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Something good to drum about

Feds' public apology strikes the right note for First Nations

Posted By Angela Brown, Central Plains Herald-Leader

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LONG PLAIN FIRST NATION — For one Indian residential school victim, the words "I'm sorry" come as a sign of hope for the future for her.

"It meant a lot to hear Canada apologizing for what's been done to our people," said Diane Mines, a librarian at Long Plain School and a survivor of residential school abuse.

Many aboriginal people have waited years to hear the Government of Canada apologize for the abuse suffered by those who attended Indian residential schools throughout the country.

On Wednesday, about 100 students and community members packed Long Plain School's library to hear Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologize on behalf of the Government of Canada for the systemic physical and sexual abuse residential school victims suffered during the years the government-run schools operated, between 1831 until the 1990s. As part of the Indian Residential School Policy, aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their homes and denied their culture and language.

"We apologize for failing to protect you," said Harper in his speech.

He repeated the words "We apologize" when he spoke from the House of Commons in Ottawa in the televised event. Liberal Leader Stephane Dion and NDP Leader Jack Layton also made official apologies.

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Mines said the grand apology from the government has made a change in her life. Originally from Long Plain, Mines attended residential schools in Brandon, Sandy Bay and Birtle, north of Brandon, from 1959-68.

"Today is a new day for me," said Mines. "To feel Canada is acknowledging what happened to us, which is good. It's finally out there. The healing has to come within, and you have to find a way to heal yourself. And, also it talks about what has happened and it's never to happen again. History cannot repeat itself for any of our people."

Jackie Daniels, a 12-year-old student from Long Plain, listened attentively to the entire broadcast from Ottawa, and recalled how her grandparents suffered while attending residential schools in Sandy Bay.

"I feel bad about all the people who died at residential schools," added the youth.

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Long Plain Chief Dennis Meeches, who attended the event at Long Plain, said the government's apology will help in the healing.

"It's been a long time coming, the apology we've been waiting for," he said. "For many, it's too late. My grandfather passed away in 1986, my mother passed away in 1993, and both my father's grandparents passed away too, and they didn't have the benefit of experiencing an apology or a compensation. So, I have mixed feelings about it, but, at the



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same time, this is something we've waited for, and I'm a little bit relieved that the prime minister has finally made an apology"

Before the broadcast, Meeches addressed the youth assembled in the room.

He pulled one boy up from his seat to demonstrate how the government forcibly removed aboriginal children from their families as a tactic to try to assimilate them into Canadian society.

"Can you imagine being separated from your mom and dad?" said Meeches. "These places created challenges. My mother did not know how to be a parent because of the dysfunction. This is what residential schools did — 150,000 children were taken away from their families."

Meeches added he hoped this will be a time to help to educate the younger generation about the years of abuse aboriginal people suffered.

"Some day when you're 20, 30, or 40 years old, you'll wake up to know what it means to be an Indian in Canada," stressed Meeches. "We're trying to preserve history This (abuse) should never happen again. I hope some of you remember this for years to come."

Long Plain band member Sheila Myran was visibly moved to tears when she heard the government's apology. Three of her sisters and one brother went to a residential school in Birtle, near Brandon. Both of her parents also attended residential schools. Myran said she wished her father, who died in 2000, could have been alive to hear the government say, "I'm sorry."

"The apologies were a good thing," Myran said. "I'm hoping, as they were saying, that it will be good for us in the future, and that chapter of our past now can move on and we can heal from it."

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