

EPISODE 4: PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

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 nohkakyistiyii.

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.

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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: Throughout the entire history of the residential schools, students faced problems ranging from rancid food or being forcefully deprived [of] food, to forced sterilization and what some have called a purposeful spread of tuberculosis. The system itself allowed for common experiences of hunger and disgust. In general, the food was awful, and there wasn't enough of it. Macaroni or spaghetti was served four times in one week. Bologna is mentioned five times and the report from another noting one menu card recommended 8.5 pounds of minced meat for 50 children, meaning less than three ounces per child. Often, the food was rotten, bug-ridden, spoiled, or considered unfit for human consumption.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: The food the residential school served was boring. We have the same thing served day in and day out sometimes. There was no love put into the food. By the time the bus driver dropped us off at the public school in town, my bagged lunch was already eaten. I was growing and I needed to eat, and many times went to bed hungry.

CAMERON SIFERD: The children were hungry. They needed more. But you ate what you were given. Edmund Metatawabin, in his autobiography *Up Ghost River*, recalls an example of asking for more food ending with severe vicious whipping. He provided other examples of staff, in this case, a priest who took advantage of the children's hunger and would molest children in exchange for giving them bread. On the other hand, there were heavy punishments for the children who didn't eat. There are historical accounts of children refusing to eat bug-ridden food or rotten meat being beaten or locked in an attic for weeks. Many children couldn't keep the food down, but throwing it out wasn't an option.

Author and residential school survivor Bev Sellars recalls one girl's experience: "Once, when I was doing chores in the dining room, I witnessed a young girl, Junie Paul, get caught throwing food into the garbage. June had made the mistake of scraping her food directly off the plate into the garbage can. A nun saw her and made her dig the food out of the garbage and eat it. Of course, the food was now mixed with other

garbage. Junie sat there crying and gagging, trying to get the food down. If she vomited, she probably would have to eat that too. During another period, the food got so bad, we just couldn't eat any of it. Instead of throwing out the rotten morning mush, the cook mixed it with the soup at lunch. We couldn't eat that. So the mushy soup was mixed with the supper. This went on for a couple days before the mess got so bad. It just had to be thrown out. There were many hungry bellies in those days."

MELINDA BULL SHIELDS: The food was not good. I had stale bread, lumpy porridge. We had dairy cows on the place and the boys went out to milk them and worked the farm. But all the milk went to Cardston and we had powdered milk that was lumpy, it wasn't even mixed up good. And a lot of the food was burnt.

CAMERON SIFERD: Everything about the kitchen and dining room was dirty, and there was a lack of cleanliness and sanitary care in the handling of the food. The place was full of flies, it was not uncommon to see food particularly black with them. Cockroaches were everywhere.

Between 1942 and 1952, Canada was performing experiments, purposefully depriving children of specific vitamins and minerals: ascorbic acid and vitamin A, and to a lesser degree, thymine, calcium and niacin, as well as using a special enriched flour that wasn't legal for sale anywhere else in Canada under food adulteration laws. They additionally stopped medical and dental treatments towards the children so the effects, which included the development of anemia, could be observed.

MELINDA BULL SHIELDS: I was sick from the food. And I had chronic diarrhea from eating the processed food for four and a half years, as opposed to the game meat that we had because we still had to hunt for meat and process our own meat at that time, that was in the '50s. And so what my mother would offer me was these yellow flowers, sticky flowers, and I never had that kind of problem forever after that.

CAMERON SIFERD: As early as 1887, the Department's records acknowledged the poor construction, cheap materials, and lack of forethought that went into the school buildings themselves. It was not uncommon for 25% of the children to die of tuberculosis. File Hills Industrial School, which resided in Saskatchewan, had 69% of its students die from TB over the span of a decade. Students that were both sick and healthy, were placed together in classes and were made to share accommodations.

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The government did nothing to improve the conditions of the schools or the children's health. The tubercular epidemic, which had moved across the country, was the result of white presence coupled with the Aboriginal communities lack of immunity to infectious diseases. It was also a consequence of the process of colonization.

CYNTHIA WESLEY-ESQUIMAUX: My name is Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux. So my work in my graduate program, the master's program, I should say, was about the impacts of epidemics, the aftermath of epidemics on the Indigenous population, and I used this continent and that my comparative continent was Europe that had the Bubonic Plague. And how do people respond to the Bubonic Plague? And how did the people here on this continent respond to the epidemics? And that led me to recognize the, you know, the impact of those epidemics led to a lot of the addictions and a breakdown of a lot of the governance systems. They, you know, the moving over from traditional medicines to the missionaries, because the missionaries knew how to work with smallpox. You know, we didn't have those kinds of immunities, but the people that came here did, so they understood how to treat those diseases, smallpox, influenza, and all those things. So there was kind of a movement over because people wanted to survive, obviously.

