Yellowknife's toxic history through the eyes of the Betsina family

'The government spoiled our lives,' says Muriel Betsina. 'Giant Mine spoiled our lives'

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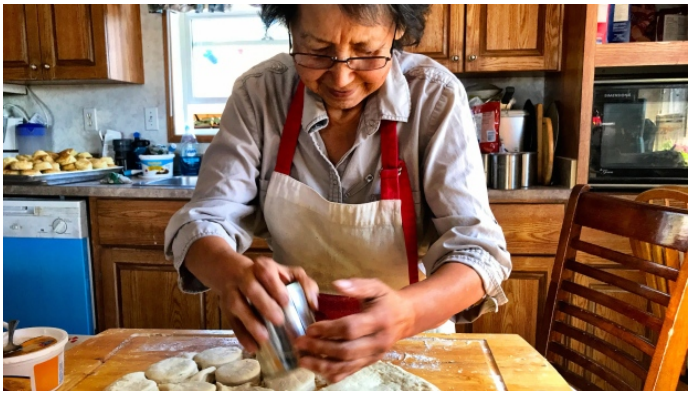


Dene elder Muriel Betsina says her life and the life of her family has been deeply affected by Yellowknife's former gold mines. (Hilary Bird/CBC News)

This story is part of a series from CBC North looking at Canada 150 through the eyes of northern families.

Muriel Betsina's voice is soft and nurturing as she explains, step by step, how she makes the perfect piece of bannock. But ask her about the old mine site you can see out of her kitchen window in N'Dilo, N.W.T., and her voice drops. Her fists clench. This tiny Dene elder has a rage that boils deep.

"The government spoiled our lives," says Betsina. "Giant Mine spoiled our lives."

During more than half a century of mining, 19,000 tonnes of toxic arsenic trioxide dust went up the stacks of smelters at the Giant and Con mines and settled on the once-pristine land and lakes in and around Yellowknife.

The gold mining industry began in the late 1930s. Giant Mine closed in 2004, leaving a toxic legacy that has deeply changed the lives of people in N'Dilo.

Betsina recalls stories from her childhood living in the bush of the Sahtu region of the N.W.T. As a young girl, she was sent to residential school in Fort Resolution. Soon after graduating, she moved to Yellowknife and met her husband, Frank.

Muriel's late husband, Frank Betsina, worked as an electrician in Yellowknife for decades. He was born in a white tent on the shores of Latham Island in 1939. (Courtesy of Muriel Betsina)

As the family matriarch, Betsina is an expert on the history of Yellowknife's small Dene community, thanks, she says, to stories imparted by her mother-in-law.

'"We were very wealthy in our own way,' my mother-in-law said. She said, 'We got food anywhere we want. We set nets anywhere we want just along the shore. The fish were small like this but they were just pure white,'" recounts Betsina.

"Now you see a fish like this, a little bit bigger whitefish, and the scale is all black," she says.

"My mother in law said, 'You never see fish like that around here. Never see fish like that. It's from the mine. After they started building the mine.'"

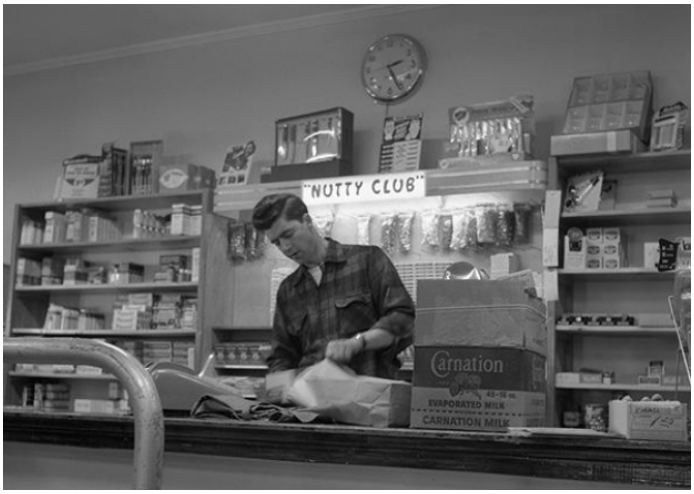
Jobs at the mine

Betsina's husband was born in 1939 on the shores of Latham Island in a white canvas tent. As Con and Giant Mine brought in workers and supplies from the South, many Indigenous people in the area began building small wooden houses with the help of the federal government.

