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Despite racism, Bartleman rose to pinnacle of profession

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BY JANET GIBSON

Former lieutenant-governor James Bartleman attended a four-room school in Port Carling. By the time he entered Grade 12, he had only three classmates. That may have been the end of his formal education had it not been for the chairman of Pittsburg Plate Glass Company, a man his father knew.

The man paid Bartleman's expenses for Grade 13 and for four years of history studies at the University of Western Ontario.

But his school years weren't an easy ride. Bartleman's family was poor. His father made money selling fish to Sloan's Restaurant in Gravenhurst. He saved enough to buy a tent which the family pitched on the edge of a dump. In the winter they rented a house. On the coldest of nights the children and their dog huddled with their parents while snowflakes blew in through cracks in the walls.

This way of life seemed normal, Bartleman told his audience at Laurentian University on March 18. What wasn't normal was what he often heard on the street, words he never forgot. "Dirty half-breed!" kids shouted at Bartleman, whose father was white and mother was Aboriginal.

One day, he followed his dad into the library and discovered the world of books. "I could be a philosopher, an explorer, I could dream," he recalled. "All of a sudden, I had good marks."

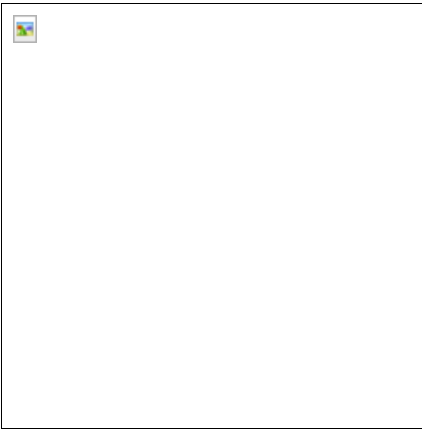
Upon graduation from Western, Bartleman hitchhiked around Europe for a year. He was one of a handful of people to hear Martin Luther King give his speech, I Have a Dream, at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He was one of thousands to witness the funeral procession for Winston Churchill. As he tasted life abroad, he became determined to join Canada's foreign service.

Bartleman succeeded in his quest and served Canada as a diplomat for 35 years. During his term as Canada's High Commissioner in South Africa, he attended Nelson Mandela's farewell speech and was beaten within inches of his life. "All over the world," he said, "indigenous people have been treated badly by society."











When Bartleman returned to Canada, he travelled to First Nations in northern Ontario. As you go from south to north, he said, you enter a different world, a world that is "out of mind and out of thought. People are just forgotten."

It's a world where native children were torn from their homes and sent to church-run residential schools where they were forbidden from speaking their language. The process, Bartleman said, which started in the 1880s and ended in 1986, was a social engineering project to turn native people into white people. Many children were beaten and sexually abused. Others died of tuberculosis.

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In March 2006, the government announced the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Agreement which gave a lump sum payment to former students.

In the next few weeks, Bartleman said, the government will establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the first two years of their five-year mandate, a chair and two commissioners will travel to seven regions in Canada and hear the stories of Indian residential school students.

As well, Bartleman said, people can come forward to apologize. He added: "You really can't wait until people come to say they're sorry. You have to forgive them and move on and heal yourself. If someone says they're sorry, how do you know they really mean it, anyway?"

Reader's Feedback

On Tuesday, March 25, 2008 at 08:18, Man About Town said:

The best thing Bartleman can do is to help the Indians remember the past, but more importantly to stop using it as a crutch.

As he perfectly shows by example, it is up to the individual to be responsible for their choices. Going to school, learning, choosing not to fall into the self pity trap.

Yes, people all over the world have been oppressed or taken advantage of by one occupying power or another. The scenario is as old as time. Examples include the Roman Empire, Egypt, Vikings, the Napoleonic wars, Slavery, Nazi Germany, Apartheid, etc...etc..

Sadly it's part of human history. Choosing not to better yourself isn't.

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