

EPISODE 1: THE FIRST DAY

EDITOR'S NOTE: This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity. For media inquiries related to *Survivors*, or to obtain a copy of this podcast and/or its transcripts for broadcast or educational purposes, please reach out to news@cjsw.com.

DISCLAIMER / CONTENT WARNING: Please be advised: the following program contains stories and accounts of true events from the lives of residential school survivors. Due to the sensitive subject matter, some participants decided to remain anonymous.

These testimonials may include accounts of physical and sexual abuse and may be triggering to some listeners. If you or someone you know is experiencing pain or distress as a result of the residential school experience, you're not alone. Please call the Residential School Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419. They are there to help and they're available 24 hours a day.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Oki nikyokowawaa. Kiitkanakyimatyinohpowawaa. Nohkkyistyikoyii nitakokapayanakippa kitawasinnonii. Anakaa asiksikkapoyiwaa. Anakaa siksikaityitapiwaa. Anakokaa siksikawaa kainaiwaa pikanii. Oki aniksyii matsyitopikskii. Anikaa innestyokakstyimanii. Siksikainnestyisinii. Anikyikokyawaa saahsiwaa sahsahsokitakiwaa. Anikyokyawaa nityiyanakipaa nohkakyistyiyii.

Welcome, my relatives. I'd just like to acknowledge the land that we reside in: the land of the Blackfoot-speaking nations at Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, and also, after Treaty Number 7, we also acknowledge Stoney Nakoda and Tsuut'ina. A rightful acknowledgement of the people and the land that we reside in.

CAMERON SIFERD: This is *Survivors*: an eight-episode podcast made in partnership with CJSW and the Department of Canadian Heritage, providing insight into the lived experience of residential school survivors and their families.

The residential school system ran across Canada from 1883 to 1996. Throughout its lifetime, over 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their homes, stripped of their cultures and forced through a system created to destroy their senses of identity. The lasting negative impact of the residential school system continues to devastate communities of survivors.

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My name is Cameron Siferd. I'm a Métis individual studying the topics of sociology and international Indigenous studies at the University of Calgary.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: Oki, hello, my name is Grace Heavy Runner. My Blackfoot name is Poksikainaki. I am from Kainai First Nation, Alberta. I'm a residential school survivor who attended the St. Mary's Residential School, which operated from 1898 to 1988. I was born in 1974 and attended the residential school when I was nine years old. At the age of 11, the school was closed permanently.

I want to share my story and the story of other residential school survivors to raise awareness and aid in the healing process of our community. Presently, I'm a journalism student and a podcast producer. I'm a daughter, a sister, a mother and grandmother. Every generation of my family within living memory attended residential school. This is my story, but also the story of many. While my experience may have been different from others, there is a unifying impact felt by all generations. I want to share my stories and experiences living at the residential school. Thank you for taking this journey with me.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: The changing colors of the leaves indicates the end of summer. I am nine years old, living on the ranch with my mom, my siblings, and my stepdad. I loved riding horses and enjoyed exploring the land of the Blood Reserve this summer. But now it's time to go back to school. The look on my mother's face is stoic and serious. Although my mother rarely displays emotion or affection towards my siblings and I, today feels different. There's a heaviness hanging in the air. Mom comes into our room after supper. She says it's time to leave. I looked up at her and this overwhelming feeling of worry washes over me.

"Where are we going?" I asked, "What's going on?"

We get into the truck and drive into the darkness of unlit back roads. No one says a word.

We finally arrived at our destination after what felt like the longest drive of my life. We are met with a large brick building towering over us. We pass countless hallways and doors as we walk towards the back office.

"Where are we going?"

Our steps echo through the quiet hallway. The silence is haunting.

"What's going on?"

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No answer from my mother. Her stern gaze is focused on the office at the end of the hall. My mom puts our backs against the wall and tells us to wait here. I peer through the window and see my mom speaking with two women and a man dressed as a priest. She signs several pieces of paper and returns to my brother and I. Coldly, she says, "You both are staying here. I will see you on the weekend."

She walked away.

CAMERON SIFERD: Residential schools were mandatory boarding schools for Indigenous children between the ages of 7 and 16 years old. Parents' options were giving up the children or facing jail time. At its peak, there were 80 residential schools in Canada, and it's estimated that over 150,000 children were forced into attendance throughout its life. The school's purpose was assimilation. Their operations included the demonization of Indigenous culture, knowledge and identity.

