute little pixie cuts and little framed glasses. She had a noticeable space between her teeth, which Dad says is a sign of wisdom. I'd ask mom to do her trick, although not classy now, she would squeeze her cigarette butt between her fingers and stick it in her gap. This was totally cool to us as youngsters.

At age 17, mom was engaged to a young RCMP constable named Chester but he liked to drink too much so that relationship faltered. She was always only an occasional drinker.

By the age of 20, mom was renting a room at an elderly couple's home in St Johns. One afternoon, a young man called Charlie stopped by to play cards. He was their grandson and had just got back from serving 2 years in the Air Force. After a year of dating, mom headed back to Port-aux-Basques to a hospital job and found, to her surprise, a bun in the oven – me!

I was born on December 16 1971, at the Port-aux-Basques hospital. While mom worked, my Nan and Poppy Enwood took care of me. When I was 6 months old, my dad came to see me for the first time. Next thing you know, when I'm 15 months old, on the 17th of March 1973, my parents married.

My dad's father was an underground coal miner, so when a job in Faro, Yukon came available, my grandparents took the chance and headed west. Soon after my parents took the plunge with me in tow and followed. These next 12 years would be a great chapter of our lives.

Faro was a new open pit mining community, a bustling little town, full of young families just like us. Mom and Dad settled in for the long, dark, cold winters. Mom was very popular. Never too proud for hand-me-downs, she became the neighbourhood seamstress, the lady who permed everyone's hair, and even pierced most of the young girl's ears. Mom and Dad became active in darts and were in every dart

tournament known to man. She would spend hours in the kitchen of the legion raising money for the Ladies Auxiliary, catering for local events and weddings.

Oct 7th, 1976, my brother Warren was born... just shy of my fifth birthday. We were blessed with great friends who had cabins out at Salmon Lake where we spent many weekends snow or shine. Three of my mom's siblings found their way to the great white north. After another 5 years, on April 27, 1981, a last minute decision produced little Melissa Jean Samson.

I realize how strong my mother was when I recall the day Melissa was born. My dad arrived home from work around 4:30, mom had dinner ready, and we promptly ate. Mom was cleaning up when she turned to dad and said, "Charlie, it's time to go". She never breathed a word about her discomfort the whole day. Dad left Warren and I at home and dropped mom off at the health centre with intentions of going back home to finish the dishes. Within an hour the phone rings. "Hello Charlaine, its Dr Long! Congratulations, your mom had a baby girl! Can I speak to your dad please?" "Sure!" I said and called out... "Dad, dad, its Dr. Long... Mom had a girl!" I was excited it had happened so soon; dad on the other hand was not. For years I thought he was mad it was a girl. I realize now just how close mom cut it. His response was an articulate "fu*# off!"

During our years in Faro, we were mighty campers – every other year we'd make the 5000 km trek across Canada, to NFLD. Mom kept a mean camper, packed tight as can be. I remember her taking the porta potty out to put in a 5 drawer dresser, one drawer for each. Then room on top for baskets of potatoes and apples and corn. I remember our first camping trip, Melissa only weeks old, and mom made a bed for her in the clothes hamper.

The mine shut down in 1985, and we decided to head home to Port-aux-Basques. After the winter passed, and nothing looked promising in the future, we decided to head back west. After a brief stay in the Okanogan where my Nan and Poppy Samson had retired, we ended up in Tumbler Ridge. Which was great for us, half of Faro was here!

Tumbler was a great bustling mining town, newly built. Dad got an electrical position at Bullmoose Mine. He stayed on with till retirement just two years ago. Soon afterwards mom got on at the health clinic; she too stayed there until her retirement 15 years later.

Mom fell right into place like we lived there forever. Back in the legion she served on committees, catering and planning events, and carrying the flag for services. She was a regular in the kitchen, with her always so popular buns – making them by the dozens.

And she was a star dart player, playing dad in the battle of the sexes, bringing home prizes, and rubbing dad's nose in it on Saturday mornings. They were a social bunch. Mom could get a laugh from anyone. She'd go to celebrations and come out as a stripper. The music would be playing and then suddenly...screech to the Newfie music and on comes mom's song: "Don't look now, mamas got her boobs out!" Mind you she looked more like a man in drag – only 4'11" and 110 pounds with a big gap in her front teeth, wearing a long platinum wig, gaudy glasses, plastic breasts and her red spray painted Sally Anne boots. She'd make her way around the room dancing and teasing. Remember, this is a lady who cannot blame alcohol for her actions.

By now, I'm on my second marriage, this time to a woman...which my mom took pretty well. We lived in North Vancouver with our three kids; Warren settled in Grande Prairie with his fiancée and little one; Melissa settled in Dawson Creek with her three kids. While mom was retired and dad still working, mom

would make her rounds and do her visits – Nanny 911 was her nickname. A jack of all trades, always making curtains, painting, baking, and helping with the babies, we would fly her down this way a few times a year when my wife, Terri, would go away for business. It was always a treat – shopping, pedicures, trying sushi for the first time, a no-go; or massage, a yes.

Mom and dad would take out their RV and help my uncle Hubert build his dream cabin an hour from the highway on One Tree Lake. Mom and dad would spend many days, summer or winter there, making plans to turn the small original cabin into a home away from home. You'd always find mom sitting by the fire drinking tea and knitting facecloths and sweaters for the tribe, whilst Uncle Hubert played the guitar and they all sang Newfie songs.

Mom was ready to celebrate her 60th birthday, dad had his 65th only days later, PLUS dad was retiring. We were planning this event of the decade to be out at Uncle Hubert's cabin. They'd just got their passports for a 6 month get away to Australia, to visit friends from the Yukon. Mom had come down that spring to spend 10 days with me. We did a surprise renovation to our bedroom, mom and I hard at work. I've got pictures of her trotting around with my bra on backwards and over her shirt, "let's see if anyone notices" she says. Always a card.

With just 6 weeks till our family reunion/dads retirement/ and moms 60th and dads 65th birthday party, there was lots to do! My Uncle Hubert, his brother-in-law Pete and his girlfriend were out as well. They were cutting down trees and gathering up wood to fill up the cabin and dad's truck so they could make their rounds to Warren's and drop off wood for his stove, and then continue down the highway to see Melissa and the kids.

After a decision to cut down one more tree before mom and dad headed out, mom went to get the truck loaded up to go. In a split second every thing changed. Mom, eager to head out, ran ahead to move a gerry can. The silence was loud; the screaming only lasted a moment. The lone tree fell, and mom didn't move the right way. The force of the blow knocked her to her face then the tree bounced away. As the longest hour of my father's life passed, Pete's girlfriend became mom's dearest friend – lying next to her in the dirt waiting for the air ambulance to arrive. She stroked her hair and talked to her. The men worked feverishly to clear a spot for the helicopter to land. As she was airlifted up, she drew her last breath.

Just 10 days prior, we were at Vancouver Airport, mom heading home. We did the self check in. As mom's boarding pass spit out, she looked at me in amazement. "Jesus, next time I'll be flying the plane myself!" —And that she did.

Fly away, mom, fly away.

Bessie never got the Nobel Peace Prize, nor did she discover the cure for diabetes or anything like that but Bessie was a star, all in her own. Just ask anyone who knew her.

Bessie Samson July 7 1949 – May 16 2009

R.I.P.