

EPISODE 7: TRUTH & RECONCILIATION

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. Kiitkanakyimatyino hpowawaa. Nohkkyistyikoyii nitakokapayanakippa kitawasinnonii. Anakaa asiksikkapoyiwaa. Anakaa siksikaityitapiwaa. Anakokaa siksikawaa kainaiwaa pikanii. Oki aniksyii matsyitopikskii. Anikaa innestyokakstyimani. 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.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: I am a broken angel because of my childhood. But I do not let my hurt speak endless volumes in my life. Pain does not define me. It is only a part of my journey. The announcement of the last day of residential school was quite the shock. During my time living at the school I learned how to hide my feelings and emotions, and so did the other children. No one said a word. I felt incontent and worried about what was going to happen next. I thought that I was going to live at the school until I was 18 years old.

The supervisors and others that were running the residential school organised a track and field on the last day. They also invited other survivors from other residential schools. We played touch football, baseball, soccer, and my favourite, running. They awarded teams that came in first, second and third. And I remember my team won. We came in first. I think many of us felt very lost because we didn't know how to feel. I know I didn't. But at the same time there was a glimpse of happiness, knowing that, "Hey, I don't have to come back next semester. I don't have to be here during a whole school year. I can spend it with my family." And all I wanted to do was be part of a family. All I wanted was my mom and dad, and my brother and my sister, all together.

CAMERON SIFERD: In 2008, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology. It was an apology that finally acknowledged the truths of the residential school system. It outlined a brief but accurate history of the schools. They acknowledged it was wrong for the government to have taken children from their homes. It acknowledged the intergenerational trauma it lined up for those who experienced the schools. It promised a desire to build communities together. This came in the light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which, along with investigating the impact of the system, was set to collect as much information and history of the residential school system as possible.

At its conclusion, the TRC had 94 calls to action regarding Canada and the Indigenous peoples who live on in the land. We were very fortunate to have the opportunity to speak to Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux. Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux is the Indigenous chair on Truth and Reconciliation at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay. She's

worked on projects and boards across the country to encourage environmental and humanitarian causes and initiatives.

CYNTHIA WESLEY-ESQUIMAUX: Now we still have a lack of accessibility for appropriate services in remote communities. We, you know, we have a tendency as a country, to send in teams of non-Indigenous peoples into northern remote communities and expect that they're somehow going to make a difference, when what we should be doing is actually training our own people that are even in those communities, and going up and working with them, so that they have the proper tools. And they can host those conversations, host those healing circles, and help people understand the reason they behave the way they do, or the way that they, you know, they moved away from being in the bush, it's because of, you know, this, this push from land-based economies to cash-based economies, that made it easier for the federal government, but robbed our own people of their ability and their initiative to go out and take care of themselves.

Welfare, any elder, in any place across Canada will say to you, like, elders that are you know, like 80+, like, up there will say, you know, the advent of welfare, what they called them at the time they called, um, what did they call it, they called it relief, you know, after the war, was a huge mistake, that it hurt them more than it helped them, that they were completely self-sufficient prior to that, and it removed that ability or that desire, so... and that's not because Indigenous people don't want to work, or they're lazy, or anything like that. It's, you know, I call it the violence of benevolence. Because so much helping creates, it's a social violence, it says, "you're not capable of looking after yourself. So we're going to do it." And if I raised children like that, if I said to my children, "You don't have the capacity to make decisions, you don't have the capacity to look after yourself. So I'll do it." I'm depriving my children of the right to grow and learn and make mistakes, and find their own way. And that's what, uh, all of this has done, has created.

Now we have lots of, I think, really good chiefs today, women and men who have said, you know, we're taking this back, like, where the restoration of jurisdiction authority is in our hands, and we're gonna make it happen. And they push for the United Nations Declaration [on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples]. They pushed for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, they pushed for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry. You know, they pushed for, Idle No More. Like, there's just no end to the fact that Indigenous peoples have [said and] are saying, you know, "we're not going to join the parade, we're going to lead the parade and we're going to do this for our people."

CAMERON SIFERD: In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released a report. It revealed that one year after the apology, the Conservative government denied funds to search for missing bodies of children. Six of the TRC's calls to action include finding and preserving lost burial sites. It details, "The federal government's denial of this request has placed significant limits on the Commission's ability to fully implement the working group's proposals, despite our sincere belief in their importance."

