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Red Wolf and Reconciliation

Education is the key to residential schools healing

By Jennifer Dance

Canada is one of the most multicultural and tolerant countries in the world. That's why millions of immigrants have come here, to escape persecution and live in freedom.

It's why I came in 1979, looking for a place where my bi-racial children could grow up in safety and have equal opportunity regardless of skin colour. So it's hard to comprehend that while the Canadian government gave immigrants the opportunity for a better life, they behaved so badly toward aboriginal people.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has just completed the long and painful task of recording the personal experiences of residential school survivors from all over Canada. Justice Murray Sinclair, who chaired this daunting project, concludes that, "the residential school experience is clearly one of the darkest and most

troubling chapters in our collective history... leaving in its path the pain and despair felt by thousands of indigenous people today."

Justice Murray Sinclair challenges all Canadians to be part of the reconciliation process. "Reconciliation," he says, "is not an aboriginal problem. It is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us."

So what is reconciliation? The dictionary definition includes restoring to friendship or harmony/ resolving difficulties. In my mind, it means making things right. But we can't make things right if we don't know what's wrong. So the first step toward reconciliation is learning the truth.

Thanks to the voluntary testimony of over 6,750 survivors as well as school staff, we now know the truth. We can no longer ignore or deny that 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes and families for one reason alone: they were aboriginal. We can also

no longer deny that the rift between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada today is very real, and is largely due to the residential school system.

During the 140 years in which aboriginal children were being taught that they were inferior, white children were being taught that they themselves were superior. Ever since settlers arrived here, this colonial mentality has been alive and well in Canadian classrooms. But children are not born racist. Racism and prejudice are learned.

The hope of true reconciliation lies with the youth of today, and with their teachers and educators. Just as systemic racism was taught in the old schools, it can be "untaught" in today's schools. Grade 5 and 6 teachers in Ontario are now required to teach a unit on residential schools. This is a big step in the right direction.

However most teachers were not taught anything about residential

schools or the Indian Act when they were in school, because this shameful part of Canadian history had been silenced. They know little about it. Over the last year many of them have commented that *Red Wolf* has opened their eyes to this difficult subject, helping them to teach their students. A teacher recently tweeted that her act of reconciliation is to read *Red Wolf* in her classroom!

Murray Sinclair says this: "We have described for you a mountain. We have shown you a path to the top. We call upon you to do the climbing."

Jennifer Dance is the author of Red Wolf and Paint. She lives and works in Whitchurch-Stouffville. This article originally appeared on allisonsbookbag.wordpress.com on June 15.

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Wednesday, September 23rd
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