

The Difficult Truth About Residential Schools

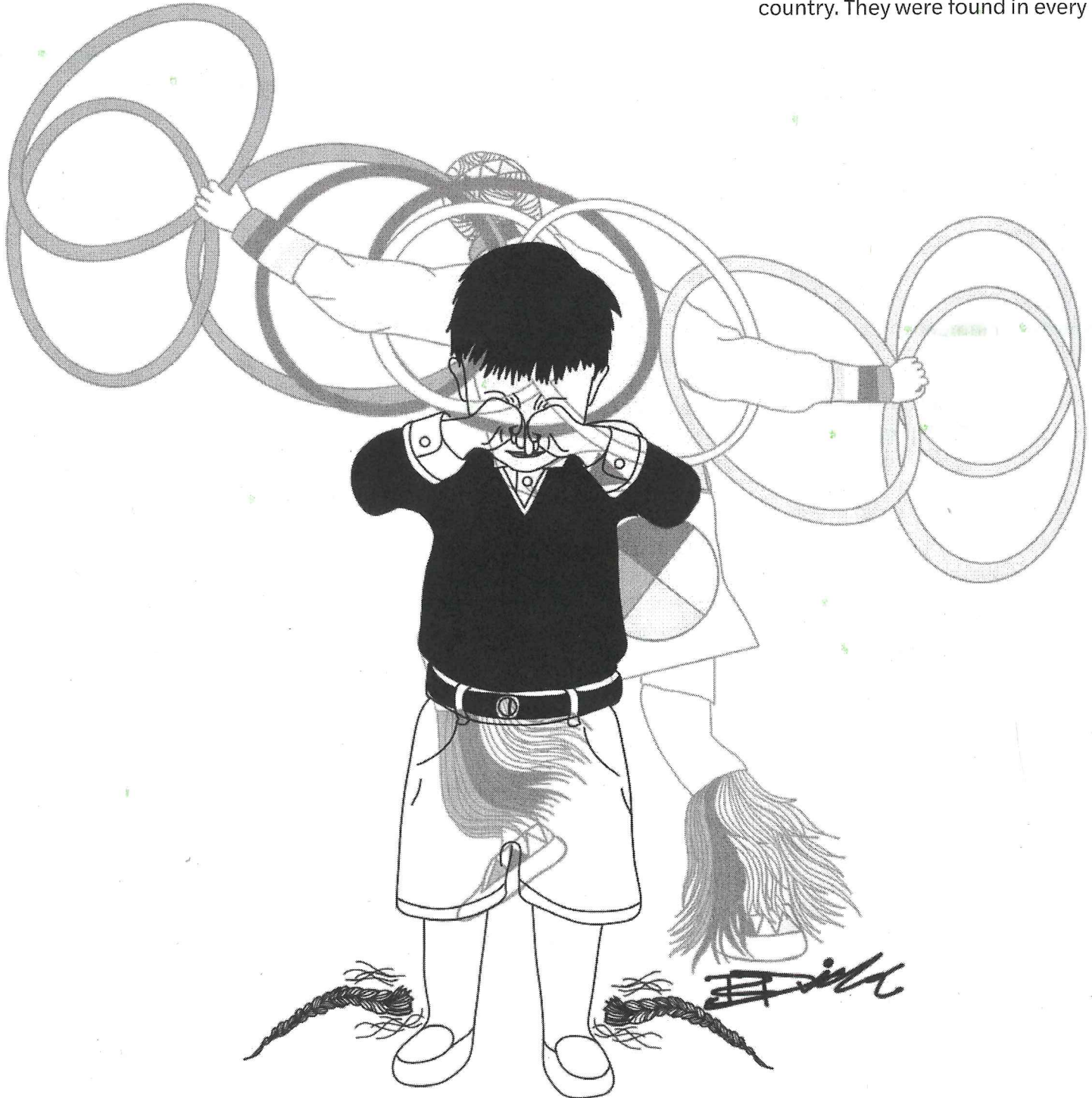
In the 1880s, the **federal government** began taking **Aboriginal** children from their homes. The children were sent to “**Indian** Residential Schools”

against their wishes, and against the wishes of their families.

