

Voices

A personal history of life in the residential schools

JAMIE KOMARNICKI
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In the House of Commons Wednesday, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a historic speech apologizing on behalf of the Canadian government for native residential schools and a decades-long policy of forced assimilation. Below are the stories of some who experienced life in the schools first-hand.

DARWIN BLIND, 61

Involvement: student, Gordon Indian Residential School, Sask., 1954-1963

Currently: family support worker, Gordon Wellness and Therapy Centre, George Gordon First Nation, Sask.

I spent nine years in a residential school. I was six years old when I went. My parents had no choice.

My brothers and sisters, they went through the same thing I did. Like every other child, I believed I was going to be with my older brothers. I thought I could go home once I got tired of the situation.

[But] it was a totally different experience.

They gave us school-issue clothing. Big overall-type pants and a big T-shirt.

I was really fearful of entering a large institutional-type building. Everything was different in terms of schedule; people told you what to do. My first experience was getting in a line-up of several children my age and being doused with louse oil. They believed every first nation person who came to school was filled with lice and diseases. The clothes you came with from home were put in a big barrel and you never saw them again.

[My room] was just one big, large room with about 30 beds in it side by side. We got up at about 7 a.m., showered, washed up, [went] down to the chapel for what they called morning prayer. Then to breakfast, then you went to the playroom to play for a while. Then off to school.

We got to go back [home] on holidays and sometimes my mother came to visit. They were visits where you always had a supervisor in the same room. It was never what you would call a private visit.

Many children like myself suffered physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse. There was nothing ever mentioned at that time in regards to abuse. It was kind of accepted as the norm.

It was a thick, canvas strap, three inches wide, 21/2 feet long. [We were strapped] for anything. If you did any simple little thing, like not listen, act out a little bit, were caught running around when it was time for bed. If you were fighting with another child, then you got beat. Anywhere they

could hit you. It didn't matter if you had a shirt on or not, those straps left marks. I've got scars on my body that I'll die with.

Most of the [sexual abuse] happened at night in the dark in the big, crowded room or when you went to the bathroom. When you're six years old, you'd go to the bathroom several times a night.

I'm very lucky though. I've been sober and straight for almost 25 years of my life.

The [survivor stories] sound almost all the same, but the feelings are different.

Each one of those people who attended those institutions were affected differently because we're not all the same people.

BERNICE LOGAN, 76

Involvement: teacher and supervisor. All Saints residential school, Prince Albert, Sask., 1949-52 and Shingwauk Home, Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., 1952-55

Currently: advocate for former teachers of residential schools, Tangier, N.S.

The Anglican Church was advertising for young people to come and give a few years of their life to help these Indian children to work in the Indian residential schools. It was appealing to me to go and work with Indian children. I just felt sort of this was going to be my missionary work that I was going to do.

I know more than anybody else knows. The staff who work in the school know. ... We're having a hard time having our voice heard.

We loved it. We enjoyed working with the children.

They were well-behaved kids to work with. They were very artistic.

There were different reasons why the children were there. Nobody went out and tore the children from their parents.

They were there if they were orphans, if they came from broken or dysfunctional families, if they were emotionally disturbed, if they lived in isolated areas of Canada where there was no schooling, and most importantly ... they were there because their parents wanted them to come.

When I heard all this negative reporting, I thought, there's no way I can let that go unchallenged.

I know there were some staff accused of sexual assault, I know that's happened. That does not mean all the staff out there were dysfunctional and abused the children. They're calling it a trauma, the darkest chapter in Canadian history. ... This is not true.

There was no suggestion at all that we were supposed to go there and rob them of their culture and turn them into white kids. That was never part of the agenda at all.

We were always proud of everything that we did.

[But now] we're the criminals.

JANICE ACOOSE, 53

Involvement: student, Cowessess Indian Residential School, Sask., 1959-1961

Currently: associate English professor, First Nations University of Canada

My story is connected to a bigger circle of people. There's not just my story, there are generations of people in my family that went to residential schools.

My parents were following in the tradition of their parents putting their kids in residential school. I don't think my parents realized they had a choice. Where else would we have gone to school?

