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## Marilyn's story

**Art does have amazing healing powers, as one residential school survivor discovered**

**Kerry Benjoe , Leader-Post**

Published: Saturday, April 12, 2008

REGINA -- Art does have amazing healing powers, as one residential school survivor discovered.

Marilyn Tsinigine decided to step out of the shadows and share her story with others. She believes it should be told.

"We're not fooling anybody but ourselves when we say it's out of our system. I think everyone has been affected by (residential schools) even the ones who didn't go and say none of this affects them," said Tsinigine. "I believe residential schools live on even today, in different forms and different ways. It just didn't die when the schools were closed."

Last summer, Tsinigine was a participant in the Indian Communication Arts (INCA) Summer Institute, a program offered through the First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv). Tsinigine decided that she wanted to do something on residential schools as part of her class assignments.



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**Marilyn Tsinigine, a residential school survivor, walks along the path north of the First Nations University of Canada.**

Roy Antal, Leader-Post



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With the help of a videographer and a strong support system, Tsinigine made her story into a short video simply titled Marilyn's Story.

"What got me interested was that there wasn't enough stories - the real, real stories - of what happened in Saskatchewan," explained Tsinigine. "So many people that I've talked to who are non-aboriginal, they think it's something that happened 100 years ago or more and I should forget about it. We should all forget about it."

She said many people didn't realize that it's not a story from the past - there are many survivors who are still living with memories of residential schools.

"It has to come out. Otherwise it can be passed on. It can be passed on to our children," Tsinigine explained.

After trying unsuccessfully to bury and forget horrible memories of abuse she decided it was time to tell her story.

"I'm glad I did because I guess I saw that not much was really being done. Sure there are stories in the newspaper about residential schools but nobody talks about what really happened," she said.

She believes this is just another step forward on her healing journey.

"It's about getting down to the core, down to the place not many people want to go. It's frightening. It's scary," she explained.

Tsinigine spent six years at the St. Michael's Residential School in Duck Lake. She started school as a bright, happy five-year-old girl and left the school six years later forever changed.

It was the last time she thought of herself as attractive.

"I lost all the beauty I had," said Tsinigine. "When they were finished with me - nobody wanted me. I didn't even want myself."

Her experiences in residential school haunted her for years and affected the person she became. Although she raised two sons she always felt disconnected because there was no place she could call home.

"I wasn't balanced. I wasn't together. I tried to be like everybody else, but I couldn't," said Tsinigine. "I didn't know how to be a mother."

It was only after she sought help to deal with her childhood experiences that she was able to start her healing journey. Twice she stayed five weeks at the Tsow-tun Le Lum Healing Lodge on Vancouver Island to help her deal with her residential school experience.

Making the video has helped her focus on her goals.

Tsinigine has come to realize that she has the right to want things for herself because she has the right to be happy.

One of her dreams that never disappeared was the dream to go to university and get a good education.

"When I went to school before I was so blocked that I did so bad. I couldn't comprehend the schoolwork," said Tsinigine.

Now, she is one semester away from completing her INCA communications certificate at the FNUniv. Since producing the video, she feels more empowered and focused. She has given herself a deadline to complete her studies in Regina and knows she wants to do more work on her video.

"I feel like I want to finish my story," said Tsinigine.

She realizes her experience in residential school is a burden she no longer has to carry on her own. Confidence has replaced the shame and self-doubt she once felt and she now knows with certainty that the abuse she suffered as a child does not define her and the person she wishes to become.

"(Working on the video has) helped me to focus and to understand where I'm supposed to be in life," said Tsinigine.

She has shared the video with her sons - one lives in Toronto and the other lives in northern Saskatchewan and they have been very supportive of her journey.

Tsinigine breaks into a smile as she talks about her children. She knows that, as she continues on her journey, her children are there behind her urging her to keep pushing ahead.

"They are proud of me," she said, adding that they see her in a new light because they now have a better understanding of the pain she carried.

