**RESIDENTIAL BOARDING SCHOOLS**

My sweet little Labrador Inuk mother is part of the unpleasant chunk of history that the indigenous people endured. Mom attended the Nain Residential Boarding School of Nain, Labrador that took and “educated” thousands of Aboriginal and Native American children in Canada and in the United States. “Aboriginal” is an umbrella term for indigenous people of Canada who have Inuit, Métis, or First Nations bloodlines. “Natives” refers to the Native American Indians of the United States in either Federally-recognized tribes or State-recognized tribes. This is my abridged version of how indigenous people of North America lost their culture, happiness, and language.

Military officials created these schools because they knew if they took the indigenous peoples’ children, their parents would: one, comply to their demands; two, live in fear of the officials; three, join the military to fight the latest war; and fourth, learn and live the White way then live their traditional ways. Also, the indigenous peoples complied because they didn’t have a snowball’s chance in a greenhouse to survive if they didn’t. It was a perfect storm to make the indigenous conform.

These same military officials believed Aboriginals and Natives were dirty, inferior, and needed to pray to their Christian god. Research shows the officials thought that if they converted the indigenous to their religion, then they would be “civilized” humans. Further research shows, the founders of the residential boarding school knew children were easier to convert, dominate, and manage. The residential boarding school officials used any or all tactics of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse while they preached the Holy Spirit upon the innocent. These atrocious schools existed, and their acts of cruelty happened for over a hundred years in North America.
For instance, Captain Richard H. Pratt founded a school called the Carlisle Indian Industrial School of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The famous school housed thousands of Native children between 1870 to 1918 (“Canadian Indian Residential School System”). Captain Pratt gave “an uplifting speech” to his troops in 1892 with the popular phrase “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” The men liked it so much, it boosted morale and Captain Pratt’s northern allies adopted it. His school succeeded in erasing generations of Native families--- their language and their traditional ways—and made them act Anglo-Saxon by: converting them to Christianity, cut their hair, taught reading-writing-arithmetic and how to have a proper house.

My petite deaf Labrador Inuk mother, Julie Nathanael, deserves her story told. Imagine life for my kindergarten-aged relative in the quaint town of Hopedale, Labrador in the early 1950s before the boarding schools. The Inuit community in Hopedale was full of love and protection. They spoke Inuktitut or used home sign language. Her family lived and played on the seashore with love and joy. The Inuit families had humble homes, fished and ate together, went to Moravian church, and were happy. Then, unexpectedly, some big church official came to houses and took the children away.

Her new home was a scary sterile strange building. She was in an unfamiliar environment with mean nuns who barked her to learn another language. Julie had to lip read to learn English and the English alphabet. She was forced to forget her first language and missed home fiercely. For 96 consecutive months, Julie learned how to write English in cursive, add simple math while she fended off abusers at the Nain Boarding School.

Julie stayed prisoner of the boarding school until 1962. She detailed how the nuns beat and raped her, made her speak English and forget Inuktitut. When she was 12, she left the school
damaged and still is. However, her family moved south from Hopedale, Labrador to Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador for the commerce. Julie had a new chance though she lost her joy. She wasn’t the same panik her parents knew when she was four. She vowed never to return to the educational system and only has an eighth-grade education. I can’t imagine how awful her life was along with the other thousand Inuit, Innu, and Métis students of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Unfortunately, the Native relatives of boarding school survivors in The States have never received apologies nor compensation from the United States government. However, the Aboriginal students from seven provinces and three territories (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Québec, Saskatchewan, North West Territories, Nunavut territory, Yukon) were included in the first settlement under Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. PM Harper apologized publicly on June 11, 2008 (Harper). Sadly, the aboriginal residential boarding school survivors from the province of Newfoundland and Labrador were never recognized due to a loophole.

Thankfully, the thousand aboriginal boarding school survivors of Newfoundland and Labrador decided to file a separate class action lawsuit. Mom attended one-of-the-five boarding schools that existed from 1949 to 1979. My ani and I encouraged our mother to file. It took lots of faith and grit for Mom to relive her truth. Mom allowed me to read her notes she wrote in cursive for the attorney. I couldn’t believe how much information she recalled. It was hard to watch her try to recover after she testified for three days.

Then, on November 24, 2017 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered an apology in my hometown of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. It was a beautiful and well-planned service with the
heads of each nation and federal government officials attended. All the Newfoundland and Labrador residential boarding school survivors were invited.

My favorite passage that Mr. Trudeau spoke was: But today we want to tell you that what happened in those five schools- at the Lockwood School in Cartwright, the Makkovik Boarding School, the Nain Boarding School, the St. Anthony Orphanage and Boarding School and the Yale School in Northwest River- is not a burden you have to carry alone anymore. It is my hope that today you can begin to heal- that you can finally put your inner child to rest. We share this burden with you by fully accepting our responsibilities- and our failings- as a government and as a country (“Trudeau Apologises”).

My mother missed the opportunity since her second husband was too ill to travel. She watched it on TV. The ceremony didn’t take as long as I thought it would. I watched the ceremony online, simultaneously, and wept while I clung to my husband. Mom and I chatted on Facebook messenger.

Our cousin Shan ushered for the ceremony. I, along with the attendees, received a commemorative pin called “Flight of Resilience” that an indigenous artist designed. Shan told me how sad it was to watch the aboriginal survivors sob and leave the room during PM Trudeau’s speech. He spoke in the big hall that had round tables and chairs with countless boxes of tissues. There was a designated room to grieve in away from the ceremony. Mental health counselors were available for one-on-one counseling. It was a memorable and necessary day for all.

The medical community gave the term, Intergenerational Trauma, to the survivors and their offspring because they survived the residential boarding schools. This IT label covers the side effects that thousands have. Common symptoms are: alcoholism, depression, suicide
(Menzies). I consider it a miracle that Mom had me since she was so badly abused. My entire life is a direct result from what the officials did to my mother when she attended the residential boarding school.

My mom received a handsome compensation last year. However, money doesn’t buy happiness. Now, at 68, Julie is a broken woman. The emotional, physical, and sexual abuse scars destroyed her spirit. She believes- and it’s most likely so- that she has PTSD and health ailments (COPD, bad heart, glaucoma) because of her boarding school experiences. Her frail body can’t take much more sickness. My Anaana appears lost in the North. She self-medicates, and her depression almost won after PM Trudeau apologized.

The residential boarding schools closed not long ago, 1997. The damages cannot be undone. The Secret Path created by Gord Downie is one version of the boarding school history as mine is. I recommend you find a Native elder to hear their stories.
Works Cited