I was seeing the school through a five-year-old's eyes. My first reaction to it was, of course, fear. I was terrified. The nuns' demeanour, the institutional size of the school itself didn't help. I felt lost, I felt disconnected, and again, lots and lots of fear. That fear was based on my sisters' own stories about being there and about other peoples' kinds of reactions to being in that school.

Even though I had three older sisters and an older brother that were already there, that didn't mean I had the support of family. We were divided into small-girls dorms and big-girls dorms. Because I was a small girl, I was separated from my older sisters.

It was highly regimented. One of the first things they do is they try to institutionalize you by taking away your name. I was given a number and that's [how] I was identified.

All my personal belongings were taken away from me. ... I immediately was hauled away, had my hair cut into a short cut that made me look like every other kid in the school.

I remember the smells mostly. That kind of smell of disinfectant everywhere in the school. That smell of fear, too, if you know what fear smells like.

It was run like an army, as though we were part of an army. We slept in army-like barracks, little cots lined up one right next to the other. We were told to sleep every night facing left, with our hands under our chin a prayer like position.

One of the first days I was there I saw a couple of nuns fighting with a girl who was there who refused to conform. There was a huge fight in our common room. I saw this one girl pulling the habit off the nun who was trying to hit her. It was there right in front of our eyes, we saw violence every day that was there, in some form.

When I went out and did some studying away from the residential school, trying to move away from what I tell people was severe indoctrination, one of the first things I did was, I tried to look at other ways that people expressed spirit in the world.

When I look back at it, I know now there were attempts to brainwash us into becoming something different than what we are, as though difference is something that's intolerable, as if difference is something we shouldn't embrace.

Mostly I'm bitter not just about the sexual abuse, not just about the physical abuse, the thing that affects me most was the spiritual abuse, the way that God was used, this Creator of the world was used in a way to destroy. To me that's one of the worst things that happened in those schools.

When people look at me, I don't think they realize all the stuff is there. I don't wear the badge of victimization, I don't wear it any more. I refuse to be victimized by everything those schools represented. I want to move ahead in my life in ways that I don't carry that stuff any more. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. There's a lot of stuff inside of me that's still really affected by it.

Sometimes it's really hard for people to understand how it impacted our communities. I want people to understand I'm part of a family, a community, a nation of people who are affected.

BISHOP DAVID ASHDOWN, 57

Involvement: supervisor, Stringer Hall hostel for Sir Alexander Mackenzie School and Samuel Hearne Secondary School, Inuvik, NWT, 1970-1974

Currently: Bishop, Diocese of Keewatin, Ont.

I arrived at noon, the administrator gave me the keys ... gave me some instructions and said, the first students will be arriving at 8 o'clock tonight. I just felt absolutely, quite frankly, overwhelmed. I'd have left immediately if I had the money to pay for my airfare out.

After that I developed a real affection for the place, for both the students and the staff. I was a supervisor. I had 75 teenage boys that I was responsible for, and I was 20 years old myself.

This may sound strange now but I thought one of the ways I could contribute was helping people get their own voice, was to go North and work with aboriginal youth to try and promote this sense of self-determination. ... This was an opportunity to help shape the future of the North and promote some of the ideas about self-determination and control of one's own destiny.

Perhaps I was a bit naive. I was certainly enthusiastic.

The school I worked in was a progressive one. People were encouraged to use their own language. Traditions were considered to be important. People came to visit quite often — parents or grandparents if they happened to be in Inuvik would even come and stay.

Even though the school encouraged people to speak their own language ... there was no active, organized way of promoting language. People were speaking English most of the time. When you're losing language then you're losing connectedness with your culture and your tradition. ... There's a break with your connection with the past.

The negative part of it is that the residential schools were part of an assimilation process and that's where I think in many ways we need to focus on what was wrong. It doesn't matter how caring and competent the people were in the institution. You can't replace family life with institutional life.

There were some schools that had a bad reputation. Even among staff, you were told 'never accept an appointment there, that's a really bad school.' A lot of people are embarrassed to have their name even connected with the residential school system in any way.

What's important is that no matter how good some of the people were who were there, the system was bad.

These are bittersweet moments in some ways. I certainly recognize now what was wrong in the system. Twenty years ago, I would have said it was a good system with some bad people. Now I realize it was a bad system with a lot of good people in it.