"I still feel a bit raw that I'm not strong enough to deal with those people who don't have that knowledge and awareness yet or are in denial and say, 'This can't happen in Canada,' " said Tsinigine.

She has exposed her wound for all to see by making the video and has received positive feedback. Tsinigine believes it was time to tell her story and the fact that it was a video was something that wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for Richard Agecutay.

"When she first pitched the idea she was crying. 'I said oh my God, I have to jump,'" recalled Agecutay, network videographer for CBC Toronto.

As a First Nation's person he's always maintained his belief in his culture and spirituality.

"I was meant to meet (Tsinigine) and she was meant to meet me and her story idea, it was the time it was going to happen," said Agecutay. "We had a hell of a time doing it but nothing in this world is easy. You've got to work hard for it."

Agecutay is a strong believer in the healing power of art. It was while pursuing his education at the Banff Centre for the Arts that he obtained a certificate in television production. He was exposed to a wide variety of artists who were dealing with tough issues.

"They were using art not only video but photography, ceramics, writing digital media big at the time. And they were exploring their identity and trying to understand their humanity," explained Agecutay.

He was brought into the class to help teach students the technical aspects of operating a camera. However, his art background, which includes working for 10 years at Regina's Globe Theatre, came into play after listening to what Tsinigine had to say about her residential school ordeal.

"I have unique capacities to understand sorrow, loss and healing," said Agecutay.

He was moved by Tsinigine's story and wanted to use his skills to help her.

Agecutay said Tsinigine knew she wanted to do something on residential schools but at the time she was unsure of the shape it would take.

"I asked her to sit down and just write all the ideas in any kind of form - prose, poetry, paragraphs. She ended up writing 11 pages," said Agecoutay.

"I grabbed it and I recognized it and I went through it three or four times. I noticed and I recognized a certain style of writing that was almost like poetry."

He pulled out those parts and from that he developed a script both for the narrative and for the video. Tsinigine went into the recording studio armed with the script and voiced the entire narrative for the video in one take.

"To me it was emotional because she just read it from the heart," said Agecoutay. "She was stuttering and the shakiness in her voice in some places was not due to her having the inability to read but it was her confronting it. Once she was reading it, then it was in her mind, then it became verbal. She was revisiting some of those things of her being abused by a nun in boarding school."

He said the next step was to shoot the video.

Armed with crew of students and volunteer actors from his family, Agecoutay set out to shoot the images over two days. A day before the shoot, he drove past an abandoned house that he knew would be an ideal location.

"I used that house as a skeleton of her soul. It's there but it's not really there - it's hollow," said Agecoutay.

He asked his sister and four-year-old niece for their help and they obliged. Agecoutay's niece became Tsinigine as a child, and his sister played the role of the nun.

Agecoutay was amazed at what they were able to create in two days.

"Because of this sexual abuse thing it was really creepy. It's a vile thing that happened to her," he said.

He had to find a way to shoot the video without making it too offensive.

"It's hard to understand what was going through that nun's mind but in the end abuse is abuse," said Agecoutay.

After two days of work he was able to bring Tsinigine's story out into the open.

While shooting the video he saw the impact it had on Tsinigine.

"She's confronting those fears that for years she didn't have a way or a form or a vehicle to be able to look back and understand what happened to her in order to figure out why she is the way she is," said Agecoutay.

He's happy to have had the chance to help Tsinigine heal the scars on her soul.

"A lot of people have that victim guilt. They're ashamed even though they're the victim," said Agecoutay, who believes people are able to move forward only when they can break free from their past.

He said after making the video, Tsinigine can now look at what happened to her more objectively as a third person. Instead of it being inside it's outside, he said.

"When it was inside her I think she didn't feel validated because no one understood her pain. Once we put it onto video and saw it then it validated her."

Agecoutay hopes that Tsinigine will continue on her healing journey and finally be able to see herself for what she is and that is a worthwhile and beautiful woman.

The video can be viewed online at [incasummerinstitute.com/](http://incasummerinstitute.com/)

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