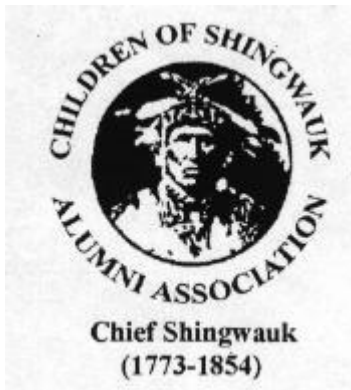


A chief's vision revisited at residential school reunion

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SAULT STE. MARIE JULY 24, 2000 -- A chief's vision for First Nations education is rising from the ashes of one of Canada's most famous residential schools in the form of an Anishinabek university.

Shingwauk University, after the chief whose name provided the title for J.R. Miller's book on residential schools, was the focus of an emotional gathering recently. About 400 former residential school students came together at the site of what was once Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., a place many say has been a source of lifelong pain and struggle.



Alumni association logo

Alumni of Ojibway, Chippewa, Odawa, Cree, Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Oneida, Sioux and Potawatami nations from as far as British Columbia and California came to the reunion at Algoma University College.

With them were family, First Nations and non-native government representatives, Chief Shingwauk's descendants from local Garden River First Nation, former students of other residential schools, Algoma staff and students, one former staff member of the school, Anglican clergy and staff, and descendants of the first Anglican principal.



Terrence Sands and Charles Soney stand next to a photograph of their Grandfather Soney, above right, who attended Shingwauk in the early years.

The alumni's focus was healing the damage done by the residential school system, and planning for the future.

People rejoiced to see old chums. Elders teased and poked each other about high school crushes. Former students and their children cried and walked out of sharing circles, receiving tissues from the little son of a circle facilitator. Alumni wandered silently about the premises, and gazed on photographs of students from the 1890's curated by Algoma political scientist Don Jackson with students and alumni association office administrator Theresa Turmel. The group praised

in traditional gatherings and Anglican services, crooned to a Cree Elvis impersonator's gyrations, and in an alumni association meeting, strategized for Chief Shingwauk's vision for

aboriginal education which gave rise to the school in 1873.



Alumni offer a Cree hymn in the Bishop Fauquier Memorial Chapel.

As alumnus and spokesperson Chief Michael Cachagee of Chapleau Cree First Nation described to me, the idea of "teaching wigwams" for European learning came to Chief Shingwauk in a vision. He secured a Anglican teacher and small schoolhouse for his people. In the next generation, his sons raised funds with the school's first (English) Anglican principal, and the Garden River Ojibway helped erect the first Shingwauk school.

When it opened, the school aimed to teach First Nations people European skills and trades. To this end, Chief Shingwauk's sons of the Garden River Ojibway lent land in trust to the Anglican church. But soon, the school became a tool for assimilation into white society.

According to Chief Cachagee, the exact shape of Shingwauk University is to be determined after a charter is in place to guide curriculum. First Nations educators and elders will lead course development, which will be grounded in the philosophy that "learning is not just book learning, it is also experiential."

The "cross-cultural centre of excellence" will be open to native and non-native people, he said.

At the reunion, the legacy of hurt, and the graciousness and hope of the people as they spoke of the past and Shingwauk University were moving.



Chief Michael Cachagee of Chapleau Cree First Nation takes up the microphone for a karaoke evening following a traditional feast at Garden River First Nation.

When I met alumnus Don Sands, a retired printer, he told me he was furious with the church and then hugged me and invited me to join him, his wife and friends to celebrate his 43rd wedding anniversary. That night and over the weekend he spoke of his feelings.

"It's a great feeling, meeting all the old people I know...and making new friends too," he said. "At the same time, coming back here brings back a lot of those terrible things that went on."

Mr. Sands, a member of the Chippewa nation, was born on Walpole Island. He attended the school from 1935 to 1945, from the age of 4 until he was 15.

"I want everyone to know our story," he said, speaking of beatings, chronic hunger, the pain of forgetting his language and learning that "everything Indian was wrong and dirty."



Alumnus Don Sands

"That's why we should make Shingwauk University," he said. "They tried to take the Indian out of us, and out of this place [where the school stands], but it's always been Shingwauk and it will always be Shingwauk," he said.