Small houses dot Yellowknife's shores in the early 1950's. Muriel says many Indigenous people in the area moved from canvas tents to houses in the 1940's. (NWTARCHIVES/Henry Busse)

Some Indigenous residents got jobs at the mines, including Betsina herself, who worked as a baker for years at Con Mine. The new employment opportunities seemed like a blessing in the beginning,

she says. People could go to the store and buy new types of food as well as supplies for their houses.

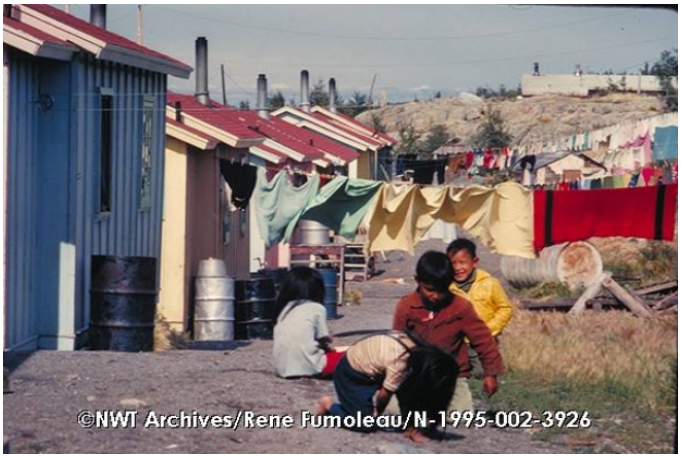


An employee mans the commissary at Giant Mine in Yellowknife. Muriel says many Indigenous people saw employment at the mine as a blessing because they used their wages to buy supplies. (NWTARCHIVES/Henry Busse)

But that sentiment would change. Tragedy struck in the early 1950s when several Dene people living on Latham Island got sick. A child died after eating snow laden with arsenic. The parents were paid $750 in compensation.

"They didn't know," Betsina recalls. "They didn't know what arsenic is. We didn't know what the mine was doing to us."

Betsina still worries. "When the wind comes this way, you see lots of dust coming. We make sure we close the window in the summer time."

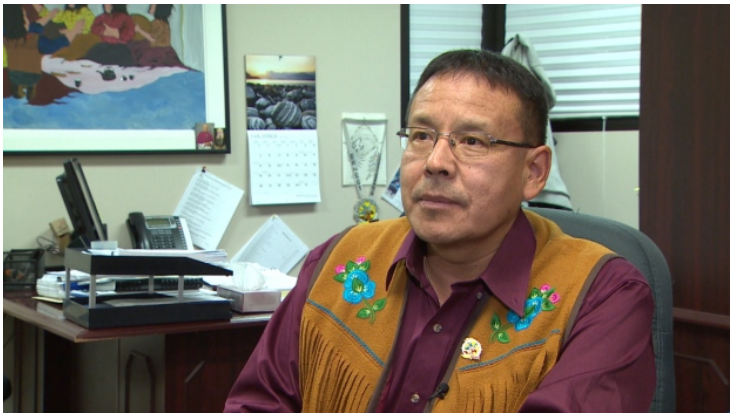


Muriel Betsina's sons, Paul and Ernest Betsina, play with other children in Yellowknife in 1970. (NWTARCHIVES/Rene Fumoleau)

A vow for justice

Betsina's son, Ernest, is now chief of N'Dilo. Sitting at his mother's kitchen table, he vows to get justice for his family and the community he represents.

"I know some members have traces of arsenic," says Chief Betsina. "It's the safety of my members that I'm concerned about."



N'dilo Chief Ernest Betsina has lobbied the federal government for $75 million in compensation for Giant Mine. (CBC)

Chief Betsina and his political counterparts have called on the federal government to apologize for the mine and to pay the nearby Indigenous communities of N'Dilo and Dettah $75 million in compensation.

Smoke billows from Giant Mine in this photo taken in 1948. (NWTARCHIVES/Henry Busse)

"There has been no recourse yet," says Chief Betsina. "Nothing has come back to us saying that, yes, they'll do the apology; yes, they'll do the compensation. Nothing yet."

Giant Mine is currently undergoing a billion-dollar cleanup that will see most of the arsenic dust that was captured by pollution controls stored, indefinitely, in artificially frozen underground chambers. There's been no attempt to address the contamination beyond the borders of the mine sites.

While Ernest continues to appeal to the federal government for compensation, Muriel takes a different approach to try and heal from the mines' toxic legacy and protect her homeland from future contamination.

"I pray," she says. "Every night, every day."