And then I just started to -- from there, I went into a doctoral program. And I just wanted to know, what were the long term intergenerational effects of unresolved grief and trauma on Indigenous populations? You know, how are we dealing with that as we move forward, because it wasn't just at contact all the epidemics, and the losses that -- you know, huge numbers of people dying, like something like 90% of the population continentally, you know, 76%, or 72% of Canada, like what is now Canada. Huge numbers of people died, and anthropologists still argue, you know, whether there was 12 million people here, or 120 million people here, but there were a lot of people here in civilization.

So I just went from there and started looking, just tracing it into the present. And the fact of the matter is, because of that unresolved grief and trauma, much of that hurt has resonated into the present, because there has been no time. So let me just one little small thing, the bubonic plague in Europe hit on average, every 40 years. And in 40 years, you can do a lot of reconstituting: economies, you know, populations, babies born, you know, all of that. Whereas, on this -- on this continent, the epidemics hit on average, every seven to 14 years. They were constant. So people had no time to represent them, resolve them, and grieve them and then move forward, they were constantly carrying that grief into the next generation.

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So that's why we have this, what we talked about is this legacy effect or this intergenerational impact. Because it hasn't been, we have never stopped long enough. We've never been in a place where we can relax enough to do the actual proper healing that's necessary to bolster ourselves so the next generation does not have to carry that. And we're still there in many places; you know, in remote communities in the north. Some of us, in southern, more acculturated areas, have had opportunity to do counseling, we've had opportunity to get the kinds of education that take us into the kind of work that was, you know, we find satisfaction in other areas, and we can start to resolve and we raise our children differently, because we're not fighting poverty, we're not fighting crappy housing, we're not fighting food insecurity. We're not fighting all of those things that are actually keeping a lot of our remote communities locked into these places of despair.

So we have to be responsible as people who have made the, you know, that shift, we have to be responsible and work hard to ensure that the people that haven't got the access that we have are taken care of and that they have an ability and the time given to actually do that resolution process. We have lots of work to do. We're not there yet.

CAMERON SIFERD: The health care of children was minimal and segregated. If the school infirmaries were insufficient to help in a medical emergency, students would be sent to Indian hospitals. The system ran with racist policies, staff, and were notorious for dealing with patients in extreme painful procedures and treatments. These segregated hospitals worked as an arm of the assimilation machine led by the government and the church, with their closure only beginning in the 1960s.

MELINDA BULL SHIELDS: Grandmother passed away. She passed away of TB, and there was other children in the household. But there was only two of us that [were] kind of close to my grandmother. And for some reason, they took only me and my older sister from the house because we [were] closer to my grandparents. Like, we slept with them and stuff like that.

I don't remember getting a test, an x-ray. I just remember getting picked up right from the house. I never walked, I stayed in bed until the day I was discharged. And then I don't remember much of my, uh, stay there because I acquired a disorder called disassociation. I totally disassociated from my surroundings and the people who were there. So I don't really remember much of that stay at the sanatorium.

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CAMERON SIFERD: The mental trauma received in these schools has been linked to the disproportionate rate in which Indigenous people in Canada face living with mental illness, struggling with addiction, and the outrageous over-representation of Indigenous people in the justice system.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER: As time went on, we learned to survive the bullying from older students. When I look back, I know I was in a depression. We learned how to cope by having air bands and playing dolls till it was bedtime. It was like kids raising kids, because there was no mom and dad and there was only one supervisor and we hardly [saw] her.

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.

So the challenges in boarding school [are] sometimes, you see, hear, and experience things and say, "How can I deal with it? Who can I talk to so he understands what [it is] that I'm carrying?"

DALLAS YOUNG PINE: I'd seen a lot of people that were abused. There were, like, we... we had that kind of a privilege when weekends we would go home and then go back on Sunday evenings. You had to kind of, y'know, wash up. I've seen kids being thrown in, you know, showers that were -- you could see the steam coming out. That's how hot it was. Kids being thrown in those showers.

ANONYMOUS: But as far as us guys being under that, kind of like, the regime of the residential school, we went through all the physical, the emotional, and all the other abuses that people have been hearing [about], you know, through the TRC. We went through all that. There was strappings, there was... if you weren't listening you'd, depending on which nun was taking care of you, I used to remember getting disciplined by different nuns and either through strappings or through kneeling in the corner for hours on end or... you would, you would have to do different kinds of work in the church, like maybe you'd have to go clean the whole church because you were you weren't listening or... physically and emotionally they, you know, they played a lot of mental games with you.

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CAMERON SIFERD: It is common that survivors of the residential school system live with the symptoms of PTSD. Coleen Cardinal's experience, outlined in her book *Raised Somewhere Else*, details learning how compounded and prolonged experiences can take even further effects. She came to understand that PTSD and CPTSD were very different, with PTSD usually being a reaction to a single event and CPTSD being defined as multiple or ongoing traumas with the feeling of being trapped that can last from childhood to adulthood.

