

# Infamous Port Alberni residential school dormitory demolished

*The Canadian Press*  
By Sunny Dhillon

VANCOUVER — When Ben Nookemis was just another seven-year-old child torn away from his family and forced to attend the Port Alberni Indian Residential School, he and the other children would often pass the time crafting projects, such as stilts.

“We used to make them out of a two-by-two square piece of wood,” he remembers.

But it was on those stilts, and the extra height they provided his small frame, that Nookemis gained insight

into the true horror of his surroundings.

“We would walk around on these things and it was just high enough for me to look into the supervisor’s living quarters and I would see the supervisor sexually abusing these young girls,” he says.

That image is one of many Nookemis and other Alberni residential school survivors buried Tuesday, when the school’s dormitory building was demolished.

“I’m glad they’re tearing that building down,” he says. “It’s nothing but bad memories.”

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# Infamous school demolished

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The school, located in Port Alberni on the west coast of Vancouver island, opened in 1920 and closed its doors in 1973.

It is notorious for the number of children raped and beaten by dorm supervisor Arthur Henry Plint.

Plint, described in court as a "sexual terrorist," was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 1995 and has since died.

Some have suggested that since the school's main building is no longer standing, the dormitories should remain as a reminder of the atrocities committed within.

But Tseshaht First Nation chief councillor Les Sam says the demolition brings with it an opportunity to heal.

"People are coming and want to share a part in the witnessing of the school coming down and want to put some closure to all our childhood nightmares," he says.

Sam's father attended the school but never spoke to him about the experience. It wasn't until the elder Sam died that his son understood why.

"When he passed away, I was able to look at some interview files that he had done for the Tseshaht First Nation. It said, 'I attended residential school and it was hell from the first day I got there.'

"He never burdened me with it."

In a cruel twist, Sam says the impoverished Tseshaht had little recourse but to occupy the dormitory building as a band office until just over one year ago.

"There was always bad karma in the building," Sam says.

He describes the difference in employee demeanour since the move to a new facility as "night and day."

On Tuesday, the Tseshaht held a cultural ceremony at the building's site. Sam says counsellors were on hand for anyone who needed them.

As opposed to merely knocking the dormitories down and leaving the site unoccupied, Sam has an idea on what a fitting tribute would be.

"The right thing to do would be to conduct a health and wellness cultural centre on that site to give people something back that was taken away," he says.

"I think that would be the right thing for the government to do, to make it the opposite of what the residential school was."

Scott Fraser, Alberni-Qualicum MLA and opposition critic for Aboriginal relations and reconciliation, is receptive to the idea.

But Fraser says the establishment of a cultural centre should be just one small step in rebuilding Canada's relationship with Aboriginals.

"There's a lot more that has to be done," he says. "There's a legacy that goes with the removal of children from their families and the attempt to basically wipe out their history."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized in the House of Commons in June 2008 for a century of abuse and cultural loss involving the residential schools.

Harper called the treatment of children in residential schools "a sad chapter" in Canadian history.

In 2007, as a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, common-experience payments were introduced to recognize the impact living at a residential school had on Aboriginals.

A spokeswoman for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada says as of Jan. 26, more than 97,000 applications have been received for the payments, with some 72,000 paid out.

Including advance payments, the total amount distributed is \$1.47 billion.

But for many, watching the dormitories destroyed will be priceless.

"In some ways, it closes a very dark chapter in history," Fraser says.

For the 74-year-old Nookemis, the vicious beatings and long rounds of starvation were one thing. But the near-loss of his Aboriginal language was a particularly tough blow.

"I'm always thankful for my grandparents and my late mom using our language all the time, therefore I never lost it," he says.

Nookemis is now teaching that language to youngsters in the Huu-ay-aht First Nation.

He says he'd like to be there when the dormitory comes down, but not if it interferes with giving a language lesson.