REBECCA MANY GREY HORSES / I'TISNOHTISPIIYAKI: Oki, nistonitaniiko I'tisnohtispiiyaki nyomhtoto Kainai. Ohmanikyita nitahktyipysii amootyitotopihpii residential school. My government name is Rebecca Many Grey Horses. I am from the Blood Tribe, otherwise known as Kainai Nation.

I felt so disconnected from my home life and what comes to mind is that period of my life where, you know, there was a lot of fear, feeling oppressed, and -- it just was not a good part of my life. And then, you know, emotionally, I have those feelings of loneliness and abandonment and feeling -- being misplaced and trying to swim through all this. You know, all these new experiences that were not always so good. It was a dark period of my life. Yeah.

CAMERON SIFERD: The schools were underfunded and filled with unqualified staff. Teaching and administration jobs were often given to religious zealots who were relentless in their methods. It wasn't unusual for children to face extreme punishments, whippings, beatings, or forced isolation, for trivial things like speaking their own language, or asking for more food at mealtimes. In the extremes, there were reports of people being pushed down stairs or out windows, or in the case of at least one school shocked into unconsciousness on a homemade electric chair.

On top of physical pain, schools were a haven of sexual abuse. The majority of the time, school staff would face little to no true punishment even if the abuse was made

public. When the crimes are dealt with, it was more likely they would be transferred to another school.

DALLAS YOUNG PINE: One time, I went up to this teacher. I was going to go ask him for a cigarette and he told me to go into his room. He took out this yardstick and he was kind of tapping it on us and, you know, all I was going there was for a cigarette. There was that sexual abuse that was about to happen. You know, it was pretty horrifying. I got out of there and it was... it was a pretty devastating experience at a young age.

CAMERON SIFERD: The wounds of residential schools have not healed. The devastation felt has carried intergenerational consequences. Traditional languages and teachings have been lost through forced assimilation. The loss of parenting skills and traditional ideas of family have led to a situation where there are more Indigenous youth under government care today, than during the height of the residential school system. It took until 2008 for the government to apologize for their role in the system.

REBECCA MANY GREY HORSES / I'TISNOHTISPIIYAKI: We're just thrown into this place. And we had to, you know, we all had to live together whether we wanted it or not. And so we had to learn, it's like being thrown into water and you don't know how to swim. You have to learn quick how to survive in that environment, because these are total strangers that you are expected to live with day-to-day. And so I remember I had my -- my older sisters were in residential school before I was, and they were telling me, this is what you have to do, you have to do this, you have to eat your peas, you have to eat your beans, you know. And so they were trying to teach me, as they went along, how to survive there.

So, it is like you just get the survival instincts. And you just, you just do what you have to do to survive in those elements. And there was a lot of bullying that went [on] there, and you had to learn to fight, or you had to learn how to protect yourself. And you had to learn who your allies were going to be. And so it was -- it was very dysfunctional, because you're just thrown in there, and you're expected to live with these people. So, it was really jolting and you just had to survive.

CAMERON SIFERD: The effects of the residential school system started trickling through generational lines. Stories, history, culture; everything that had been a part of the traditional Indigenous identities were gone. Further, along with the loss of identity,

came the loss of Indigenous parenting skills. The traditional structure of large extended families with roles and responsibilities spread out communally, had been dismantled by the residential school system. Indigenous children were isolated, often separated from even their siblings completely.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: Tears ran down my face as the two women approached us. They explained that we would be split up for the night; boys and girls resided in different quarters. They must have seen the tears in our eyes because they assured us that we would see each other again at breakfast. I begged them not to split us up. How can I protect him if they split us up? I could see the kindness in the supervisor's eyes as she bent down and assured me we would see each other tomorrow. In a word, he was gone. I am taken to the girls' quarters and shown my small locker, where I can keep my stuff. I was given a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, and three sets of clothing. These are now all my possessions.

The woman's name is Margaret. And she explains that she is a junior girl supervisor. She explained that I would need to wash my hair with white powder to ensure I had no lice. My mind is racing. Is this a bad dream? A nightmare? I wish my mom would come back, tell us that this was a horrible mistake. The woman brings me to an empty room with rows of single beds. My brother and I were the first to arrive. So I'll be sleeping in this empty room alone tonight. She let me pick my bed, said Our Father's prayer, then wished me a good night. How can I sleep? This was the longest night of my life. Will I wake from this nightmare?

