Residential school survivors in Kanesatake honoured forever

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

STEVE BONSPIEL
THE EASTERN DOOR

Bertha Wilson-Magnus, Selina Tewatensie-Nelson-Etienne, Kathleen Bonsipple Perry, Pearl Martin.

Four elderly ladies out of an estimated 150 are the only remaining Kanesatake’shó:yé:n non-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 (July 11) morning to make it for a special unveiling of a large memorial tombstone for residential school survivors at 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 Bonsipple told The Eastern Door about the difficulty her aunt Kathleen Bonsipple Perry had in dealing with the trauma of residential school until she finally managed to move back to Kanesatake two years ago.

“She was told and ‘slapped around’ not to speak her language. When she talks about being 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 were 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.

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“The family always came here to be with other families. It was wonderful to see all the families back together there,” said Barbara. "It was a great day. We were happy to be there with each other. We were proud of our heritage and our culture. We were happy to be reunited with each other."
Survivors

Continued from page 5

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."

Sonja was busy filming the event for the Cree film company Reconciliation Pictures, a film that would 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'keha people and friends of Kanesatake remember and honor all our children who went away from their families and forced to suffer the pain and lasting scars of Indian Residential Schools. July 12, 2015."

Sonja 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 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 Sonja.

"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 Obi Simon, in 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 thought 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 50th 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 Bonspile, 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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7

Continued on page 8