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Sorry isn't enough, residential school survivor said

AUC student attended Shingwauk decades ago

Posted By Corina Milic

Posted 3 hours ago

Shirley Horn will graduate from Algoma University next year – almost six decades after first attending Shingwauk Hall, the residential school that occupied the site until 1970.



Missanabie Cree elder Shirley Horn is "cautiously optimistic" about today's apology from the Canadian government to all residential school survivors. Horn attended two area residential schools in the 1940s and 1950s.

Corina Milic

"The school finally became what it was meant to be in the first place. It is not for assimilation, but education," said Horn, a Missanabie Cree elder.

"(Shingwauk) was an institution. I used to say to myself when I was six or seven years old, 'why am I in jail?'"

Today the 67-year-old, and about 100 other local residential school survivors, gather on campus to watch Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologize to former students of the often abusive federally-funded, church-run schools, via a live feed.

Saying sorry won't be enough to pacify survivors, but it is a start, said Horn, who was three when she first stepped into St. John's Indian Residential School in Chapleau. She spent nine years at St. John's and Shingwauk, just like all 10 of her siblings.

"I've had relationships with former students more than my family. We were denied that real family bonding and connection growing up," Horn said.

"I don't really expect the government to outright take the blame, but I'm hoping it's a genuine apology and then people can move (forward)."

The government needs to admit not only the abuse that took place, but the schools' real purpose: to assimilate, or even wipe out, aboriginal people, said Joe Tom Sayers, a project manager for Shingwauk Trust.

The trust helps former students, families and affected community members, from five area First Nations, deal with their troubled past.

"Like any pending government action, there's a sense of caution," said Sayers.

"An apology may satisfy for the historical record, but anything governments state or promise has to be followed through."



It seems the follow-through is what residential school survivors are more worried about, he said: day-to-day health, generational impacts of abuse and addiction the residential school experience fueled, and perhaps the biggest issue, Common Experience Payments.

The payments are part of a five-year Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission process – a \$2-billion settlement for about 90,000 former students.

"To me, this all fits together: the apology, the settlement of compensation. All the stories coming out will be put into the history books of this country," said Horn.

Horn said she is still missing three years worth of compensation because her records start when she entered the classroom, even though she had been in a residential school since she was a toddler.

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It's a story being repeated across the country as 5,000 partial payments have been made to former students because of documents lost in fires, floods or through spotty record-keeping, according to Gina Wilson of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Another 18,000 applicants have been rejected outright because they were day students; 7,000 more were denied because their institutions are not on the government's recognized list of 132 schools.

"The whole purpose is to make sure the government of Canada takes responsibility for all that's happened, and that must include healing dollars," said Horn.

with files from the Canadian Press

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