

Residential school survivors in Kanesatake honoured forever



STEVE BONSPIEL THE EASTERN DOOR

Kathleen Bonspille Perry accepts a handmade basket to commemorate the unveiling of Kanesatake's memorial for residential schools students.

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THE EASTERN DOOR

Bertha Wilson-Magna.
Selina Tewentawenron Nelson-Etienne.
Kathleen Bonspille Perry.
Pearl Martin.

Four elderly ladies out of an estimated 150 are the only remaining Kanesata'kehrón survivors of the residential school era, all of whom attended Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario at a very young age.

Three of them gathered on Sunday (Pearl Martin couldn't make it) for a special unveiling of a large memorial tombstone for residential school survivors in the Pine Hill Cemetery.

The memorial was created to honour the survivors forever and symbolizes a call to those too young to remember residential schools, to learn the history of them, and what the little boys and girls who attended went through as students under the strict and abusive hands of nuns and priests.

"Aunt Kay was denied her identity and was taught to be ashamed of being 'Indian,'" Barbara Bonspille told *The Eastern Door*, about the difficulty her aunt Kathleen Bonspille Perry had in dealing with the trauma of residential school until she finally moved back to Kanesatake two years ago.

"She was told and 'slapped around' not to speak her language. When she talks about being in Shingwauk she doesn't refer to being a student, but an inmate."

Barbara and her family were at Sunday's ceremony, with tears of sadness, joy and, no doubt, anger welled up in their eyes.

About 30 people bore witness to the official unveiling in the sacred cemetery next to the Club du Golf Oka, two main pieces of the battle for land in the area known as the Pines, which erupted 25 years ago on July 11, 1990 when police came in shooting at a peaceful community gathering.

"She was there with her sisters, they slept in a large dormitory separated by age," said Barbara. "Sometimes she would hear her younger sister Marjory cry, she would sneak into her bed and comfort her, but if caught, she would be beaten."

Her story is eerily similar to other survivors across the country, who tell harrowing tales of abuse in many forms; physical and mental, for sure, but so many still cannot talk about the terrible sexual abuse that also occurred regularly to a number of the estimated 150,000 children who attended residential school up until the last one was closed in 1996

Kathleen, 91, was five when she was put into residential school, and she spent 12 years at Shingwauk. She remembers starving and everyone being "skinny and sick."

Some children died of simple illnesses like measles or the flu, and were then buried in the cemetery in the back of the school, she remembered.

"My aunt Marjory was sick with tuberculosis and was sent to a sanitarium in Hull, Quebec at the age of 12," said Barbara.

She and her sister would only meet again many years later, as adults.

During her time at Shingwauk, Kathleen learned to hate her own identity, and to deny she was Onkwehón:we.

"When she came home she had to be introduced to her parents, who waited for her at the Oka ferry," said Barbara. "She only stayed in Oka for a few months, found a job in Montreal and moved there, only going back to visit on occasion to see her parents."

Kathleen moved to Toronto after Montreal. She raised her two sons, and had a long career at a bank.

Her second husband passed away in April of 2014.

She finally returned to Kanesatake two years ago to live out her days in the elders' home in a hometown she had detached herself from for so many years, no longer denying her true identity.

"I am very happy to have her close by. She needed and deserved to have someone take care of her," said Barbara. "She's happy here."

"She told me years ago that all she ever wanted was a mom to hold her and make her feel loved. She still feels like that little five year old looking for her mom. I do my best to hold her and hug her as often as I can," she said.

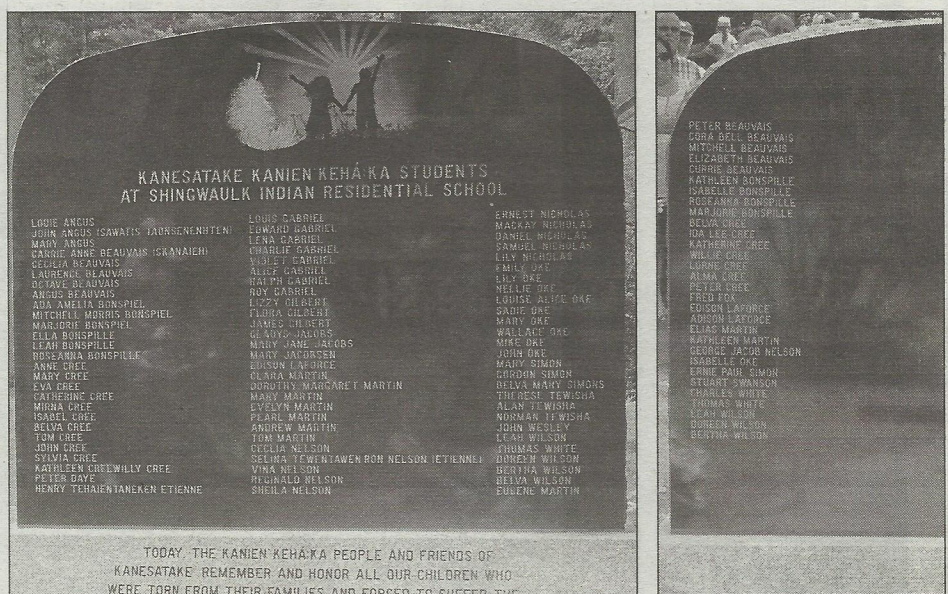
Bonspille's dad Morris, who passed away on December 6, 2007, was the baby of the family who also attended Shingwauk Residential School, but refused to speak about it. The family only heard some of the harrowing stories through his wife Joan.

