PART 15: Truth and Reconciliation

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Frustrated by the slow start of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission struck this summer by an apologetic federal government to collect the personal narratives of Natives subjected to the abuses of the forced-assimilation Indian residential school program, the Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre struck its own commission before more deaths in its community further diminished the numbers of those with stories to tell.

It must have been working off a sixth sense.

No sooner had Council Fire struck its own commission than the government’s commission imploded.

Its highly praised chair, Justice Harry LaForme, suddenly up and quit, issued a prepared statement, and then went mute.

Council Fire, perhaps suspicious of the turmoil at the government’s end, called its press conference in early October — a week before LaForme’s abrupt resignation — to announce its own reconciliation venture, not that it garnered much attention.

No mainstream media beyond this newspaper was in attendance that Thursday morning — just a camera crew from the Aboriginal Peoples Television network, and a reporter from the Anglican Journal.

“There are many residential school survivors who have passed on to the Spirit World, and many more who are aging with health conditions,” said Gordon Peters, former regional chief of the Ontario Assembly of First Nations, and chair of the newly-struck panel.

“Council Fire fears their stories will never be heard unless we do this. The historical record is also for the families who have no idea about the extent of these experiences.”

Working off the title, Heroes of Our Time, the Council Fire commission has budgeted $35,000 for the project, with a March 31 deadline to document approximately two dozen elderly residential school survivors in the Toronto area whose lives are nearing an end.

One of the three commissioners, Andrew Wesley, is himself a school survivor of 11 years, born in the Cree community of Albany House on the west coast of James Bay, and later ordained as an Anglican priest.

“At one time, before I went to residential school, I was a good person,” said Wesley. “I grew up on a trap line, and then I was taken away to residential school and I learned all kinds of things that had me walking a different road.

“It was only later that I realized the harm that had been done to me. We need to get our stories out to our communities. Once our stories are told, they become sacred because they are coming from our heart.”

The third commissioner, Darlene Ritchie, is executive director of the At^lohsa Native Family Healing Service in London, Ont., and overseer of that city’s aboriginal homeless diversion program.

Between 1998 and 2000, she was spokesperson for the Coalition for an Inquiry into the Death of Dudley George.

“As we wait for the Canadian government’s commission to get started, we are losing people,” she said.

“The Canadian government, years ago, started the process to kill the Indian in the child, and they acted on it.

“We have to acknowledge the resilience and the tenacity of our people who went through those schools, who held on, who carried on, and who continue today.”

When the federal government struck its Truth and Reconciliation Commission early this year, and appointed Justice Harry LaForme as chair, it was a decision that received high praise from the aboriginal community.

LaForme was one of them.

Back in 2004, when he was appointed to the Ontario Court of Appeal, making him the first aboriginal person in the history of Canada to sit on any appellate court, LaForme told one reporter about his days as a rookie lawyer, and how he could look out the 67th-floor office in a powerful Bay St. law firm and almost see the distant reserve where he grew up — “sleeping on straw in a converted granary with no power or running water.”

A member of the Mississaugas of New Credit First Nation near Hagersville, LaForme’s father was a labourer who took on piecemeal work — berry-picking, hunting or trapping — to provide for his wife and the five children before eventually getting a job at GM in Buffalo, N.Y.

“I thought I was going to be a big corporate-commercial lawyer and make tonnes of money,” he once said.

“(But) the more I looked, the more I realized that I wasn’t doing what I needed to do. I needed to establish an aboriginal law practice.”

And, in 1980, he did just that, all which launched a law career that was destined for increasingly more powerful positions on the bench.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that LaForme was about to head, however, is now in limbo.

In his resignation letter dated Oct. 20, LaForme told Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl that there were “incurable problems” with respect to his two commissioners — Jane Brewin Morley and Claudette Dumont-Smith — that predestined the commission to failure.

This now has Strahl seeking guidance from the two remaining adjudicators on how to proceed with the $1.9-billion, court-ordered settlement of the residential school issue, and its reported 80,000 survivors nation-wide.

LaForme, meanwhile, has returned to his job at the Ontario Court of Appeal, has refused all interview requests and, according to his spokesman, Peter Rehak, is “back in judge mode.”

If there were any telltale signs of brewing trouble, it came in a speech LaForme delivered this summer in Quebec City, a prelude to a CBC radio interview in early October when LaForme complained about influence from the Assembly of First Nations over hiring decisions, and particularly his decision to not renew the contract of the commission’s executive director, Bob Watts.

“Unless the commission can reach out to survivors as being truly independent, the integrity of its work will be undermined, and the validity of its finding and its conclusions will be suspect,” LaForme said in that speech.

Bob Watts, of course, was former chief of staff to Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Fontaine, however, refused to go there.

“The big challenge is not to try to figure out why he resigned,” said Fontaine. “Their big challenge is to find a replacement.”

So far, that replacement has no name — although high on the wish list is Roberta Jamieson, the first Canadian aboriginal woman to earn a law degree, former ombudsman to Ontario, former chief of the Six Nations of the Grand River near Brantford, Order of Canada recipient, and executive director of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation.

