

Dr. Amy Montour

At the age of fifteen, Dr. Amy Montour was living on Six Nations reserve in Ontario, the largest First Nations reserve in Canada, when she was faced with what she describes as “a bit of a culture shock”. Attending high school off reserve triggered the beginning of a journey towards discovering who she is, where she stands in life, and where she fits in. Feeling lost and angry at the world, Dr. Montour rebelled by quitting school, leaving home, and becoming pregnant and married at the tender age of seventeen. Immersed in a marriage affected by drugs and alcohol, physical abuse and financial issues, she was eventually led, a single mother of three, back to the safe haven of her parents’ land, where she began trying to support her family and piece her life back together.

With the continuous support of her parents, Dr. Montour ended up completing her high school equivalency and attending McMaster University, where she would complete a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, a Master of Science in Nursing, and finally a medical degree and residency in Family Medicine. Despite multiple challenges and obstacles, she emerged five years ago as a full-fledged Doctor about to embark upon a career as a Palliative Care Physician.



Dr. Montour and her parents

The Six Nations Reserve Palliative Care team, the first Indigenous-lead palliative care team of its kind, started as a grassroots project in 2013, the same year Dr. Montour graduated, and she has been the physician associated with the team since its inauguration. Included in

the interdisciplinary team is a social worker who is also a psychosocial bereavement counsellor and is educated in traditional medicine and nutrition. They collaborate with a larger palliative care outreach team based in Brantford, Ontario, which provides palliative care services on a small palliative care unit at Brantford General Hospital, at the Stedman Community Hospice, and at home in the community, covering a large urban and rural area.

Dr. Montour enjoys working in her home community, which she admits can be difficult when it involves the care of friends and family. Her relationship with patients on the reserve requires what she calls “a delicate balancing act” providing comfort and, at times, pulling away if she senses she is getting too close. She feels honoured and privileged to be involved in the lives of her patients, to be welcomed into their homes, and to help them at such a sacred time, stating “your circle and your world gets smaller [when you are ill] and to be allowed to be in that circle is an amazing honour.” Her patients have taught her to be patient, open-minded, and to think outside the box. They remind her that the small things that bring joy in the moment are often the most important interventions: “it’s all of those tiny things that matter: your children nearby, your friends nearby, having ice-cream for breakfast if that makes you happy, seizing the moment and finding joy in the time you have left.” She has learned, too, that humour has its place in palliative care, stating that “if you get to a place and it’s appropriate to share humour, it’s just amazing medicine.”



Dr. Montour with a niece (far left), her three children and grandson

As the Indigenous representative working with the Ontario Palliative Care Network in her region and for Cancer Care Ontario, Dr. Montour works to highlight the unique social determinants of health of Indigenous peoples and how they apply to the patient. “I always stress that I’m not an expert on Indigenous peoples. I’ll die and I still won’t be an expert, but I share the knowledge that I have and I learn from others. I try to be one voice out there.” The people of her Nation, the Haudenosaunee people, a Confederacy of six different nations, she explains, was built on the idea of peaceably coming together and sharing knowledge. She is hopeful for the future of her people and refers to *The Sea Kingdoms*, a book about Britain’s own history having some of the same struggles and cultural tensions as her own people. The book, she says opened her eyes to the fact that “it’s not just Indigenous peoples – it’s population, it’s history, we’ve all struggled at some point.”



Dr. Montour and her grandson, Jack

Dr. Montour continues to live on the Six Nations reserve, in a house behind that of her parents with her three children and twenty-month-old grandson. She’s grateful for the support she’s had from her parents in achieving her accomplishments. In her spare time she enjoys moments with her grandson, who she says is a gift to her family. As a grandmother, she has assumed the very important role of guiding and teaching her grand-child, which is pivotal in her culture. Dr. Montour enjoys fishing with her husband, especially the peacefulness of being

on the water and catching a big fish! Spirituality and faith in God are a huge source of resiliency for her. She sees God as a source of strength and starts every day trying to commune with God, to ask his help with being the best version of herself, and with caring for her patients. She believes in divine guidance and while she may not have understood all the pathways that led her to where she is, Dr. Montour has realized that everything in her past made her who she is today and has led her to where she needs to be.

By Dr. Sanea Abboud