Residential schools were paid for by the government. They were run by churches.

The last residential school was located in Regina, **Saskatchewan**. It closed its doors in 1996.

In all, about 130 residential schools operated across the country. They were found in every



territory and province except **Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island,** and **New Brunswick.** Some 150,000 children attended these schools over the years.

The aim of residential schools was to “take the Indian out of the child.” At the time, the government believed that **First Nations, Inuit,** and **Métis Peoples** should be **assimilated** into **mainstream** Canadian society. The easiest way to do this was to remove Aboriginal children from their parents and community. In schools, they could be **civilized,**

“**Christianized,**” and not allowed to speak their native languages.

This government policy was based on a **colonial** world view. According to this way of thinking, Canadian society and Christian religions were superior to Aboriginal cultures.

Now, Canada acknowledges that this policy was wrong. Aboriginal children should never have been taken from their families. The government should never have tried to wipe out Aboriginal culture.

Chanie Wenjack’s Story

Chanie Wenjack was a 12-year-old Anishinaabe boy. He ran away from a residential school near Kenora, Ontario in October, 1966. He wanted to go home to his family, 600 kilometres away. He was found beside railway tracks a week later. He had died from **starvation** and **exposure.** Canadian rock musician Gord Downie and artist Jeff LeMire turned Chanie Wenjack’s story into an award-winning album of songs, a graphic novel, and an animated video called “The Secret Path.”

Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan. Children who tried to go home had their heads shaved. They had their legs **shackled** in pyjamas. The school was more like a prison.

“I thought it was normal because I was just a young guy,” says the Winnipeg lawyer today. “Later, I realized how bad that was that adults would treat children like that.”

It took a long time to get rid of his anger. “I was **ashamed** to be who I was because that’s what we were taught.”

Life in a residential school

It’s true that some students had positive experiences at residential schools. Most, however, did not. The schools were more like violent **prisons** for **inmates** than schools for children.

Students were bullied and abused. They were **harshly punished** if they spoke their Aboriginal languages. Letters home were written in English, which many parents couldn’t read. When the students returned home, they often found they **didn’t belong anymore.**

The schools were **crowded,** dirty, and cold. Thousands of children died there. Diseases such as smallpox, measles, flu, and tuberculosis were responsible for many of the deaths.

The individual stories are heartbreaking.

Michael Cachagee was four years old when he was sent to a residential school in northern Ontario. He spent 12 years there. During that time, he never celebrated a birthday. He was never hugged or **praised.** Instead, he was beaten and **abused.**

It took years for him to come to grips with what happened to him. Sadly, his younger brother never did. He was three when he arrived at the school. “He came out when he was 16 and the rest of **his life was just a mess** with **alcoholism.** He never had a chance – all because he was sent off to a residential school,” says Mr. Cachagee.

Ken Young was taken from his home at the age of eight in the 1950s. He remembers public beatings at the Prince Albert

Definitions

assimilate: make similar to

colonial: relating to a system or period in which one country rules another

exposure: the harmful effect of very cold weather on your body

mainstream: considered ordinary or normal and accepted or used by most people

shackle: to prevent from moving with shackles (restraints)

Intergenerational trauma

Many of the problems faced by **Indigenous** people today are rooted in their painful experiences at residential schools. Students were left with feelings of low self-worth. They were filled with anger. They were **resentful**.

Some developed **addictions** to **cope** with their pain. Some ran into trouble with the law.

Later generations have also been impacted.

“The destructive beliefs and behaviours of many students have been passed on to their children as physical and mental health issues,” explains the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report. As well, Aboriginal youth who were not raised in their own homes didn’t have the chance to learn how to be caring and responsible parents to their children.

