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Ceremonies aim to heal hurt spirits

N.S. events linked to PM's residential school apology

By MARY ELLEN MacINTYRE Truro Bureau

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SHUBENACADIE — Some people taking part in ceremonies this morning at the site of the former Shubenacadie Indian Residential School will be returning to a place that holds only sad and lonely memories.

Although many will renew old friendships and gather with loved ones, it will not be a joyful return.

"This is a time to honour all those people who were sent to that school," said Dorene Bernard of Indian Brook, one of the event organizers.

Ms. Bernard spoke Tuesday as she travelled from Parrsboro to Indian Brook. "I'm on my way from Parrsboro (where I got) grandfather rocks for the sweat (lodge) on Wednesday night," she said.

Asked why lava rocks must be used, Ms. Bernard explained they represent the ancient ones, "the old, old ones who were here before us . . . and the steam rising off the rocks represents the breath of the grandfather stones, purifying us and sending our prayers to our creator."

Ms. Bernard was also one of those who got her early schooling at the Shubenacadie school, from age four to 10. The school was closed in 1967.

Several events are scheduled to take place at the site and in the nearby community of Indian Brook today in recognition of a planned apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Mr. Harper is to issue a televised apology to aboriginal peoples for the outcome of the federal government's nationwide assimilation policy, which resulted in native children being taken from their families and sent to schools usually operated by religious groups.

Over the course of 100 years, an estimated 150,000 aboriginal children, including Inuit and Metis, were sent to residential schools. Many say they were physically and sexually abused and that the theft of their culture, traditions and identity wounded not only the children who attended the schools but also continues to wound the generations of children since.

"We will hold a crossing-over ceremony, which will help spirits who were left behind at that place to cross over. . . . They need prayer," said Ms. Bernard.

Prayers, drumming and song will help to heal the spirits hurt long ago in buildings such as the one that operated in this community from 1922 until 1968.

The highly regarded Mi'kmaq woman who led the charge to gain monetary compensation and an apology from the federal government will receive special mention today.

Nora Bernard, who was murdered in her home last December, will be remembered as one of the driving forces behind a multimillion-dollar compensation package the federal government agreed to a couple of years ago.

As many as 80,000 people who attended residential schools in Canada will eventually get a share of the money.

Dorene Bernard expects 250 people will attend the morning ceremonies, which will culminate in a march, called an honour walk, from the old school site to the community hall in Indian Brook, a distance of about seven kilometres.

"There will be the apology and a feast later, and it will be a good thing to do," said Ms. Bernard.

Although some say Mr. Harper's apology is too little too late, Ms. Bernard says most believe the apology is important and significant.

The other important and highly significant event was the formation of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the federal government. The commission will allow natives to tell their stories.

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