

Opinion: We witnessed the cruelty of residential schools as child-care workers. We will not remain silent about what we saw

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EXCERPTS

Fifty years ago, my husband Dan Rubenstein and I were newcomers to Canada, having moved here from New York state. We had visited Expo '67 and were impressed by the images of Canada as a multicultural and welcoming society. In 1970, we decided to live here until the polarization rampant in the United States subsided, and found jobs as child-care workers.

Our growing sense that Canada was a just and compassionate country was upended by what we witnessed in our workplace: St. Michael's Indian Residential School, in Alert Bay, B.C.

On our first day, the matron led us to a subbasement where four children were delivered to her care by an Indian agent. The little children stood mute and trembling while the matron cut away their clothes and their hair and threw all of it into the blazing orange firebox in the boiler. Dan protested: "Is this necessary?" She answered, unflinchingly: "Lice."

Every morning, Dan went to wake up the 25 boys in his care, children as young as five years of age. The dorm room, filled with rows of impersonal metal beds, reeked of urine as most of the boys, if not all of them, wet their beds. The children's unhappiness about their harsh treatment was palpable. Older staff told us discipline and consistency were essential; there was no discussion about love or respect.

Our belief that cruelty begets cruelty was confirmed. We saw students hurt other students; two boys tried to hang our puppy. We tried to protest within the school, but we were told we were naive.

Eventually, we joined a community effort to petition Indian and Northern Affairs to send a delegation to Alert Bay; the federal government had assumed control of residential schools across Canada in 1969, just one year before our arrival at St. Michael's. We felt the government should see first-hand what was happening. A delegation arrived at the end of the year, but when Dan told them that the school was an instrument of cultural genocide, he was fired by the school administrator.

Dan and I left Alert Bay and moved to a neighbouring island. From time to time, we saw the children from St. Michael's at the public school. The administrator agreed to our offer of allowing two of the little boys to visit us in our cabin in the B.C. village of Sointula. But we stopped advocating for the children. When the school was closed a few years later, we thought the trauma was ending.

We lament our silence.

In 2015, when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) tabled its final report, memories of St. Michael's resurfaced and I was overcome with emotion and guilt for not telling my story. By chance, Dan shared an elevator with Ry Moran, the founding director of the University of Manitoba's National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and now the associate university librarian-reconciliation at the University of Victoria. He promised Mr. Moran that he would tell the story of what we had witnessed.

Friends and acquaintances challenged our views. "People did what they thought was right in their day," they said. "It wasn't all that bad. Look at British boarding schools." Many insisted that the government and the churches had acted out of kindness and good intentions.

But I was there. I know better. The survivors' stories speak the truth. We read the TRC reports in their entirety and learned that what we witnessed at St. Michael's occurred across the country. Residential schools were an assault on Indigenous people and their families. Separating children from families led to the loss of identity, language, spirituality and culture. The residential schools were never about education. They were always about something more: The eradication of Indigenous people as a distinct, separate group.

The tragic discovery of the unmarked grave at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School happened to coincide with the publication of our story. For any Canadian who remains unconvinced that residential schools had tragic consequences for Indigenous children and their families that continue to this day, I urge them to read the accounts by survivors and those of us who found ourselves in a malevolent institution where love and kindness rarely survived.

I join people across Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who grieve for the children buried at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. And I stand in awe of the survivors and intergenerational survivors who promote hope and love as they lead our country toward justice and reconciliation.

Nancy Dyson is the co-author, with Dan Rubenstein, of St. Michael's Residential School: Lament & Legacy, the royalties of which will be donated to the Indian Residential School Survivors Society and other support groups.

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