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Home News Ontario Residential school couldn't destroy her culture connection

Residential school couldn't destroy her culture connection

Posted By CHRISTINE MCFARLANE

Posted 1 day ago

Susan Esquimaux- Burke is an example of the resiliency and determination that enabled some residential school survivors to become bright footnotes to one of the blackest chapters in Canadian history.

The second youngest in a family of nine who grew up in Whitefish Falls, Ont., she is a citizen of the Sucker Creek First Nation, now known as Aundeck Omni Kaning.

In 1953, when she was five years old, she went to Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, where she remained until she was 16.

Esquimaux-Burke now lives in Hamilton, an active grandmother. She speaks candidly about her experience at Shingwauk and the impact it had on her life. The childhood feelings of fear, anger and loneliness are still fresh in her memory.

Holding back tears, she recalls as a six-year-old seeing her mother arriving to collect her sisters and brother to take home for the summer, but leave her behind.

My mother does not love me," she thought, not realizing that school officials refused to let her accompany her siblings home.

Shingwauk's legacy, Esquimaux- Burke says, was the message constantly drummed into students that

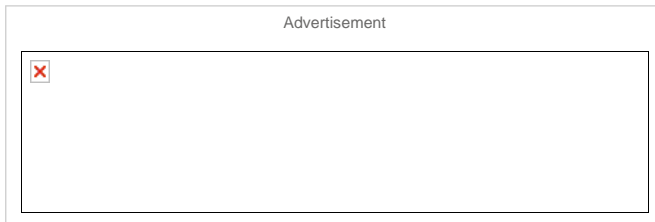
Indians cannot hold down jobs such as being a lawyer or doctor because they were not capable of it."

She had to overcome a total dependency on school staff who decided everything from the clothes students wore, to the food they ate and the chores they were expected to do.

She saw corporal punishment meted out for infractions" such as speaking her Ojibwa, or showing any type of affection towards other students.

Esquimaux-Burke learned to be silent and speak only when spoken to. Later she would have to re-learn how to be gentle, herself and toward others.

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Esquimaux-Burke credits her survival of the residential school experience to the knowledge that she had six siblings attending the same school, as well as her mother's teachings of how to treat people in a good way. She fought loneliness because staff kept family members apart and her correspondence was censored; announcements about births or deaths at home were deleted, making students feel disconnected from their communities.

I was sitting on a fence and straddling two cultures," she says when she left Shingwauk. My ways of interacting and dealing with people was no longer recognized and this became a source of resentment from others."

By living with one of her older sisters who had left Shingwauk before her, Susan was able to watch and help her raise her children.

Those parenting skills came in handy when she began raising her own family, and Esquimaux-Burke vowed that what she had experienced at Shingwauk was something that she would never let her own daughters and grandchildren experience.

Because Shingwauk had tried to suppress her feelings of identity, and her sense of culture and connection, Susan recognized that it was important for her daughters and grandchildren to know their culture.

It is the foundation on which you stand on, in knowing who you are," she says. I tried to teach them to know balance, to be strong and to be true to themselves".

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At 60, Susan Esquimaux-Burke can look back and say that now she is in a good place because she has learned about relationships, and has raised two daughters who are successful in their own lives.

She says she has let go of the shame that was imposed on her in residential school. She believes that many doors have started to open for her because she sees life differently.

She is proud to be a mother and a grandmother and understand that Shingwauk could not suppress what has always been inside her.

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