

## EPISODE 2: THE AVERAGE 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](mailto: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.



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. This is my story, but also the story of many.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** The average day of the residential school system looked different for every individual student. There were systematic differences, which can be considered when attempting to gain an understanding of the experience of survivors of the school. To start off with, boys and girls had their lives segregated from each other and would be treated and taught differently. The stories of survivors' experiences will vary school by school, depending on what era they went, which part of the country, which religious denomination, or whether it was after the government had taken over, how many students were enrolled, how many a child knew, and where they were from.

Was the school staffed with zealots? Or were there any particularly cruel teachers? These questions are raised by the institution before a child even has to face the idea of how they will get along with the other kids. What will they do when they miss their family? Who is going to help them if they need it?

**GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI:** As time went on, I gave up on the notion my mother and father would come rescue my brother at night from the loneliness we felt. One evening I decided to curl my hair with a curling iron and pretended I was a big movie actress. I gazed into the mirror and suddenly, the mirror was yanked out of my hand and I was slapped across the face. A taller, older girl was standing in front of me glaring, and was very angry. I held my face thinking, "What have I done?"

Bullying was not uncommon from other students to occur daily. I got used to being pushed into fights or seeing fights among other girls and boys. That was the norm. The supervisors never knew what happened. Because no one said a word. We learned how to be silent and keep secrets. We learned how to survive.

Some days when there was no fighting, everyone would get together and play sports and pick teams. After supper, all students were sent to the gym to play more sports, like floor hockey and basketball. I always surrounded myself with the girls because sometimes I would see older boys target younger girls, and lure them in the

back room. As I got older, I feared the older boys and I isolated myself in the girls' play room for a whole year. I felt so detached and so alone. I didn't know who to turn to, or who to talk to.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** Historically, days would start for the children as early as possible. Many of the schools had children getting up at four in the morning to take care of animals or other chores around the schools. Failure to get up in time was met with physical punishment.

**BETTY LOU CRAZY BOY:** In the residential school, it was all controlled, [a] controlled environment right through and through. And there's no love, there is no affection, there was no positive emotional growth in there. It's all negative emotion. Here you are, a seven-year-old and going through all that. Yeah, there was no life for us after. And not seeing our parents; that was the worst, cruel thing they could do to us. The loneliness, you know, gritting your teeth, you know, sucking your thumb or chewing on your, you know, nails. We had so many symptoms, negative symptoms, and we had nowhere to go.

It was like we were caged! I felt like a caged animal, probed and hit and let out of the cage to eat or to go to the bathroom. Trying to remember, you know, what we're told, you know, when you're telling a kid in a mean way to do something, they're going to forget. But if you teach a child, [in] a loving way, when they do something wrong, they'll remember it. We were never taught that [way]. It was all cruelty. You know, getting whipped with a canvas; that was layers and layers of canvas and then sewn together. And then the verbal abuse we had endured, the physical abuse, like our ears getting pulled, or our hair or, you know, the impatience of those caregivers. So there's so much punishment and cruelty in them changing a heathen to a Christian. And then you had brothers and sisters, you couldn't even you couldn't even go there and hug them or tell him, "Oh, I got hurt, I got strapped, somebody was mean to me."

I couldn't even rely on my brother and sisters. Because they were in the same situation as me. It tore the family apart. Like I thought, "Well, this is my brother and sisters. They're not trying to -- they're not helping me." But they couldn't.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** Children as young as five were met with similar expectations of prisoners or members of the military. The bed needed to be made, pajamas folded. If a child had wet the bed, they were met with physical punishment and humiliation in front

of the other kids. As the schools approached their end, morning came at a more reasonable time but the institutional regiment remained.

**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.

Well, I stayed there till about six and a half, I might say. Everything you do in residential schools is kind of like military-style. You line up, little boys to the big boys to intermediates. And a lot of the priests, the supervisors and priests, they had worked in military-style in England and some supervisors were ex-Marines, US Army. Oh, they were sending people that wanted to keep us in a military-style environment. We go to -- we wake up to the sound of the bell at five o'clock in the morning. But the persons that are milking the cows, they get up at four o'clock in the morning. They have to go and they do everything by hand. There's no machine -- milking machines. I was assigned to sweeping the front steps and, like I said, going and putting up the flag and we stand there at attention. You line up, you stand to attention. Don't talk, you know, somebody talks, everybody gets punished.

