

# Far From Home



Boys lined up in rows at the Brandon Indian Residential School in Brandon, Manitoba, in 1960.

by Lisa Charleyboy

Not many kids can imagine living apart from their parents for a month, let alone an entire school year. Well, that's exactly what happened to more than 150 000 Indigenous kids who had to go to residential schools far from their homes.

Across the country, children aged 4 to 16 were taken from their families by the Canadian government. They were forced to attend residential schools for the whole school year, and sometimes even longer.

In school, children had to cut their hair, wear a uniform, and be called by an English name, or worse yet, just a number.

They also had to follow very strict rules, or they could be punished harshly. Many

Indigenous children spoke their own languages at home, but they were forbidden to do so at school.

The Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, Ontario, was the first recognized residential school. Founded in 1828 as the Mechanics' Institute, it became a full residential school for boys and girls in 1834.

The first residential schools were run by churches. Many students had to take part in church activities that were strange to them.

Later, the schools were turned into boarding schools under the Canadian government's control. More than 130 schools operated across Canada between 1831 and 1996.

## Life for Families and Communities

When children were taken from their homes, it had a huge impact on communities. Parents and grandparents were sad and lonely without any children around, and the whole circle of life was broken.

Girls in sewing class at the Fort Resolution Indian Residential School in the Northwest Territories.



Without any children around, some people lost the ability to parent. They had no model of what family life looked like before residential schools. Some of the children who were taken away to school never learned how to show love to their own children—never hugging them or kissing them good night.

Culture is another thing that was taken away by residential schools. Children didn't learn about their culture, and many didn't have any opportunities to learn even after they grew up. There are generations of Indigenous people who have lost their culture because of this. Thankfully, many people are working hard to regain this knowledge.



This scene is from *We Were Children*, a 2012 film by Tim Wolochatiuk. The film recounts the story of Lyna Hart and Glen Anaquod, who were both taken from their homes at a very young age and sent to residential school.

## Loss of Language and Culture

Many Indigenous languages are disappearing because kids were forbidden to speak their language at residential school. Being forced to speak English or French for most of the year meant that many simply forgot how to speak the language of their ancestors. And when they became adults, they couldn't teach their children how to speak the language either. As Elders and Knowledge Keepers get older, there are fewer chances to regain these language skills. Young people learning their language become even more important because of this.



**A**lthough residential schools seem as though they happened long ago, the last one only closed down in 1996. What happened in these schools is still affecting people's lives today.

## Jacob Pratt's Story

**J**acob Pratt is from both the Dakota and Saulteaux Nations. He went to the Gordon Indian Residential School as a day school student from grades 3 to 7. The school was on the George Gordon First Nations in Saskatchewan.



▲ Jacob has been dancing powwow since he was a child, and is a men's traditional dancer and a hoop dancer. Jacob also works with young people, helping them to become leaders in their communities.

*"I had no other options for school than to go to this residential school on my reserve. The school was run very military-like. For instance, when we had to eat, we would run as fast as we could to the lunch area and we would have to line up facing the wall. We weren't allowed to talk, move, or do anything. And if you did, you'd have to go to the back of the line, and you didn't want to do that because there's only so much good food, and then you'd have to eat the food that was leftover—if there was any food by the time you got your turn."*

The conditions at the school Jacob went to were not as harsh as the conditions that some students of residential schools faced. Many students consider themselves "Survivors," because the treatment they faced at school was so difficult.

*"I don't consider myself a Survivor. I consider myself a former residential school student, but not a Survivor," Jacob says.*

At only 33 years old, Jacob is one of the youngest former residential school attendees in Canada.

**Think About It!**

What do you learn from your family that you can't learn from other people? How would residential schools affect that learning?

## My Mother's Story

By Rosanna Deerchild

**F**or most of my life, my mother was a stranger to me.

When I was a wee Deerchild, she showed little physical affection, was quick to anger, and suffered from depression. She also struggled with alcohol and a difficult marriage.

She showed her love in other ways; she kept the house clean, kept us clean, sheltered and fed us. Every day, my mother brushed and braided my hair while she hummed and sent me off to school with soup and sandwiches.

I know she cared, but I never understood her. To me, she was a mystery and it wasn't until I was in high school that I learned her dark secret. It took another 20 years before she shared her story with me.

My mother, Edna Ferguson, is a residential school Survivor. Born in 1945 in South Indian Lake, Manitoba, she was raised in the North—on the land with her parents and two older sisters.

But that would all be taken away from her. After her dad died on the trapline and her mom died after getting sick with tuberculosis, she was sent away. She arrived at her first school when she was just five years old.

*"You didn't go to school to learn. All you learned was to be mean. I didn't learn nothing. I didn't know how to read, and when I talked Cree they grabbed your hair and bang bang on the floor. I was too young to fight for myself."*

She went to three residential schools between the ages of 5 and 14. After returning to South Indian Lake, she tried to put the past behind her.



▲ Rosanna Deerchild and her mother Edna Ferguson

*"I kept everything to myself. I didn't want to talk about it. I thought people would laugh at me or say, 'Don't make up a story.' That's what they used to say when we went home after school. They didn't believe what we were talking about. What happened at school. What the nuns were doing. What the priests were doing."*

In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began travelling across Canada collecting the stories of Survivors. When they set up in Winnipeg in 2010, I took a chance and asked my mom if she would come with me, just to listen, to know that she was not alone.

What started out as a way for Rosanna's mother to tell her residential school story turned into a six-year healing journey and a book of poetry, *Calling Down the Sky*.

