

# Lena Pedersen



Lena, age 29, elected December 21, 1969

First woman elected to the Northwest Territories

Legislative Council (now the NWT Legislative Assembly)

## Background

Lena was born and raised in Greenland. She moved to Canada in 1959 and initially lived in Cape Dorset, Kinngait, in the Qikiqtaaluk Region of Nunavut. She has since lived in Pangnirtung, Behchoko, Yellowknife, and is now retired in Kugluktuk as Northern Canada is her home. Lena speaks four languages: Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, English, and Danish and is committed to her family, her people, her culture, her languages, and building a strong North.

Lena is a mother, a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. She has worked tirelessly on behalf of the people of the North throughout her life through her work, her volunteer activities, her appointments, and as the first woman member elected to the Legislative Assembly (then called the Territorial Council). Lena also served as a board member of the Northwest Territories Housing

Corporation (1973). Premier Paul Okalik appointed Lena Pedersen to Nunavut's Law Review Commission and she served as a Commissioner from 2000 to 2003 (2 terms).

Lena was elected to the 7<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly of the NWT on December 21, 1969 and served as the Central Arctic MLA from 1970 to 1975. The Central Arctic electoral district was vast; much larger than the electoral districts are today. Her electoral district included the communities of Pelly Bay (Kugaaruk), Spence Bay (Taloyoak), Gjoa Haven, Cambridge Bay, Bathurst Inlet, Bay Chimo, Coppermine (Kugluktuk), and Holman (Ulukhaktok). Lena recalls the limited transportation and traveling from community to community to meet with the local people to identify their priorities: being housing, education (to ensure children and youth were educated in their home communities), the need for better health care facilities, including a Boarding Home for people to stay when in Yellowknife for medical reasons or women having children, as well as transportation infrastructure.

Lena was twenty-nine years old when she was elected and the mother of four (4) children, all under the age of 10. Lena's friends helped take care of her children so that she could campaign and talk to the people in her big riding. This support was critical to her ability to pursue her goal of becoming the Central Arctic MLA.

### **Motivation to become a political leader**

Both of Lena's parents were municipal politicians as well as teachers and this had a great influence on her. Her parents were seen as leaders in the community and they also set an example and encouraged Lena to become a leader. As a mother, an Inuk, and an active community member, Lena heard the federal government from the south telling northerners and the North how to do things, too many times and too often, not the right things for the people living in the North. This motivated Lena to talk to the local people about their concerns (e.g. overcrowded and unhealthy housing), their priorities, and how they thought things should be done. This informed her decision to seek elected office as well as her work as a member of the NWT Legislative Council (now referred to as a MLA).

## **Barriers to women seeking elected office**

Lena did not personally experience many barriers when seeking elected office. She had the support of her friends, as well as a strong and supportive network throughout the Central Arctic. The people knew her and believed in her ability to work on their behalf. No one said to her “you are a woman and a mother, you should not run for elected office.” In fact, many of the people in her riding encouraged her to run for MLA as they trusted her; they knew she was not afraid to speak in public and that she would speak from the heart.

Although Lena did not identify childcare as a barrier to her becoming an MLA, she did acknowledge that her ability to pursue elected office was supported by friends who helped to take care of her children. She also encouraged women to offer this kind of support to other women seeking elected office. Lena went on to discuss the need for affordable, quality daycare so that women can seek employment, elected office, and leadership positions. She suggested that daycare fees should be graduated – reflecting the parent’s income and their ability to pay.

## **Strengths of a political leader**

Lena believes that anyone seeking elected office needs to be a good listener and a good communicator. She stressed the importance of meeting with and listening to the people in your electoral district. Lena stated that it is important for politicians and leaders to be honest, to be reasonable, and to build the trust of the people you represent and serve. She added that it is important to not only have your own ideas, but to be open and flexible to what others have to say, to listen and to work together to solve problems and achieve common goals.

## **Why do you think women in leadership roles are important?**

Women represent half of the population and as such, should represent half of the leaders. Too often, we see lots of men sitting at the table; we need to see lots of women sitting at the table too. Lena added that we need to involve the youth and Elders in decision-making and political processes, and that we need to ensure communications between the politicians and the people they serve.

Lena believes that we need more women in elected office and leadership positions at all levels of government: municipal, territorial federal, and Aboriginal. She encourages women to pursue their dreams and become a municipal leader, a territorial leader, or a Member of Parliament, as well as

leading Aboriginal governments. Lena feels very strongly that we need women and men at the table, representing and serving the people, at the various levels of government. She encourages everyone to work together to build our North and to remain committed to consensus government. Lena believes that consensus government is the best governance model for the North and she does not support the party system, in particular in the North.

**Lena's advice to women considering seeking elected office**

- Listen
- Build your experience – over your lifetime
- Build trust with the people
- Build a strong team
- Be persistent
- Be honest
- Be reasonable
- Don't be afraid to seek elected office – don't hold back – support one another

**Lena identified the following as her current priorities**

- Building the North
- Respect for Elders
- Quality, affordable childcare
- Pay equity – addressing the gender pay gap

**In closing – thank you!**

Lena's commitment to the people of the North, to building the North, and to public service was evident in everything she said during the interview with the Status of Women Council NWT on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019. We want to thank Lena for taking the time to share her experience, her thoughts, and her recommendations with us. Lena is truly a trailblazer and an inspiration to us all.