Boy, I relate it to today and people go to jail, in penitentiary, where I worked also. It's not any different than what they went through [in] residential school. They have a big, big list and said, okay, some people get ten straps on each hand, some people get -- they go over the table, take their drawers down and give them ten on the bottom. These are some of the challenges I faced. You know, how do those people feel that they're being punished and me standing there trying not to cry and boy, I could still feel that sting on my wrist when that strap hit my hand. But when I'm done, I turned my head and I have a little tear coming down the corner of my eye -- wipe it off really fast. Because I don't want the supervisor to see me crying. That's the challenge.

**BETTY LOU CRAZY BOY:** You know, you just didn't know where to go. You're literally, you turned into, like a robot. You know, programmed to be a perfect little girl or perfect little kid, at the expense of those people controlling us and every move we made. Everything we did, said, thought, and everything.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** After the morning work and chores were done, the children went to breakfast. For many children. This included only bland porridge, often dry, burnt, or rotten. One common memory is how they were forced to eat gruel while the priests and

nuns would enjoy full meals in their private dining rooms with fresh bread, eggs, jam, fresh fruit, whatever they wanted to bring in. Chefs in the schools historically had a completely different menu for the staff. Once breakfast was over, some of the children would clean up. Others would be sent outside to wait for school to begin.

**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.

Looking back at it, we think, well, what happens when you're just thrown into a place and you have to learn to survive and live with each other? We weren't taught by our supervisors, love, compassion, and kindness. That sure didn't come from them. So you were just there to survive. And so, you have these survival instincts. And it's either fight or flight. And so, for a lot of those kids, I think that was their way of coping. And then it's a learned behavior. You just do it to get through your experience there.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** The purpose of the schools were to teach English and agriculture work, mechanics that related to the farm or servant work. The creators of the school felt that was all the children could learn. When they weren't being taught these things in school, they were being shipped out to farms and ranches to provide free manual labor, sometimes for days at a time.

**ANONYMOUS:** I mean, there was no effort put into the teachers to... if your assignments were late, they were late. They didn't care. There was no effort really put into us. Then when I got into college, it was very hurtful, because it was embarrassing, because you couldn't even do any of the assignments because, you know, you weren't taught the proper things.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** As the schools evolved, they shifted more and more into the classroom. English and lessons of Christianity occupied a significant amount of the curriculum. Children who came from homes that were deemed proper were to be bussed to day schools and public schools, where they could assimilate to the children around them. Children who were not allowed to attend these day schools stayed in the boarding schools. The schools continued to be extremely underfunded and the system had a difficult time maintaining a fully-qualified staff.

**DALLAS YOUNG PINE:** I remember one time we were having physical education class. This teacher... we're all standing in line and that one teacher started passing in front of me. Next thing, he had his hand like this, and he just unexpectedly hit me right [in] my ribcage. Just knocked the wind right out [of me]. And I fell to the floor and in front of the whole class. It was horrible. And I couldn't tell anybody about that incident.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** Lunch was followed by classes, which would mirror the morning. When the church was in charge, hours of the day were spent forced in the chapel. Throughout the year, sports were some of the only refuge children could find. Of the scarce positive memories of residential schools, stories about sports like hockey and soccer make up the majority.

**ANONYMOUS:** Back in the day, like I said, I think sports was my escape for all the abuse and the mental and the physical and all the other abuses that happened in, from grade one to grade six from all the nuns. My escape was to work out and stay in physically [good] shape. I think that's why when I got out of high school -- I played a lot of high school football and that's what I excelled in. And when I got out of high school, I played two years of -- they call it Prairie Junior Football League in Medicine Hat. I played football out of there and then I just happened to be in the same area that one evening when they were having basketball tryouts at the college. So I threw on my runners and went in and tried out with them and I made the team, so I played both football and basketball.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** When you examine the residential school system, many children remember little to no supervision or presence, which led to a set of problems of their own. Bullying and fights were very common. Kids had no supervision and lived in a tense time. Many children were suffering from stresses, fears, and years of built-up trauma.

**REBECCA MANY GREY HORSES / I'TISNOHTISPIIYAKI:** I remember being bullied [by] my supervisor. And the way they talked down to you was so demeaning, and you didn't get any love or respect from them. So when you've been taught to be that way, you're going to turn [out] to be that way. For me there were supervisors -- we didn't have nuns at St. Paul's, we had supervisors. And when you have supervisors that are bullying, and bullying the students, and favoritism and shaming and embarrassing them,

you're going to do what you have to do to survive there and those are all very negative traits. So you're gonna pick those up.

