

NEWS

STAR GETS ACTION

At last, Charlie's family begins to heal

Body of teen who died at residential school reburied near home

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Charlie Hunter was finally buried beneath the tundra of his home village of Peawanuck, population 250, in the remote Canadian Shield as family members sang Roman Catholic hymns, traditional aboriginal songs and "Amazing Grace" in Cree.

For 37 years, Charlie's body lay 515 kilometres away, under a white cross in Moosonee. There are no roads between Peawanuck and Moosonee.

The 13-year-old drowned on Oct. 22, 1974, while attending St. Anne's residential school in Fort Albany as he tried to rescue a partially-sighted student who had fallen through the ice. He was buried in Moosonee before his family was consulted.

For years, federal authorities refused to move the body, despite repeated requests by the family. Yet in less than two weeks after their story appeared this year in the *Star*, readers helped raise the \$20,000 in funds and services needed for his reburial.

The sky was grey as the funeral began Wednesday in Kateri Tekakwitha Roman Catholic Church, a teepee-shaped log structure.

Some of the 100 mourners spoke of their anger that Ottawa never acted to relocate Charlie's body. Others were still upset that parents in the village allowed their children to be sent to residential schools, which operated from the late 19th century to 1996.

Mourners sobbed as Charlie Hunter's oldest brother, George, played guitar and sang a song in English that he wrote: "Why Did You Send Me to School?"

There were more tears as Charlie's niece Marlene said she wants to be a lawyer when she grows up, so she



EDWARD SADOWSKI FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Digging a new grave for Charlie: Star readers helped the Hunter family bring back the body of Charlie, who died in 1974 and was buried far from home.

can help the families of other aboriginal children who suffered or died in residential schools. She's 13, the same age as Charlie when he drowned.

There's no exact figure for how many aboriginal children died at residential schools or while attempting to flee back to their homes. Estimates are in the hundreds, even thousands.

"It has been a long voyage for Charlie but he has now reached home," said Michael Cachagee, executive director of the National Residential School Survivors' Society, in his remarks at the funeral. "Charlie Hunter, like so many of us who attended the Indian residential schools, was a victim of a system that failed him miserably and so many other innocent children."

Among those at the service was the Cree caretaker, John Kataquapat, who pulled Charlie's body out from under the ice and tried in vain to revive him.

Charlie's younger brother Dominique spoke in Cree about how he fled the residential school after the drowning and never returned.

Charlie's father, Mike Hunter, spoke of the funeral as an opportunity for all of them to heal.

"Today we want to bury everything that we've been through over the years and move on from here," he said.

Moods brightened and the sun came out as family members emerged from the service, said Sharon Kelly of the residential school survivors' society. Mike Hunter spoke of how much it



Charlie Hunter pictured in 1973

meant to his family to see that some strangers really do care.

One reader dropped off an envelope at the *Star* newsroom with \$50 and \$20 bills totaling \$1,500 and an anonymous handwritten note: "Enclosed is an anonymous donation to help in their efforts. Please see that they get the funds."

Mike Hunter said it troubled him greatly that Charlie had no family or friends to visit his original gravesite in Moosonee.

It took men 90 minutes to shovel soil onto Charlie's casket while women sang in Cree and English

and Charlie's brother Christopher played an eagle whistle and a drum.

Among those crying at Charlie's new gravesite was Joseph Koostachin, the partially-sighted man whose life Charlie saved so long ago, at the cost of his own.

Koostachin held a red rose in one hand and a white cane in the other. He cried uncontrollably as he was hugged hard by Charlie's mother, Pauline.

He later said he often wished he were dead, because of the guilt he felt about Charlie losing his life.

After the burial, there was a feast with moose, goose, macaroni salad and pine tea. Mike Hunter said he felt like talking about positive things.

"He's back with us," Hunter said. "I can visit him any time I want."