



Apology brings history to surface
Gov't gesture stirs up feelings and memories

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper's historic apology to Canada's first nations on Wednesday afternoon was a long time coming for people like Charles Chapman.

Now a support worker and activist, he spent eight years at a residential school on Kuper Island, just off Chemainus on Vancouver Island, three years St. Mary's Residential School for Indians in Mission, and graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School in North Vancouver. His parents died while he was away in the schools, which subsequently became home.

"My sisters were too young to take care of me, so the residential became my home," he said. He knows from his own experience, and through his work with the Indian Residential School Survivors Society, the persistent and complex effects the forced attendance at the residential schools had on the first nations communities.

"We had no choices in life. We weren't accepted as citizens of Canada. We didn't get to vote until I think 1960," he said. "A lot of the good things people enjoyed we weren't allowed to have. The government controlled us so much."

Chapman, originally from Hope, was with the St. Mary's band in Cranbrook to listen to the apology.

The words were broadcast on radio, television and streaming video.

"The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history. Today, we recognize this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly," Harper said.

His words were followed by another expression of contrition by Stephane Dion, who apologized on behalf of the Liberal Party, which formed the government for about 70 years in the century during which the residential school policy existed.

At Sumas First Nations, people gathered quietly, each person dealing with the emotions that came up in their own way, said band manager Chris Long.

"It's still very, very difficult for people who've gone through the [residential school experience]. All the old emotions come back," he said Thursday.

In Cranbrook, people were anxious, said Chapman, but "they accepted the apology and felt it was positive, that we could move forward."

Many first nations people are still processing the impact of Wednesday's formal apology, said Chapman.

"I think we need a week or so for everyone to settle down, from the anxiety and emotion. I expect we'll start getting calls in another week or so, from people who want to address the issues," surrounding the residential school legacy, he said.

Chapman hopes that this apology brings to light to non-natives the stories of the country's aboriginals, both their oppression as well as their rich and vibrant culture, and opens up communication between native and non-native Canadians.

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