

# Public Education Initiative on the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission

By Lorene Oikawa

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As the visitors walked through the front doors of the Squamish Nation's Chief Joe Mathias Centre, they were warmly greeted with fresh cedar branches waved around them. The sweet cleansing power of the cedar set the tone for the Public Education Initiative on the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that took place in North Vancouver at the end of October.

"I am inspired by the turnout," said Chief Robert Joseph, a residential school survivor and event organizer. "I hope that the connections [made today] remain and become deeper relationships. We can support each other and bring about a better quality of life for everyone."

The all-day event was hosted by the Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS). The TRC is a key piece of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and has a five year mandate to document the stories of survivors and their families, and to inform all Canadians of the Indian Residential School experiences.

Speakers included Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, Union of BC Indian Chiefs Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, other First Nations leaders, elders, youth, representatives from the churches, and TRC Commissioners.

The event also included participants, witnesses to the personal stories and "truths." The Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens Association (GVJCCA) was represented by Judy Hanazawa, Masa Kagami, Tatsuo Kage, Lily Shinde and Lorene Oikawa, all members of the GVJCCA Human Rights Committee. Chief Joseph noted that there was an effort to include people who are actively working on social justice and to represent a "whole rainbow spectrum of society."

Masa Kagami said, "I was quite impressed by the Aboriginal speakers' calm, yet powerful eloquence." He also noted some comments made by David McDonald representing the United Church who said, "Great harm is done to the churches themselves by their involvement in the residential schools . . . Reconciliation is where repentance meets forgiveness."

Residential schools were run by the churches and funded by the government of Canada. *Reconciliation, A Work in Progress* by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation lists the churches: "the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England (or Anglican Church), the Methodist (or United) Church, and the Presbyterian Church."

The TRC's mandate is outlined in Schedule N of the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* and defines reconciliation as "an ongoing individual and collective process, and will require commitment from all those affected including First Nations, Inuit and Métis former Indian Residential School (IRS) stu-

dents, their families, communities, religious entities, former school employees, government and the people of Canada. Reconciliation may occur between any of the above groups."

Judy Hanazawa recognizes this day as "a beginning to prepare for the opportunity to grow, change and renew and to lay a strong foundation for the Truth and Reconciliation process as it does its work in British Columbia." She added, "We Japanese Canadians also do not forget that Aboriginal People stood by us in support during our struggle and our redress achievement."

Chief Joseph also remembers attending the Japanese Canadian Redress 20th Anniversary event and he says he wanted to convey a "sense of obligation to the Japanese Canadians for their work which helped set the path for First Nations." It was at that event he also urged Japanese Canadians to participate in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and received a standing ovation for his speech.

Over 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken from their parents over the years and placed in 132 residential schools across Canada. The children were forced to reject their language and culture, and many suffered sexual and physical abuse. The first residential school in BC was opened in 1863 in Mission, and it was also the last school in BC to close in 1986. The last residential school in Canada to close was in 1996.

Louisa Smith, one of the First Nations elders from Kitamaat (Haisla Nation), talked about "washing away" the trauma and pain that their bodies have carried for too long. Her daughter assisted her with a very moving cleansing ceremony which involved wetting a towel in a bowl, wringing it and placing it on her hands and face. The symbolic act of washing away was witnessed by all and the other Indian School Survivors stood during the ceremony.

Chief Joseph talked about the long-term impacts of the Indian Residential School. He shared how his family suffered, and how he "had to overcome real demons."

"I am overwhelmed with the First Nation's energy to deal with past injustices and trauma," said Tatsuo Kage. He declared his interest in learning more about the concept of human rights in connection with the TRC and also Canada's stance with respect to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation estimates "that there are approximately 80,000 residential school Survivors today." The Indian Residential School Survivors Society estimates "that 14,000 residential school survivors live in BC—the second highest survivor population in Canada."

The GVJCCA representatives agreed that it was an honour to be invited to witness this dialogue, and hear the important and powerful stories. "We witnessed, listened and learned," said Hanazawa. "Participants realized this process must be owned by all of us, from survivors...and all others...in order to achieve genuine reconciliation and a Canada free of colonial, racist, hierarchical and oppressive roots."

Chief Joseph agrees for the "need to stand together." "We are distinct and have differences...but we need to minimize the barriers. We must honour each other or we all lose."

At the day wrapped up, Chief Joseph's young grandson ran to greet him and sat on his lap. The young boy who is not quite six-years-old—the age of the Chief when he was taken away from his family—smiled contentedly as his grandfather held him. A hopeful glimpse of a future where all Aboriginal children will have the love and support of their families, and not have to worry about losing their identity, culture or self-worth. ♦