BETTY LOU CRAZY BOY: And then when we went into the residential school, they cut our hair and then they put a coal oil or some kind of powder in our hair all over our body to make sure we didn't have bugs and then lice in our hair. And we all stood there naked, like every one of us kids were standing there naked while they were bathing us and everything and, and, you know, cutting our hair and everything and, you know, throwing away our clothes that we went in there with. And then we all started dressing the same. Same dresses, different colors or whatever, but the same.

REBECCA MANY GREY HORSES / I'TISNOHTISPIIYAKI: When I entered residential school, it was very traumatizing. You leave a safe, sheltered environment to this really hostile environment. And you experienced so much trauma there from being attacked [by] your supervisors. And you're walking on eggshells all the time trying to survive, it's

a very survival mode of existence. And so when this is going on, you're experiencing trauma after trauma, after trauma, from these abuses that are happening there. You know, when those traumas are not addressed, keep carrying that trauma with you, through the years as you age, you have to address them at some point or another.

For me, you know, I used alcohol to numb those memories and that pain, then at some point, I had to address those traumas. And I had to say, "Okay, this happened to me, when I was in residential schools, this is my experience."

Then I had to go and seek therapy, I had to get healing. But what happened is, I was a mother, so I was transferring that trauma to my daughter, because I hadn't healed it so that she was also experiencing what I experienced, because that's what I was teaching her: that intergenerational trauma. And also, as a parent, I wasn't parenting her the way a healthy parent would. But I was parenting her with fear and judgment, and just being really harsh with her. And so those are the effects of residential schools, that intergenerational trauma. And the parenting skills: where you don't have those parenting skills, you start -- when you become a parent, then you parent that way.

So I had to learn how to parent. And I remember, I had co-workers and I worked with Alberta Health Services, and I would look at the way they parent, they would really build up their children. And I would observe them. And then I had to take a parenting class, because I wanted to do a better job. And so it was through those people that helped me to become a better parent.

So those are all the intergenerational effects, but now today, we're still seeing that mental colonialism those are effects you know, that, you know, people still have that mentality that I call it that residential school mentality, where we, we still believe we're inferior to napikowaiks [white people]; we still believe that the church is right over our religion, and we still want to act and behave like them, and, and look like them. And you know, that's all part of that mental colonialism. And it's not right, we have to heal ourselves from that. And our standards we don't, we don't have we don't use our own standards. As niitsitapi, you know, these are our teachings, these are our standards back in the old days, this is how they would groom you as a leader. And this is how they will groom you as a mother or as an aunt. We had standards back then. But we don't use those standards anymore because of that mental colonialism where we are constantly using mainstream society's standards for us today.

So we really lost a lot. And with our spirituality, we really lost a lot. We still think [that] Christianity is the right religion. And we fail to look at the basic fundamental spiritual values that our old people taught us of kindness, love, compassion, those basic

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principles, Blackfoot principles that old people knew and how they wanted us to follow those principles. But we don't. We still go back to those mainstream Christian values that we try and live up to their standards.

CAMERON SIFERD: The last church-run schools transferred over to the government in Ontario during 1970. From this period onward, the nature of the schools changed from being primarily boarding schools, to a combination of boarding schools, hostels and day schools. The number of schools reduced until they were finally brought to close in 1996. As more children were put through public and day schools, the government decided that less children required the total removal from their home. This seemed to be a combination of a slight increase in appreciation for Indigenous lives and lifestyles, along with a growing population of Indigenous children whose families had faced generations of the residential school system. There was less influence in the home that the government didn't approve of.

CLARENCE WOLFLEG / MIIKSIKA'AM: Oki, nistowonnakoka Miiksika'am. My name is Red Crane. That's my Blackfoot name. My name is Clarence Wolfleg. I'm from Siksika Nation, not too far from Calgary.

As soon as my parents left, a priest came, and he says, "Come on, let's go, little boy." And his voice changed. This nice person turned into somebody [else]. And he grabbed my hand and he takes me down, down the hall to the boys' side on the south side.

And now I say, "Tsimá? Tsimá?" What I'm saying is, "Where? Where?"

And he kind of gave me a little tap on the back of my head and he says, "Don't ever speak that language."