She is known, not so coincidentally, for her work in dispute resolution.

It is her forte.

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Roberta Jamieson, whose foundation has already awarded some $30 million in scholarships and bursaries to 8,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis students since its inception in 1985, is a walking template for achievement.

If there were a definitive list of first achievements among First Nations in this country, her name would undoubtedly be first on that list of role models.

She has made a career out of busting down barriers.

Not only the first aboriginal woman in Canada to achieve a law degree, Roberta Jamieson was also the 19-year-old law student (and founder of the Native Law Students Association) who, during a televised debate on land claims with then Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chretien, was so well-versed on the subject that a poorly-briefed Chretien ended up walking off the set in over-matched disgust.

Also among her impressive list of firsts was being the first non-parliamentarian to be appointed an ex-officio member of a House of Commons committee, namely the special task force stuck in 1983 on Native self-government.

Today, the 56-year-old Jamieson’s name tops the whisper list to replace Mr. Justice Harry LaForme as chair of the federal reconciliation commission on the residential school fiasco.

But, as Jamie Monastyrski, media director of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, puts it: “More to the point, when is Roberta Jamieson’s name not mentioned?

“Her name is atop everyone’s list.”

For the moment, though, Jamieson’s “baby” is the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation where she has just celebrated four years as its head, and where she cites “inspiration, motivation, empowerment, support and celebration” as the keys to pushing young aboriginals to realize their dreams.

“One of our biggest barriers (in pursuing higher education), and it goes back to colonialism, is that many of our people still don’t believe we are worthy,” she says. “They still don’t believe we have a choice.

“That’s what colonialism is all about. It makes you lose your self-worth and self-esteem. You know, all of our families have been touched by the residential school extremes, and I am no exception,” she adds,

“But, with support from community, and from family, when you see other people achieving great things, then finally you start to believe in yourself.”

For Roberta Jamieson, what motivated her goes back to when she was very young, and living on the Six Nations reserve where her family ran what she calls a “greasy spoon” diner called Bobby’s Grill.

“When I grew up, we had an Indian agent — a white person — who sat up on a platform above our (band) council,” she says. “We were not allowed to meet without him being present. He presided over all decisions.

“So the hand of government external from our community was very evident in determining the size and the shape of our future and I decided, at a very young age, that this was not acceptable.

“Our people, quite frankly, were the founders of democracy in the western world,” she says. “They were a people who had traditional healers, who were famous for their diplomacy and conflict resolution ... and to think that they should be reduced to this?

“Well, it just didn’t fit with me. I got quickly tired of being told that Indians don’t do this, or women don’t do that.

“And I wasn’t going to listen to it.”

It wasn’t that long ago, in fact, that a Native Canadian who became a doctor (Jamieson’s original goal), or a lawyer (which she is today), or a minister of the church, or even a graduate from a university, became subject to Involuntary Enfranchisement — meaning Native status had to be signed away.

“Back in the day, Involuntary Enfranchisement was a powerful barrier to stifle achievement,” says Jamieson, a Mohawk. “I am not the first First Nations woman in Canada to achieve a law degree because I am some kind of Einstein.

“But there was the day when you could only do what the Indian agent thought was a good idea — usually the ministry — or else you would lose your status.

“It was a huge barrier. Huge.”

On March 6, in Winnipeg, the 2009 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards will be handed out to 14 recipients.

Corporate sponsors have bought in, and in a major way. Scotiabank, for example, just kicked in $100,000 over the next five years. BMO Capital Markets recently donated a portion of the institutional equity trading commissions during one market day earlier this year that generated $1.7 million. And CIBC, one of the original sponsors, recently committed to providing an additional $830,000 over a two-year period.

The list is extensive, and the recipients of the achievement awards are increasingly impressive.

Last year, in Toronto, some of the recipients of the bursaries and scholarships included Jason Hochstein of Alberta, who was entering the master of science program at the International Space University; Dayna Gobin of Alberta, completing her final year in business administration at the University of Lethbridge; Tasha Robitaille of Ontario, in her third year in biomedical science at the University of Ottawa; and Kaitlin Sandy of Ontario, entering her first year towards a bachelor of science degree from the University of Toronto.

“The reason the work we do here (at the foundation) is so important is that it challenges the stereotypes that abound out there,” says Jamieson. “When we tell the story of some of our achievers, people are just floored.

“We have an achiever, for example, who has worked on a system that is now used on the NASA space shuttle.”

That award winner, back in 1996, was a Metis man named Albert Rock.

Following a devastating auto accident that almost took his life in 1982, and unsatisfied with the medical technology used in his rehab, Albert Rock devised a means of measuring blood flow and muscle temperature in the affected areas of his body — this despite being diagnosed with dyslexia and attending 19 schools before reaching Grade 10.

The device he invented from a hospital bed has become an extensive line of computerized Data Loggers now in use on NASA space shuttles and Indy Car racing teams.

“I told Albert Rock’s story at a dinner party the other night,” says Jamieson. “And, like I said, people were just floored.

“We have a multitude of stories like that — stories that Canadians are not aware of.

“It is time for everyone to open their eyes.”

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