APTN's Jorge Barrera showed further issues dealing with the Harper government following the apology while trying to obtain important documents. The protracted battle between the Harper government and the TRC over the release of relevant residential school documents, which included a court ruling against Ottawa in January 2013, also hampered the search for the dead children. He continued to detail the report's conclusion that "since that date, there has been considerable improvement in the production of documents to the commission." Nonetheless, the delay in clarifying Canada's obligation means that the production of documents to the TRC was still continuing.

BEVERLEY JACOBS / GOWEHGYUSEH: Greetings of peace to all of you. Mohawk Nation comes from the bigger, or the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. I am a lawyer. I am the Associate Dean, Academic, of the Faculty of Law, University of Windsor. But most importantly, I am a member at Six Nations of Grand River territory, and I live here. I have a little law practice here as well.

So, what is Canada going to do to address its abusive behavior with our people? They think it's throwing money out there. So that's where the conversation needs to come. And maybe it never will, because they don't know what that means. There's this term called "reconciliation." It's not just Indigenous people reconciling what has happened. It's all -- that was the whole purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was that all people have to reconcile what has happened with this residential school system. And everybody's responsible.

I don't trust them. I don't trust anything that they do, that they say they're gonna do. They'll just throw money, say, "Here you go." That's it, that's the only thing that they need -- that they know how to do. And they don't know the repercussions and that it's not just about money. It's about relationships. And it's the same idea that I put out there about, you know, when you're in a violent relationship, being in recovery of that relationship. Trust is huge, right? You lose trust... So, with Canada, how do you regain trust with a system of governance? I don't care what government it is, I don't care. It's

the institution. They need to come to terms with the truth and righting the wrongs that they've done.

CAMERON SIFERD: In May 2021, during the production of this podcast, the remains of 251 children that were buried on the former site of the Kamloops residential school were located. This discovery brought the country to a pause and centered its focus on the residential school system. Since the first announcement, there have been over 1300 unmarked graves located with radar systems. These bodies were found at the sites of four former residential schools in BC and Saskatchewan. There were over 130 residential schools throughout the system. One can only speculate how many unmarked graves remain to be relocated. We were fortunate enough to get a chance to speak to creative writer and Indigenous author Judy Everson.

JUDY EVERSON: I just wanted to acknowledge our children that [were] discovered, our beloved little ones being found and discovered with their bones across Canada. Um, those residential schools, and it has touched my life quite a bit... reminds me of my dad, my grandma and all the rest of my family that, unfortunately, was tied to those schools in Manitoba, and, uh, surrounding areas of Winnipeg and stuff. So it's been tough, but I've been on a healing journey as well.

CYNTHIA WESLEY-ESQUIMAUX: Oh, no, they didn't only die from tuberculosis. We don't really know the percentages, and I don't know how in-depth they're going to get, you know, cost-wise to actually... because I think they can tell from the bones whether there was any, you know, whether it was tuberculosis. I don't know, I know that children died. I mean, if you listen to the residential school survivors speak, children died from other causes. They died from influenza, they also died from brutality. You know, they talked about the children kicked down the stairs, you know, and being hurt by -- or just disappearing, you know, trying to walk home. You know, they died like Chanie Wenjack died, on the railway track, trying to get home.

So, children died from lots of different things. You know, unsuccessful surgeries, the infection, you know, they, I mean they used to take, you read the report to Dr. West, I think it was, you know, they took, they would pull, they didn't think Indians felt pain. So, they would just pull their teeth out without any kind of [anaesthetic]. I've heard survivors talk about how you, when you went into the room where they were doing the dental work, um, it was like somebody got murdered in there, there's blood everywhere, you know, so they would just yank the teeth out if they were if they were infected or

rotten, and then you got kids, you know, with infections in their mouth. So there was all kinds of reasons why children died.

There was experimentation there. If you read some of the the books that I'm going to send you on the book list. I'm not sure exactly which one it is, but there's books on Indian hospitals. Um, there was hospitals, there was schools set up specifically for the purpose of experimentation. And they did, they gave them many drugs to test them. That's why people were so vaccine-resistant in many of the First Nation communities. They're like, "why do we have to go first? If, you know, so if we died, then they won't give them to anybody else?" Like, there's reasons why people are suspicious. And I have my own aunt that had got tuberculosis and went through, and they gave her so many different things and tried so many different things that, you know, rendered her sterile.