JUDGE ALFRED SCOW, 81

Involvement: student, Alert Bay Indian Residential School, B.C., 1936-1942

Currently: Retired provincial court judge, and first aboriginal person to graduate from law school and be called to the bar in B.C.

My father and mother wanted their children to have an education so my sister and I were enrolled in the residential school by my parents.

I was nine years old. I was in the school for six years.

We were enrolled in August of 1936 and we had a wonderful time. ... For the first part, we had picnics everyday and it seemed like a wonderful holiday. Then when September rolled around, the picnic was over, and the school began.

The lifestyle in the school changed considerably. We were introduced to a formal education. We became exposed to the military-type lifestyle because the vice-principal was a First World War captain.

There were students from other places. For the first few years, I developed many friendships from those different reserves that carried into my adult years.

We didn't enjoy everything about the residential schools. ... If we were caught speaking our language, we were punished. [But] when there were no staff around we carried on with our own languages.

It wasn't until I was out of the system of residential schools that I realized that much of the objectives of the residential schools were to disregard our culture and to bring the students as quickly as possible into the main culture. ... In other words, to make white men of us.

It did not ruin my life. But, if anything, what I learned about the residential schools after I left there caused me to want to prove to the world that Indians were as intelligent as other people. I was angered and hurt much later when I saw the disrespect the system had for our culture.

INSPECTOR GERRY PETERS, 45

Involvement: RCMP constable, file co-ordinator and lead investigator for the Native Indian Residential School Task Force created in 1994

Currently: RCMP E Division (B.C.) Inspector

I was asked to lead and co-ordinate ... allegations of physical and sexual abuse at residential schools [in B.C.]. Some of that meant liaising with other divisions and provinces that were starting to see allegations coming into their office.

We also worked closely with the aboriginal communities. We wanted to make sure we were sensitive to the cultural aspect as well. It can be a very traumatic experience to retell what happened. We had a real concern and we went to great lengths to try to avoid re-victimization.

At the very onset we stopped and recognized there is a cultural component to this that's obvious and we need to make sure we consider the cultural component before we begin.

Once we learned how many schools were in operation, how many years they were operated, how many years the kids went to the schools, once we understood that, what we faced was what we expected. ... We expected the allegations to flow.

Eventually what it led to was individuals providing statements to us, recounting their own experiences. And, of course, those in most cases contained allegations of sexual or physical abuse, or both.

My experience in interviewing many, many dozens of victims is that the allegations were mainly against the lay people that worked at the schools: janitors, cooks, that sort of thing.

My own personal reaction, all of these statements I took — and I took dozens of statements — every single statement I took was, it was sad. It's a sad story.

It's not pretty. Abusing a child, an aboriginal child or a child of another race, it's about one of the ugliest things you can imagine.

I think it's a pretty tough thing to tell your story to a complete stranger, to a police officer sitting with a tape recorder. In some cases these people were telling very detailed, very personal information, very painful stories for the first time. My heart just went out to some of them.

I don't think anyone has seen the end of the investigation to be quite honest. Who's to say there isn't someone out there waiting to give their statement, still summoning the courage to come forward? We can place deadlines on things if we want, but the fact is there are probably still people out there who for whatever reason up until now have decided they weren't willing or strong enough to give a statement.

CHIEF FRANK JOHNSON, 57

Involvement: student, Alert Bay Indian Residential School, B.C., 1959-1963, Alberni Indian Residential School, 1964-1968

Currently: Chief of Wuikinuxv First Nation, B.C.

I always remember my first day, I got in a fight with one of the boys. The supervisor locked me in a locker, six feet by two feet wide. Maybe a couple hours, it seemed like a long time to me.

The schooling, it was rough for me. We didn't want to go, we were told our father would go to jail if we didn't go, so we went willingly.

Our father went to residential school [at Alert Bay] and he treated us the same way. That's why we were tough when we went there. The punishments weren't anything different than what we received [at home]. We were already tough.

When we got lickings, beatings, we never cried. I can remember sitting by the window in the dorm late night. Not just me, other kids would be sitting in the dark, crying, waiting. We wanted to go home.