Alumnus Dorothy Bonspiel Cunningham of the Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) Nation, Kanasatake, Que., shared similar views on Shingwauk University.

Mrs. Cunningham attended the school between 1941 and 1946. She said she "found it to be an excellent school [where she] learned a lot." At the same time, she said that several generations of her family were "almost destroyed" by separation and by attempted assimilation which caused denial and shame of native identity.

"For me, my healing will come about when Shingwauk University is established," she said. "It will seem that there's been a positive outcome."

Ronald Freeman, her son, like many children of former students at the reunion, described what it was like to come for the first time to the school which has so impacted his family's life.

"These [former students of the residential schools] were taught to be ashamed of our people and our language, and the circle was attempted to be broken by the churches and the Indian Act - especially the Indian Act," he said.

Ronald, a student at the University of Toronto, said that the establishment of Shingwauk University where First Nations languages would be taught would be "an incredible learning opportunity and achievement."

Rev. Harry Morrow, a manual training instructor at the school between 1947 to 1953, also reflected on his experiences and future healing. Rev. Morrow, who spoke at length about his experiences as a young teacher at the school, said that by sitting in a sharing circle he was "gaining a better understanding of the problems [the children] faced."

He found "that the media has been focussed on physical and sexual problems, but a lot of these people are talking about separation and what it meant for communities to lose children," he said.

"There's a lot of hurt," said Rev. Morrow. "There had been talk of some healing for the staff a few years ago [with the church], and I don't know what's come of it," he said.

After the reunion, he mused that "it was good to talk to some of the fellows...and to hear talk of Shingwauk University, and fulfilling the dream."

In 1991, after the school's second reunion, the alumni association and the Shingwauk Trust succeeded in bringing the idea for Shingwauk University to the Algoma College board of directors. The board approved the development of a new charter, still underway, and a name change. Since then, the trust, alumni association and board have been talking.

"It takes time to get everyone together on something like this that involves so many people," said Mrs. Cunningham. "But I feel we're on the precipice, especially with Dr. [Celia] Ross," she said, referring to the president of Algoma University College.

"She came to the healing lodge," said alumnus Don Sands.

Both Dr. Ross and Bud Wildman, chair of Algoma College's board of directors, spoke at the reunion's welcome.

"You've given us a vision of Shingwauk University and for that we thank you," said Dr. Ross in her opening remarks.

"There was a partnership [for the education of aboriginal people] and we...know in many ways it was not fulfilled. We want to work with you, we look forward to meeting the challenge," said Mr. Wildman, in his opening speech.

According to Chief Cachagee, the people of Garden River who originally gave the land in trust to the church for education "are taking a lead on this [Shingwauk University]."



At this years' reunion, the president of the Shingwauk Education Trust and former Chief of Garden River First Nation, Darrell Boissoneau, alluded to past communication problems in developing the university, but spoke of the significance for First Nations solidarity and leadership in realising the vision.

"I want to say that colonialism stops here," he said in his introductory remarks. "The hurt and the pain stops here for our

Algoma College, the former site of the Shingwauk Indian Residential School, Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

people...[as we] look to our future."

Mr. Boissoneau first voiced the idea for Shingwauk University was at the 1996 reunion. The Shingwauk Education Trust oversees the land on which the former school sits.

At one time the diocese of Algoma was in conflict with the trust and native communities. After the school closed in 1970, native educators opened a Anishinabek cross-cultural learning centre at the site. Algoma College also leased part of the land. However, when the college and diocese evicted the Anishinabek centre, and when the church tried to sell parts of the property, relationships deteriorated.

According to Chief Cachagee, the relationship between the church and the trust, Algoma College, and the Alumni Association has improved.

"[Algoma College] is starting to see that it's a viable partnership with the church and trust... and one that needs nurturing," he said.

Archdeacon Harry Huskins, another trust administrator, said that "for too many years, the church was making strategic decisions [regarding the trust] and now it's time for indigenous people [of Garden River and Batchewana Bay] to be running it."

The Anglican Church of Canada helped finance the Shingwauk Reunion through its indigenous Healing and Reconciliation Fund. Additional supporters were several First Nations, the diocese of Algoma, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Indian Affairs, and others.

For more information on the Shingwauk Alumni Association, browse their website.

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