"Oh," and I just nodded my head. And that's when I knew. Why is this so-called holy person telling me I cannot speak my language? Well, I better not argue with him, because he might hit me. That was the first time that I got indications that -- don't speak your language. It's not -- it's evil.

CAMERON SIFERD: Throughout the years, most religious denominations responsible have offered an apology for their involvement in the residential school system. The Roman Catholic Church have not offered an apology, but an acknowledgement of regrettable involvement. In 2008, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an apology on behalf of the government for its role in the residential schools. These

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apologies have been taken differently by every individual who experienced the residential schools. Generally, the acknowledgement has been appreciated. But the sincerity of the government and church have been questioned.

In addition to the government's apology was the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC made 94 recommendations of how the government could take action to improve the devastation caused by the residential schools. As of January 2020, 10 of those recommendations had been followed.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: The next morning, the supervisor wakes me up at 6:00 a.m. The nightmare is still a reality when I realize I'm not waking up in my own bed. The heaviness of the day weighs upon me as the loneliness creeps in. I miss my brother, my sister. Most of all, I miss my mom. The supervisor tells me that it's time to get ready for school. I dread the week ahead. I feel scared and alone. Will the other kids like me? I hope my brother is okay.

I'm escorted downstairs to a huge bathroom that soon will be filled with other junior girls. I grabbed my set of clothing from my locker and hurried to put on my new uniform. The sweater is an ugly green with white polka dots. The tiny dots on the fabric make it look like the sweater is covered in lint. The clothing is scratchy and thin. I wash my face with a bar of soap and line up against the wall. I can't wait to see my brother.

The supervisor takes me to a room where we will have all our meals. It's a giant cafeteria with a table and chairs. I can see green trays stacked on the table. The room feels cold and sterile, like a hospital. They segregate the junior and senior students, so we eat in a different area.

Although the supervisors seem nice, I feel like any wrong move can land me in trouble. I listen carefully to every instruction I'm given. I don't want to be punished or hit. [On] the other side of the room, I can see my brother getting breakfast. I want to run over and hug him. But I was told not to leave my seat. After breakfast, I walk over to my brother. I can tell that he was scared. I give him a hug and he barely says a word. After breakfast, we are separated again. I'm told to brush my teeth and grab a bagged lunch before being shown to our separate exits. Today is the first day of school. My mind is racing.

CAMERON SIFERD: The experience you hear in the stories from Grace and others may not come across as extreme or seem as horrific as the treatment outlined throughout history. Each individual's experience is subjective, and there was no one way to feel

about the schools. There are former students who look back positively on their time in school. The reason for including these historical events is to display the experience of too many individuals who were at the very least, supposed to be provided care and education, and instead received pain, misery and trauma.

When you follow the history of the schools closer to their final decades, the system as a whole faced improvements in treatment. We can look at the quality of teaching as an example. In 1948, only 60% of the teaching staff in the residential school system were qualified to teach. By the early '60s, as the government was approaching control of the schools from the churches, that number increased to closer to 90%. Despite the improvements in this area, there were still problems maintaining a fully-qualified staff throughout the system. Similarly, while abuse still took place, the average experience became less violent, and the availability of food generally improved.

There are important factors to consider when we think of the residential school experience. First and foremost, punishment and abuse are not the scale of whether or not the residential schools were acceptable. The system itself, holding the purpose of forced cultural erasure and assimilation of the Indigenous people of this country through a total institution is the fundamental problem. This did not change throughout the existence of the schools, and the effects of the fallout are still felt.

SKIP WOLFLEG / AKAINIHKASIMI: My name is Clarence Wolfleg Jr. People call me Skip. [This] was a song that was created or made -- composed by my grandfather, Niinonistaa, Mark Wolfleg Sr. One of our last World War Two veterans. [He] was injured twice in World War Two and he still went back into battle. I believe this is one of the songs that kind of came to him during that time.

CAMERON SIFERD: This podcast was produced by Grace Heavy Runner, Cam Siferd, Hannah Many Guns and Jasmine Vickaryous with music by Matthew Cardinal and Skip Wolfleg. Special thanks to all those who shared stories about their residential school experience. This podcast was made in partnership with CJSW and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

JASMINE VICKARYOVS: If you or someone you know is experiencing pain or distress as a result of the residential school experience, you're not alone. Please call the Residential School Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419. They are there to help and they're available 24 hours a day.