

# A Survivor's Story

## PART II

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My mom, Jeannie, and me, Terry

*“...[I]f anything is to be done with the Indian, we must catch him very young. The children must be kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions.”*

*Nicholas Flood Davin—“Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds”*

In the context of Prime Minister John A. McDonald’s “aggressive assimilation” and the residential schools’ goal of “killing the Indian in the child”, children were severed physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually from their language, culture and their communities. **The result was not assimilation, but the loss of their sense of personhood and the inability to feel a part of a community; survivors felt caught between the two worlds.**

My mom, Jeannie Mianscum (Crosby), was born in Mistissini, Quebec, in 1939. She lived in tents, lived off the land and spoke only Cree. At eighty-six years old, my mom often comments about wanting to be “where she grew up,” on the land. Her father died when she was a toddler, and her mother struggled to raise and care for three children on her own.

Mom’s Residential School story began at 7 years old when **an Indian Agent came around to tell the families in her community that their children would be going to residential schools.** Grandma didn’t have a choice in the decision, as her rations would be withheld if she didn’t comply, and she had no way to provide for her children. Some parents were jailed for hiding their children from the government. Mom remembers being confused, not understanding what would happen, and why it was happening.

In their first year, Mom and her sister, Mary, were taken by train hundreds of kilometres away. Upon arriving, everyone was given haircuts, their long braids chopped off into bobs and bangs, a hairstyle Mom particularly disliked. **She wasn’t allowed to speak Cree, and she didn’t know any English.**

While telling her story, my mom recounted that when she returned home after her first year of school, she couldn’t understand what her own mother was saying. She recalled, almost with guilt, how painful it was for her mom that she couldn’t communicate with her daughter. She did recover her first language in time, but **the trauma of the residential schools stunted and erased the language and development of these children.**

For the next six years, Mom would live at the school for ten months out of the year, with no visits, letters, or any contact at all with her mother during that time. Between her second and third year, she couldn’t return home for the summer because her mom was in the hospital with tuberculosis, so she didn’t see her for nearly two years.

For Mom’s second year of school, her five-year-old brother was forced to join them. **The scene of her brother screaming and crying as the train pulled away, and her mom’s anguish at losing her last child, haunts Mom to this day.**

When I asked my mom to tell me her story, I was expecting the recognition of the abuse and isolation, but I hadn’t anticipated the sorrow and worry that consumed her about her mom.

My mom's story, thankfully, does not include the sexual abuse that many children endured. She was strapped for speaking Cree, for wetting the bed or crying in the night. The children were forced to hide their fear, loneliness and pain. **For Mom, the worst part was being taken from her mom, her culture, her language and everything she knew.**

She had limited friends, and she tried to be obedient and well-behaved. This protected her from some of the mistreatment her peers experienced, but it didn't protect her from the loss of her family and community.

My mom recollected that in all the years at the residential schools, **none of the supervisors or priests were kind—they acted with malice and contempt.**

Mom had limited memories from the first residential school and virtually none from the second. Things progressively got worse, and the trauma increased as she moved to the second residential school.

**Can you even imagine a school with a graveyard?** My mom's schools both had them. The children who died were not sent back to their parents but were buried on site, never to be united with their parents.

There have been 4100 confirmed deaths at the schools, but a more realistic prediction would probably be 7000 to 9000 children. With the ongoing efforts across Canada dedicated to searching for and documenting unmarked graves, the number is likely to increase.

## **Responding to the Truth & Reconciliation Process**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2008, was tasked with uncovering the truth about past wrongdoing by the Government of Canada and the churches. The goal of the commission was to bring restorative justice to the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

## **What is reconciliation?**

To be reconciled is to be restored to friendship or harmony. When we understand the personal stories of the Indigenous people, we can learn how we might build respectful relationships and help restore the lives affected by these atrocities.

Shelagh Rodgers, a Canadian broadcast journalist, suggests:

Walking together on this journey, not leading, not following, but walking beside Indigenous people.

Chief Robert Joseph encourages everyone to develop what he calls a "Back pocket Reconciliation Plan." He states:

- 1. Reconciliation is the work of being human, of being in relationships.**
- 2. We must acknowledge the painful experiences of others.**
- 3. Begin as if you don't know what the experience was like.**
- 4. Reconciliation starts with you; engage with the stories.**
- 5. Make room in our hearts and minds—first, we must listen.**
- 6. Work out/act out the word of love.**

Become an Indigenous Ally and commit to listening, learning, and acting out the word of love.

Today, I honour the strength and resilience of my mom, and the other survivors who attended residential schools.

I share this story with you today in the hopes that it helps you connect with and learn from one survivor's story. ■

