

North

Remembering 103-year-old Nunavut elder Qapik Attagutsiak

'She was someone who gave so much of her culture, her way life'

[Emma Tranter](#) · CBC News · Posted: Dec 20, 2023 2:56 PM EST | Last Updated: December 20, 2023



Inuk elder Qapik Attagutsiak waves to the crowd gathered at the Canadian History Museum in Gatineau, Que., to honour her contributions to the Second World War. (Olivia Stefanovich/CBC)

Beloved Nunavut elder Qapik Attagutsiak died at the age of 103 last week.

Born on June 11, 1920 in Nunavut's Kivalliq region, Attagutsiak was a traditional midwife who worked tirelessly for better healthcare for Inuit. She was also an expert seamstress and a decorated elder, awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.

Her family announced that she died peacefully and surrounded by family in

Ottawa on Dec. 14.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau talks with Attagutsiak in her home during a visit to Arctic Bay, Nunavut, in 2019. (Sean Kilpatrick/CP)

Clare Kines, who has lived in Arctic Bay for the last 24 years — where Attagutsiak spent her later years — remembered her as warm and loving.

"She was that sort of person. She always struck me as being genuinely happy," Kines said.

"Her loss is difficult to put into words," he added.

Beyond the personal loss, Attagutsiak's death also means the loss of one of the oldest traditional knowledge holders in Nunavut.

"It's kind of akin to a library burning down," Kines said. "And most of the books in that library were one-of-a-kind."

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David Akeeagok, Nunavut's Quttiktuq MLA, which includes Arctic Bay, was close to Attagutsiak and her family. He said he saw Attagutsiak for the last time this fall.



Attagutsiak (far right) sits with six generations of her family in Arctic Bay, Nunavut. (Submitted by Kataisee Attagutsiak)

"She had a profound impact, just being humble and being gentle and kind to everybody," Akeeagok said. "She showed the compassion that everybody should have."

Akeeagok said his wife and Attagutsiak were very close, despite not understanding each other initially when they met decades ago.

"They didn't have the same dialect, so they smiled at each other all the time," he said.

That smile, Akeegok said, is one he will never forget.

"When you see that beautiful smile, whatever stress you have gets lowered really fast."



Attagutsiak lighting a qulliq — a traditional oil lamp — in her home. (Submitted by Clare Kines)

An Inuk's contribution to war-time efforts

Attagutsiak was also considered the only surviving Inuk to help with war-time efforts during the Second World War.

In the 1940s, Attagutsiak and other Inuit collected bones — from seal, walrus and more — and shipped them south to Montreal and Halifax. They were then processed into ammunition, aircraft glue and fertilizer and sent overseas.

She was also an integral part of creating the Akausivik Inuit Family Health Team and Medical Centre in Ottawa — the first centre in Canada to offer an Inuit-centred approach to healthcare.

In Arctic Bay, Attagutsiak spent much of her time in her 10-by-16 foot qammaq, or canvas hut, heated by a seal oil lamp.

That's where Prime Minister Justin Trudeau met her for the first time, during a trip to the community in 2019.

"Elder Qapik Attagutsiak was extraordinary," Trudeau wrote on X this week. "I'm incredibly saddened to hear of her passing and I'll never forget our time together. To everyone mourning this loss, and to all who have been inspired by her wisdom, kindness, and endless energy: I'm keeping you in my thoughts."



'She always struck me as being genuinely happy,' Clare Kines recalls. (Lucy Burke/CBC)

Nunavut Premier P.J. Akeeagok, who grew up in Grise Fiord, also spent time with Attagutsiak and remembers her commitment to her community.

"She was often the first one attending public events, always sitting there right in the front row," he said.

"She leaves such a beautiful legacy behind, that embodies strength. She was someone who gave so much of her culture, her way life."

The flags at Nunavut's legislative assembly will fly at half mast until Attagutsiak is laid to rest.



Qapik Attagutsiak and Travis Kines, son of Arctic Bay resident Clare Kines, share a moment during his high school graduation in June 2022. (Submitted by Clare Kines)