IRENE YOUNG PINE: There's a new term that came up: complex post-traumatic stress disorder, meaning that you still are suffering from whatever it is that's causing you to have this post-traumatic stress, but the "complex" -- they put a "C" [before] it, meaning that you're still being put through that trauma.

GITZ CRAZYBOY: Oki, nikyokowa nitahnikko Paahkyikoyii... My name is Gitz Crazyboy. I am Blackfoot and Dene.

Both my parents have post-traumatic stress disorder from residential schools. Both of them were abused; to what degree, they don't -- they won't tell me. Knowing some of the people that attended with them, it's pretty safe bet to say that they were really abused in the worst possible ways, especially with my father in the northern community up in Fort [Chipewyan?] -- I forget what it was called, that place was horrific. All of his brothers, they were all beaten and molested. It was almost like they were so far up north that no one was really looking and they didn't really care anyways, but it felt like because they were further up and further out, um, these insanely evil people just... were having -- it was just their playground. The emotional repression is one, like... I don't have a relationship with my dad right now. Just because of how messed up he was. And growing up I never really had a father. Like, a father that was there and present. You know, he was always emotionally, just, distant, emotionally cut off. We never really did father-son things growing up.

IRENE YOUNG PINE: It's up to you, but you've got to make that choice in your head to say, "I'm going to do it." Because I did it. And I didn't have the proper upbringing, too, you know, I went through my childhood with some... seeing bad stuff growing up. Really bad stuff. Again, I know why my parents sometimes don't tell me what they went through because there's things I won't tell my children what I went through, what I've seen.

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CAMERON SIFERD: Reading through historic accounts, autobiographies, and interviews with survivors, the topic of suicide comes up frequently. Accounts from as early as 1920 tell of groups of children attempting suicide; a trend that continued throughout the system's existence. The idea that children as young as eight years old would attempt to consume hemlock or tie together a makeshift noose from towels to escape life in the schools should outline the desperation and agony children were burdened with. It has been shown that survivors of residential schools share symptoms with others who have suffered in internment camps, such as people of Japanese or Ukrainian heritage in Canada, as well as prisoners of war and victims of ethnic cleansing.

As Starblanket details, "There's no doubt that children who have suffered brutalities such as whippings, beatings, confinement, sexual violence, and many more such brutal acts of terror, would be severely and perhaps permanently and fundamentally altered to view the world not from a 'civilized,' but from a traumatized and dehumanized point of view. The neural circuitry structuring of the brain would become wired for the trauma, thus rendering the child vulnerable to dehumanizing messages that would be repeated again and again to him or her through words such as 'savage,' 'devil worshiper,' and 'dirty Indian.' When the trauma begins at an early age, the process of cognitive integration is usually distorted, at least in many cases, observable alterations in brain structures result. Although a variety of long term therapeutic approaches offer the prospect of compensating for certain aspects of the damage, it is important to note this connection, that what is the real issue are psycho-emotional wounds, not illness. None are known to heal it."

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: I know some have passed away, because they, you know, they did drink themselves to death, or maybe, maybe other substances could have been involved. I'm not really quite clear, but some actually died really horrifically, I have to say, and I, you know, God, you know, like I even have an ex-boyfriend actually, that died in a fire that I went to residential school with.

IRENE YOUNG PINE: Losing our brothers was a very hard thing to deal with. For me, I dealt with that in a very bad way, a decade of just... and finally, you know, I faced life and death at a point in my life where, um, I didn't have my children. I have four children. I told myself, "Do I want my children to be without a mom?" Like, I thought about all the things that I was lacking in my life, um, especially when it came to parenting. That's the awareness that they are lacking. They don't know what we've gone through and what we

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still continue to go through every day. But yet we still continue to wake up and we're still trying and we're still, you know, we're still here, and we're not going away.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: On Friday, we were all excited to go home for the weekend. I missed my baby sister and mother. My good friend pulled me aside and whispered in my ear, "Let's stay here at the school. I don't want to go home. We can go hide." She had this sad look on her face, and she burst into tears. She was afraid to go home. I gave her a big hug and I told her, "I'll see you on Monday."

SKIP WOLFLEG / AKAINIHKASIMI: My name is Clarence Wolfleg Jr. People call me Skip. And this song we used to sing when, whenever we're asked, uh, whenever we join the hand drum contest and it was taught to me by a guy I used to sing with a long time ago, his name was Herman Yellow Old Man from Siksika Nation. And every time we sang, we ended up winning, we ended up winning first place, and... and it was, like I said, it was actually a really, really lucky song for us. It actually comes from the Crow Reservation, the Crow people from down south, and it's actually a Push Dance song and it's a really tricky song to sing. You really need to use a lot of energy to sing it.

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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