So those are the kinds of things that have happened. There's many, many, many stories that people are just not aware of. And, so this is, you know, we're entering into this, this dark place of resolution on this. It's not going to be easy, because we have to always be moderating what we say. And, you know, because it's traumatic, right? If I iterate stories that I'm well aware of, and I iterate those stories to people, it's, you know, am I harming them now? By putting like, like, what happened to you? Right? Am I putting things into their heads, that they are not going to be able to undo? So, we always have to be careful about those things. So how much can you say, to create the right effect? But not so much that it's traumatizing somebody else?

BEVERLEY JACOBS / GOWEHGYUSEH: You know, yeah, it was really negative, and the reasons why things happened the way they are. But it's also a time of healing and respecting and honouring the spirits of those babies. You know that I'm a very spiritual person. So when I think about, you know, all the spirits of these babies that are being heard, they're being seen, they're being acknowledged, finally, and, you know, all those ceremonies that need to be done to put them at rest, so that it's finally done. And it, you know, people are, I feel like people are ready to do that. That spiritual strength that we have as a people is powerful.

CAMERON SIFERD: As of August 2021, the federal government has pledged \$320 million toward the search for more burial sites, as well as support for the survivors of the schools and the communities as a whole. Roughly \$87 million are being dedicated to the search along with a specialist who Justice David Lametti announced will work with Indigenous people, provincial and territorial governments and communities to identify needed measures and make recommendations relating to federal laws, regulations,

policies and practices surrounding unmarked and undocumented graves and burial sites at residential schools.

CYNTHIA WESLEY-ESQUIMAUX: I know that people that are actually working on the unmarked, unmarked burials are also trying to find ways to keep it in the, you know, keep it front and center. Right? Because, I mean, we have the September 30 day, well, that whole week now, I guess, but the whole question around Orange Shirt Day, which did extremely well, so the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, I've been sharing that for the last while as well, they have got a whole week of activities out for that. And the Orange Shirt Day is a really important... We had 300,000 students on last year. And several million people actually viewed it in the end. So, you know, there [are] things that are available for them to look at. And we need to do more of that. The Orange Shirt Day appeals to people, I think, because it was about children. Again, you know, emphasizing, this was children. I mean, yes, they are now seniors and they are elders now, but they were once children who went through these experiences and no child should be taken away from their families, and no child should be treated the way they were treated.

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.

How many more years are we going to be talking about this now? Now we're in 2021. And we're still talking about it. We're seeing very limited action. The talk is great, but there's very limited action behind that.

CHEYENNE MCGINNIS / NAATOIYIKI: Oki, nitannikko Naatoiyiki. Nyomhtoto kainaiwaa. So, hello, my name is Cheyenne, or Naatoiyiki, which translates to Holy Whistle in the Blackfoot language.

So, I think the government's role is, um, well they caused this, ha ha ha, so they need to clean it up, and they need to put money forward for... clean drinking water, first, would be a great thing, ha ha. Instead of, you know, flags at half mast are great, but, that's just another Canadian symbol of tragedy or whatever, right? It's lip service. I think lip service is less needed and more action is needed.

CAMERON SIFERD: "A dark chapter in Canadian history." This statement implies that the issues relating to the residential school system are in the past. It ignores the overrepresentation of children who continue to be removed from their homes, whether it was part of the Sixties Scoop or, as Charles Angus details, in 2011, Census Canada determined that, of the nearly 30,000 children in foster care in Canada, half are Indigenous, a number that exceeds even the grimmest estimates. This means there are more children in the hands of the state now than at the height of the residential school system.

CHEYENNE MCGINNIS / NAATOIYIKI: We've been asking for things for a long time. And you know, there are entitlements we're, we're entitled to as First Nations people and through treaties, through, just, governance, through the Indian Act. Um, but I think that we also need to start thinking bigger than the Indian Act, as well. CANDRIP, I'll call it, ha ha, it's not really UNDRIP. They've adopted it in the sense of their own laws and regulations in Canada. And so it's not really, it's a nice gesture, but it doesn't really mean anything to First Nations people. And so things like that, moves like that, don't really show us that they're trying.

I think that they need to try a little harder to have a relationship with us, to listen, to come to the table with solutions, not just more lip service. So, I think that's the role of government. Government shouldn't have a say in our lives, really, as First Nations people, I think the ultimate goal should be sovereignty for First Nations people or sitting at the same table, making agreements. Because, you know, here I'm coming from treaty territory, we've been taken so advantage of because of this treaty that we signed. And I think that we need to have a seat at the table.