When Kathleen's mother (Barbara's grandmother) passed away in 1990 it represented an about-face for Barbara and some of her family.

"When I called my aunt Kay to advise her, she had the same response (as her aunt Dorothy)," said Barbara. "I was surprised at the lack of emotion. She told me that her mother was a mother in name only, that she was like a stranger to them."

"It was then my aunts started to explain what happened to their family. It wasn't talked about, they very still ashamed."

That year was also when the so-called



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Out of the estimated 15 survivors, only 120 have been identified. There were so many names to honour, the remaining ones had to be put on the back of the tombstone.

Oka Crisis hit, which changed everything for Barbara.

"The Oka Crisis was a turning point in my life, it made me more aware of my family's pain and suffering they endured," said Barbara.

"The monument that was unveiled this past weekend was an emotional day because

I feel that we are finally recognized by both the Canadian government and Kanesatake."

Also present on Sunday to witness the unveiling was a third generation, Sonia Boileau-Bonspille.

"I was just happy for her," said Sonia, of

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her great aunt Kathleen.

"It always made me sad that her years at Shingwauk made her feel like she no longer belonged in Kanesatake. I think the fact that she was welcomed back with open arms definitely helped her feel at home."

Sonia was busy filming the event for the Cree film company Rezolution Pictures, a film that will eventually air on CBC, when emotions forced her to step out of her professional persona.

"I thought I'd be able to hold it together, especially since I was there also to film the events and I had to stay focused...but when I read the inscription at the bottom, I just lost it," she said.

The inscription reads:

"Today, the Kanien'kehá:ka people and friends of Kanesatake remember and honor all our children who were torn from their families and forced to suffer the pain and lasting scars of Indian Residential schools. July 12, 2015."

Sonia attended the Truth and Reconciliation Commission event in Ottawa in May, the wrap up of a five-year process of healing for residential school survivors, but it



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Kanesatake's survivors, from left to right: Selina Tewentawenron Nelson-Etienne, Bertha Wilson-Magna and Kathleen Bonspille Perry. Kathleen's youngest sibling Morris (who passed away in 2007) is represented by his wife Joan, far right.

didn't prepare her for a ceremony that meant so much to her great aunt and her family.

"It's like it all of sudden it hit me: I am the exact result the government wanted. A watered down Indian who doesn't know who she is," she said.

"Because my grandfather went to residential school he didn't pass on to his children and

grandchildren any pride in being Mohawk or knowledge of the language and culture."

The new monument will stand in the Pine Hill Cemetery for many years to come, a testament of the strength of those little children who attended institutions built to tear their identity from them as part of an assimilation process orchestrated by the churches, supported by

the Canadian government.

The price was high as an estimated 6,000 children across the country never returned from residential schools.

"Having that monument unveiled in the community was even more emotional and way more significant to me than the TRC events," said Sonia.

"Instead of being hurt and

angry I was relieved. It was like a huge warm blanket that eased the pain. It's strange because it actually made ME feel like I belonged."

"The residential school system was a horror story for many," said Mohawk Council of Kanesatake grand chief Serge Otsi Simon, as part of a multi-denominational service that saw many speak about residential schools.

"This is one of those horror stories that are linked to our history that we will never forget."

Simon called on doing away with the Indian Act, on South Africa's Apartheid based on Canada's reserve system, and to embrace reconciliation, despite the immense anger he still holds.

"When do the people of Canada start looking at the truth of reconciliation? They are going to understand hopefully, once and for all, that the Indian Act does not work," said Simon.

"It's a colonialist, repressive legislation and we have to do away with it and then finally First Nations can say we are free."

Simon discovered his great aunt Mary Simon's name was on the hard stone monument, something that was kept hidden.

"She was a part of this and I could only imagine what she

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went though," he said.

Deacon Ron Boyer, of Kahnawake's St. Francis Xavier Mission (Catholic Church) also spoke. His message was one of moving forward.

"It is good to be gathered here in these sacred pines, sacred burial grounds surrounded by our people who are at rest," he told the crowd.

"I met my wife (Sheila) at residential school and this year we are celebrating our 58th anniversary," he said, calling her the "master builder" behind their six children, 10 grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

"I cannot condemn," he said, of what happened at residential schools. "We cannot dwell."

Boyer talked about losing his daughter Brenda just short of her 50th birthday and 20th wedding anniversary as an example of how "no one goes without suffering."

Boyer chaired the Council for Reconciliation for the Catholic Bishops of Canada to advise them from a Native point of view on the direction they needed to take regarding residential schools.

He said to them: "For too many years, hundreds of years, you have been giving us our menu, which was wrong. Now it is up to us to decide, to tell you, what we should be having on the menu and how you should be dealing with our people."

"My dad only knew one of his sisters, Dorothy, who was in Shingwauk for about a year before he got there," said Barbara Bonspille, of her father Morris' four older sisters, all of whom went

to Shingwauk Residential School.

"When he arrived they saw each other in the school but weren't allowed to talk to each other. At recess or lunch they sat on a bench and hugged and cried.

My dad found out then that he had other sisters older than Dorothy who had been at Shingwauk for years. He met them but didn't know them at all," she said.

"They got together a couple

of times a year throughout their lives but had no real relationship, all they really had in common was Shingwauk."

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17/7/2015