We didn't like it there ... the loneliness, no parents.

Me and my brother went [to Alberni]. I went in '64. There was a bit more freedom there I guess you could say. [But] the system was still the same, the beatings were the same. In Alert Bay, I witnessed young boys being molested by the older boys. It was no different in Port Alberni.

They tried once, but I fought, I fought. They wouldn't touch me after that.

I thought it was a way of life, both my parents were alcoholics, they both went to residential schools. It was a cycle, definitely a cycle. I had no clue as how to parent my kids at all. I quit [drinking] about 20 years ago. But I see the effect with my children.

I try to lead by example. I want to make sure that we know who we are. I'm still working on that. One day we'll be whole again, I guess you could say. I'm giving to my grandchildren what I didn't give my own children, and I think that's so important.

TED NOLAN, 50

Involvement: family and friends attended Shingwauk residential school, Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

Currently: Head coach, New York Islanders

I think we're all affected by the residential schools, no question.

As a young boy, I just remember sitting around and listening to stories and watching my uncles and friends [that attended Shingwauk residential school] that came to our house sitting and crying. There were some real sad sob stories about how they were treated in residential schools. I just remember wondering why white people would treat people so cruelly and meanly.

It's a weird thing. I was more impressed with their power to overcome than feeling sorry. I still remember walking out of my uncle's house when I was six or seven years old. It was a very vivid memory. ... He was an alcoholic, going through a lot of pain. I still remember walking out. I vowed to myself, one thing I was going to fight for was respect.

I made myself stronger for it.

[My father] was forced to go [to a residential school] but he ran away, he didn't go. They tried to take my brothers and sisters, but he fought them, he wouldn't let them take them.

I was one of the lucky ones that didn't have to go. I have to thank my parents for being extra strong and not allowing them to take us.

I think it's affected our whole nation. We're all connected. One has a hurt and it's almost like, even though some of us didn't attend, it felt like we all attended. The hurt and anger lingered on, you felt a lot of despair.

It's so hard for some people to move on because of the hurt and the anguish. When people ask me, how did you make it to the NHL as a player, how did you make it as a coach, I used to answer it, 'Like everyone else, I loved hockey and played.' But it wasn't quite that way. They didn't have the burden of residential schools that really affected our people. I said from when I was six years old, I vowed to myself I would try to make a difference. That to me is the lasting effect, and it's going to take a couple generations to get back.

ALEX JANVIER, 73

Involvement: student, St. Paul's Indian Residential School, Alta., 1943-1953

Currently: artist I just got picked up on the reserve, they'd haul us like cattle on the back of the truck, throw us on the back.

I tried to communicate in my native language but they only spoke English. The first day was a lost day. No idea what hit me.

It was an authority haven. The authorities had all control on all our lives night and day. They had the whip and the power.

They didn't care about our culture, nothing, absolutely nothing. It was humiliating right from the first night on.

You couldn't own anything that was personal.

I never got used to it. I just survived one day at a time.

They instilled fear into you. That thing hung around me for a long, long time in my life. Fear of everything — fear of people, of places and things, institutions, and fear of authority.

It took me many years to dissipate that and come out of it somehow.

What happened when I was about 12 years old, there was a Parisian priest that took over the school. He had a different vision of how to run that place. I guess he was told I was good at art. He saw I was leaning towards that sort of thing and he said, 'I will do something about that.' That was the beginning of a slow turn for me. There used to be a man from the University of Alberta who taught art to the art club at the town of St. Paul. I was a young fry there, but they allowed me to join that club. This professor would come out. He took a shine to what I was doing. He didn't care if I was native or not, just tried and encourage my artistic leanings.

The art kind of held me in there. It replaced my cultural loss.

They had this idea they were going to train us to become ideal little white kids. They failed. But there's a lot of casualties still walking around today.

DORENE BERNARD, 51

Involvement: Student, Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in Nova Scotia, 1960-1967

Currently: Front-line youth worker in Indian Brook, a native community just north of Halifax

"Three generations of my family went to the school, including 10 in my grandmother's family. ... My mom and her 11 brothers and sisters went."

Ms. Bernard was 4 when she and her two sisters and brother went to the school, shortly after her parents separated.