**DALLAS YOUNG PINE:** Another incident where one of the teachers -- we were playing floor hockey and he came from the back and checked me into the concrete wall and I hit the side of my head. I could see blood. Then they brought me into the hospital. I got twenty-one stitches on my head. They had to stitch underneath and on top. Twenty-one stitches. After that incident, he dug in his pocket, then he gave me a bunch of change to go to the drive-in to buy an ice cream. And that was, you know, uncalled for.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** The children were housed in overcrowded dormitories with sometimes dozens of other kids. Once it was time to sleep, you were in bed and you were silent. Tears needed to be hidden. Crying could lead to punishment. It was common for children to wet the bed. Children who did would be beaten or face humiliating punishments like having to wear soiled undergarments on their heads. They could also face beatings and punishments for things as little as talking in their sleep.

**BETTY LOU CRAZY BOY:** We always got into trouble. Like I felt like we're always -- every corner we made got [us] into trouble. There was no nurturing, there was no explanation. And there was no sympathy [or] empathy. You experienced that and you had to cry at night in your bed. At night, crying softly [so] that the matron would not hear you. Like we... that suffering in silence, you know. You couldn't even go to your sisters.

**CLARENCE WOLFLEG / MIIKSIKA'AM:** There were four of us. When we want to shed our tears, there was a tree on the east side of the school. They were just little bushes at the time. We would sit there and we would say, "Boy, we had a tough day." We would all shed tears. We'd cry and hold onto each other. And today, one day I got called to give a tour of Old Sun College as Old Sun Indian Residential School the way it was when I went. And the people from the University of Calgary... I said, "Wait a minute." And when I looked at the place where those little shrubs were where we cried, they've grown up to be full, big trees.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** The victims of the residential school system were imprisoned in the schools. From the time they came, they were stripped of their individuality and identity.

There was no connection remaining in them from life outside of the school. Even the memories and thoughts that children had of their life before the institution were under constant attack throughout the day. Children who were allowed to go home during the summer were only there for a couple of months before it was back to their solitary lifestyle. Lying in the darkness allowed for plenty of time feeling homesick, scared and alone.

**CLARENCE WOLFLEG / MIIKSIKA'AM:** One of the things my people went through [in] residential school: we call it an orientation. You know, we are oriented into our way of life, our language, our traditions before we went. Then we went through what is called this is the reality of the white man's way of life. And today, we still fight in that battle. The challenges that I faced in residential school. A reserve is still called a reserve. Why do they call them reserves? When there's animal reserves like the parks that keep animals in them? And I often think, well that's why we changed our name from Blackfoot Reserve Number 146 on our flag, and we changed it to Siksika Nation. That's more...

It's bad enough. The challenges we faced with being contained [in] as little 450 square miles of land. And this is the only land you can talk about. Never mind all the other stuff. You know, I helped negotiate land claims and sometimes I'd get very angry inside, saying, "Why do you guys say it's your land? 60,000 square miles worth: my grandfathers, they looked after it." Now you're just looking at Siksika Nation Number 146. So, I believe now the challenges that I faced in residential school, we're still in a residential school mindset.

**CAMERON SIFERD:** Survivors of the residential school system were essentially institutionalized from ages 6 to 16, sometimes younger or older if the school deemed it necessary. Students dealt with becoming a teenager or young adult while being enclosed in a system that infantilized and demonized them because of who they were. If we take a step further and consider the amount of abuse, illness and mistreatment reported throughout the schools, there is no average day. There were system-wide similarities and policies, but the lived experience of each individual survivor cannot be quantified.

**REBECCA MANY GREY HORSES / I'TISNOHTISPIIYAKI:** I would like to address the youth that are still impacted by Indian residential schools and colonialism. I would like to call them back home and tell them that there's still a culture here. There's still a language.



# SURVIVORS



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There's still elders that care and there are people; there's knowledge keepers that are healing from the impacts and that we're still here and that we would want them to heal from those impacts.

**SKIP WOLFLEG / AKAINIHKASIMI:** My name is Clarence Wolfleg Jr. People call me Skip. The jingle dress songs and dance comes from the Ojibwe people. The story goes that the song was given to this lady from the Ojibwe tribe to heal her relatives. These songs became part of the Ojibwe culture and became healing songs for the people.

**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 VICKARYOUS:** 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.

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