The result? Canada’s Indigenous population now has high poverty

rates and unemployment. It suffers higher levels of poor health and higher death rates than the population as a whole.

Yet Indigenous Peoples are very **resilient**. The people and cultures were badly damaged by years of injustice. However, they continue to exist. Many Survivors are strong and courageous. They are determined to heal and move forward.

Reconciliation

The word ‘**reconciliation**’ means **the reestablishment of a broken relationship**. For that to happen in Canada between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, “there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been **inflicted**, **atonement** for the causes, and action to change behaviour,” says the TRC.

In recent years, many church organizations involved with the schools have **apologized**. “I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were a part of a system which took you and your children from home and family,” said the Anglican Church. The letter from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops read, “We face the past and sincerely ask for forgiveness.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was made up of a three-person panel, headed by Justice Murray Sinclair. It was appointed by the federal government in 2008 to find out what happened in Indian Residential Schools, and inform all Canadians.

Over seven years, the TRC visited hundreds of communities and heard testimony from 7000 survivors. Its final report was released in 2015. This report contained 94 Calls to Action to help Canada move towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

The federal government is taking steps, too. In 2007, it announced \$1.9 billion in **compensation** for those who were forced to attend residential schools. And in June 2008, then-prime minister

Stephen Harper made a historic apology to residential school Survivors.

For his part, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has promised to fulfill

Definitions

atonement: compensation for a wrong

compensation: money given or received as payment for a service or loss or injury

resilient: able to become healthy, happy, or strong again after an illness, disappointment, or other problem

all of the Calls to Action outlined in the TRC report. In 2018, he announced that the government will change Canada's legal system. The reason? To strengthen

Indigenous Peoples' rights. That will give them greater control over their own **destiny**.

"**Reforms** are needed to ensure that – among other things -

Indigenous Peoples might once again have **confidence** in a system that has failed them all too often in the past," the prime minister said.

All Canadians have a role to play

Today, Canadians can learn about what went on in residential schools. We can begin to understand the harm that these schools caused. But once we know the truth, what do we do about it?

According to the TRC report, non-aboriginal Canadians need to start by **exploring** their own **biases**. They need to look at the **stereotypes** of Aboriginal people that they were brought up with.

"The most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of **pride** and **self-respect** of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours," says the TRC report. "The beliefs and attitudes that were used to justify the **establishment** of residential schools are not things of the past."

That means that the path to reconciliation won't be easy, or quick. But it is very, very important that Canadians begin to walk down this path.

"Only a real commitment to reconciliation and change will reverse the trends and lay the foundation for a truly just and **equitable** nation," says the TRC.

The Witness Blanket

The Witness Blanket is a 12-metre-long work of art. It was created to recognize the **atrocities** of the Indian Residential School System.

The project was inspired by the idea of a blanket, which offers warmth and protection. It resembles a giant "quilt" made out of hundreds of objects from Canada's residential schools.

The objects were gathered from across the country. They

include old doors and pieces of stained glass, belts used to punish Aboriginal children, a child's shoe, braids of hair, a hockey trophy, a doorknob, a photograph of a child, and a letter from parents asking that their children come home. Visitors can use a mobile app to learn more about each item.

The artwork toured the country for four years. In the spring of 2018, the tour was suspended. It

was causing too much wear and tear on the monument.

The artist was master carver Carey Newma. He is of British, Kwagiulth, and Salish **descent**. He calls his piece "a **testament** to the human ability to find something worthwhile, even beautiful, amidst the **tragedies**, memories, and ruins of the Residential School Era."

Definitions

atrocities: a cruel and violent act

biases: an attitude that makes people treat someone in a way that is unfair or different from the way they treat other people

destiny: a person's overall circumstances or condition in life

equitable: fair and reasonable because everyone is treated in the same way

stereotypes: a very firm and simple idea about what a particular type of person or thing is like

testament: strong evidence for something