"My father was an alcoholic and abusive. Mom was alone with the kids. She thought it would be easier if we went to the residential school. At the time, mom told me she did not know how to get help and there was no one in her family she could trust. I had a hard time with the fact that mom left us there."

Ms. Bernard said one of her most traumatic memories during her years at the school involves her brother, Robert.

"The boys and girls were separated so they could not talk to each other. One day, I passed him in a corridor and a [staff member] grabbed Robert and threw him against a radiator for saying 'hi' to me. ... He was a year older [than Robert]. He was pushing me to keep going. I ran out of line and jumped on Maurice [the staff worker] and started pulling his hair. He wasn't a priest or a brother, just a white guy. He threw me to the ground and I got the strap."

Her brother died in a car accident in on Dec. 22, 1977, while he was on his way to the band office in Indian Brook for a Christmas party. He was 23. "... The police came to my door after midnight and told me he was killed in a freak accident. [His car] slid on black ice and hit the guardrail. That was the hardest part of my life. It took me a year of drinking and trying to come to grips with his death. I was lost without him. The biggest loss I felt was they took away so much of the time I had to spend with my brother. ... That was robbed of us."

Ms. Bernard left the residential school when she was 15. "I was angry at the world. I had a rough adolescence — drugs, alcohol, being in abusive relationships. I came home to Indian Brook but I didn't feel like I belonged. I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere."

She eventually got a bachelor's degree in social work and spent 20 years working in child welfare. She quit drinking and doing drugs in 1993. But she said she knows she is not completely healed from her years at Shubenacadie. The school closed its doors in 1968, but the legacy of dysfunction endures.

"We've just touched the tip of the iceberg. We have not really had a chance for our families to heal, our children. This is not over. We didn't get like this overnight and we're not going to get healed overnight."

DIANA BILLY, 50

Involvement: student, St. Mary's Indian Residential School, Mission, B.C., 1970.

Currently: Newspaper columnist; helps run program at the North Vancouver Outdoor School's Big House in Squamish, B.C.

Diana Billy of the Squamish Nation rejected yesterday's apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper, saying it would not ease the problems of her community caused by the loss of their culture and the abuse experienced at residential schools.

"I don't really care about what he says. There is no weight to it and it doesn't go far enough. It's just words," she said. "I have family members that just hate the government; they hate the church. They'll be scoffing at the apology."

The oldest of five children, three of whom went to St. Mary's residential school in Mission, B.C., Ms. Billy was 12 when she and another girl ran away just four months after arriving at the facility in September, 1970. She said they fled after she was mentally abused by nuns for having her first boyfriend.

"They told me I was a bad person because boys noticed me. They brought me to a room and asked me why I was after all the boys. Three of them were saying terrible things to me and it overwhelmed me. They made me feel like I was no good."

When the girls were found, Ms. Billy was expelled, to her delight, and sent home to the Waiwakum reserve north of Squamish. Now a 50-year-old grandmother, Ms. Billy teaches school children about her people's traditions at the North Vancouver Outdoor School's Big House, and writes a local newspaper column to share her culture with a wider audience.

St. Mary's (1863-1961) Run by Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Roman Catholic order from France with a doctrine of educating the poor. The Oblates believed that the first nations people were being adversely influenced by the influx of white settlers coming to British Columbia for the gold rush. In creating the mission, they aimed to offer a more positive Christian influence to the local people of the Fraser Valley.

With reports from Karen Howlett in Toronto and Cathryn Atkinson in Brackendale, B.C.

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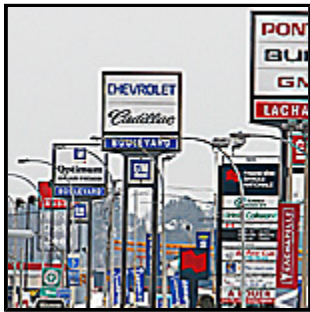
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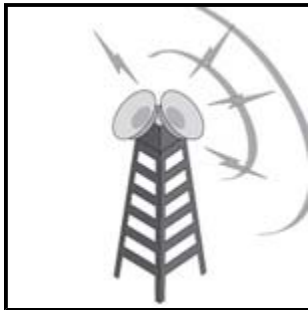
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