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Local News

Home News Local News Robbery exposes legacy of residential schools; Man jailed two years for attacking lone worker



Robbery exposes legacy of residential schools; Man jailed two years for attacking lone worker

Posted By MARIA CALABRESE

Posted 1 hour ago

A lone man in a prisoner's box, often looking at his feet, inherited a heavy burden as the next generation to live under the shadow of a "shameful" part of Canadian history, a North Bay court heard Wednesday.

At a glance, Mark Okimaw, 30, beat and robbed a lone worker shortly after being offered free doughnuts at a downtown coffee shop at almost 4 a.m. Oct. 12. The worker wasn't seriously hurt and North Bay police arrested Okimaw a short time later.

What brought the Timmins man to that point is probably no comfort to the worker, the judge said, but it's a symptom of a bigger ill facing the children of victims of residential schools.

"Your situation, your history, is a sad one," said Ontario Court Justice Gregory Rodgers as he sentenced the man to two years in jail followed by probation for 18 months.

"That policy of removing children from their parents and depriving them of their culture and their language and their homes . . . had an effect that went well beyond the children who were most directly and immediately affected," the judge said.

Okimaw's parents were subjected to residential schools and went on to create a household fueled by alcoholism and physical abuse, with Okimaw starting to drink at age 11, playing father to two younger siblings and dabbling in marijuana and cocaine.

Both parents, however, went on to beat alcohol, return to school in their later years and find meaningful jobs, including Okimaw's mother who became a drug and alcohol counsellor who is now working on reserves to help children in his situation, said defence lawyer Wayne Stickland.

In an "eloquent" report on Okimaw's background and personal circumstances as a native Canadian, a probation officer described the residential school policy as a "shameful part of our history as a country."

While government, churches and prejudice in Okimaw's Timmins hometown were at least partly blamed for his troubles, at some point the man has to be held accountable, the judge added.

Okimaw was given credit for already serving six months in jail, counted as double time or 12 months because jails offer no treatment or programs to inmates awaiting trial.

The judge recommended Okimaw serve the sentence at the Ontario Correctional Institute in Brampton or the Algoma Treatment and Remand Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., which offer programs for alcohol and drug abuse and behaviour problems, although court heard there can be waiting lists for both.



Okimaw served two years of a 34-month sentence in 2002 for stabbing the mother of his two young sons who he still has contact with and tries to support, court heard.

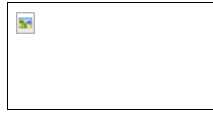
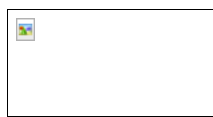
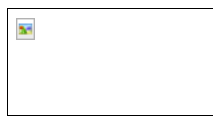
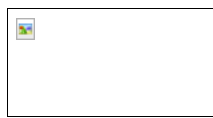
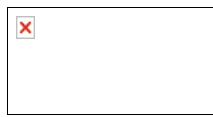
"If the cycle (of violence) stops with you . . . that means all the things that you've experienced, your sons don't have to," the judge said. "Perhaps that's the incentive you need."

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Fast facts

- Church-run federal schools closed in the 1970s, but they affected generations of families who struggle with alcohol and drug abuse, sexual dysfunction and domestic violence, while many native languages were lost when children were punished for speaking them.

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- The former Liberal government in 1998 acknowledged physical and sexual abuse in the schools, but stopped short of apologizing.

- Last year, the Conservatives finalized a \$2-billion compensation package to about 80,000 former residential school students. The House of Commons apologized, but the prime minister has not issued a formal apology.

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