CAMERON SIFERD: The children that are being uncovered were not unknown. These were children that were supposed to be under the care of the church and government that died and were buried. At best, the people in charge appointed by the highest authority in the country, buried these children and withheld that knowledge from officials. In multiple cases, survivors tell of being required to have buried fellow students themselves. These children were missed and mourned by families, friends and communities. These children had their lives taken from them and their deaths were hidden by the system meant to care for them.

BEVERLEY JACOBS / GOWEHGYUSEH: Recovery, uncovering of our babies, of our children, is just a reminder that they'll never do it, they'll never get away with it. We're

never gonna go away. And then having to deal with the colonial settler attitudes and racism and stereotypes, systemic discrimination, all that stuff we're still dealing with as well on a daily basis. We're still dealing with the impacts on a daily basis. I see it every day. I think for sure they knew and they thought it would just go away. You know, but I'm sure they've had records and if they didn't, then there was a reason for that as well.

JUDY EVERSON: How we have discovered and found so many of our little ones' bones. And, I'm just grateful that they found them and they've discovered, because now what our elders have been saying all along, it's true. People now are waking up. When they first found that 215 children. They were shocked, the world was shocked. Canada was put on a plate and said, "Well, what did you do to these children? What happened?" And even around the world, they're realizing, "okay, it's, it's a huge thing. And it's a genocide, really." And we have, um, I think now [6500] or 7000+ found, discovered so it's still not over, we're just at the tip of it, from what I understand.

CYNTHIA WESLEY-ESQUIMAUX: Part of the thing that most disturbed or disappointed people, Indigenous or otherwise across Canada was the fact that it had remained hidden for so long, not that Indigenous people had not been speaking about it amongst themselves and in various forums. It wasn't that it was unknown. It was just that nobody believed it. And now it has become, you know, what research would term evidence-based. So, before that, people kind of looked at it like, well, those are just stories, or those are just, you know, thoughts that people, you know, that it might have happened, but now there's ample evidence, proof, I suppose you would call it, that, that those deaths actually happened.

And I think that's what's really sparked the controversy, because the first school at Kamloops, you know, the church had identified 50 or 51 burials. They had said, yes, there are 51 burials. But when they found 215 burials, you know, the fact that they had hidden that reality was what, I think, made people so upset, and then the next one, 500, next one, 700, you know, and on and on and on. So there's, now we're somewhere close to 6000. And that has been a real shock, because the one thing that we're always trying to remind people about across Canada, is that these were children. They were not adults, they were children, some as young as three years old. And that is why it is an atrocity. And that is why the word genocide, you know, gets used on a regular basis today.

CAMERON SIFERD: The Canadian government distancing itself from the consequences of its actions can be seen directly in its attitude towards the term "genocide." Raphael

Lemkin, who is known for both the establishment of the term originally defined genocide, writing, "it does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions, aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves."

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: You know, we can say, you know, "cultural genocide," if we want, but it's genocide, whether we say "cultural" or not, it's genocide, because we're dying every day, from colonisation. And from the impacts of settler colonialism, because they want our land.

BEVERLEY JACOBS / GOWEHGYUSEH: You know, Canadians who have land and have resources have benefited from the genocide of our people. And the erasure of our people, and people need to really come to terms with that, and what that actually means.

CYNTHIA WESLEY-ESQUIMAUX: But the realities are that these things happened, just like they happened in Australia. And they happened in New Zealand, and they happened in other places where Indigenous populations were either eliminated completely, or otherwise marginalized. And these are the conversations that we're going to have with you and it is going to make Canada very uncomfortable. And that's fine with me, they should be uncomfortable. And we should talk about and until we can talk about it in a way that actually creates resolution. We're not getting to reconciliation in this country, until we actually name the reality.

BEVERLEY JACOBS / GOWEHGYUSEH: You know, for those who are, you know, just learning about this, I think it's really important to keep your, you know, their minds and hearts open. This can't be considered a mistake anymore, or something that can't be believed. And that it is really harsh, really difficult to think that it actually existed. And I think that's what's difficult for people to come to the reality of, like, "Canada did this? The churches did this?" There has to be an acknowledgement of that truth.

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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