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# "It has to be heard': Survivor recounts torture endured at 'Indian hospital'

Melven Jones was forcibly held for two years

Jane Skrypnek  
News Staff

The morning's rain has just stopped and soft, warm light filters through a translucent patio covering onto Melven Jones' face. Lines run across his bronze-brown forehead and out from his deep-set eyes as memories furrow the 64-year-old's brow.

"I was six. I was vulnerable in every way."

Jones' story of survival is different from many other Indigenous peoples'. He only attended the residential school in Port Alberni for a couple of days before he was uprooted once again and forced into the Nanaimo Indian Hospital for two years. But, in almost every way that matters – the torture, neglect and attempted cultural eradication – Jones' story is sickeningly similar.

The Nanaimo hospital was one of an estimated 31 "Indian hospitals" run by the Canadian government from the 1930s to 1980s to segregate Indigenous people from non-Indigenous ones in underfunded facilities with poorly trained staff. They began as a means to sequester the disproportionate number of Indigenous people catching tuberculosis, but soon became a breeding ground for the disease and an experimental lab for vaccines and medical procedures to be tested.

At six years old, Jones had no idea why he had been taken to the hospital, but later in his life when he requested his old medical files, he discovered he'd only contracted tuberculosis after arriving there. Today, he struggles with lung problems as a result.

But it isn't Jones' damaged organ tissue that makes it hard for him to breathe when he's alone or when he wakes shivering in his own sweat in the night. It's everything else that was done to him.

"I was tied down on a gurney and



Nanaimo Indian Hospital survivor Melven (Sxwen) Jones recounts the abuse he endured at six years old, as he sits outside his home in Victoria. (Arnold Lim / Black Press Media)

the doctor and nurse wheeled me into this room where they had this machine," Jones recalls. They then placed a bite stick in Jones' mouth and told him to clamp down. "And they had these two electrode things and they zapped me in my side here," Jones says, pointing at his temples. "They did that for a year. I still remember that. That will never go away."

Once admitted to the hospital, "patients" were only allowed to leave when an "Indian superintendent" or medical officer allowed them to. At night, Jones says, they were tied to their beds so they couldn't run away. Even so, he says he tried to on numerous occasions.

Punishments came in the form of whippings and beatings. Jones says he thinks the electric shocks were used when children spoke their own languages.

Other survivors report being tied to their beds for 24 hours a day for months or years at a time, being sex-

ually assaulted, and being forced to eat their own vomit, according to an ongoing national class-action lawsuit.

Jones is calm as he tells his story. He's warm and personable and inviting. But, his throat catches as he decides to share the one piece of his experience he's only told three people. He takes a deep breath. "I got raped at six years old."

The statement hangs in the air with a quiet force. Jones takes another deep breath and widens his eyes, allowing the cool, fall breeze to dry them.

"It kind of makes me feel more relieved. It does hurt, it does sting, but it has to be put out there. It has to be heard."

The decades following the hospital have been hard. Returning home, Jones says his parents told him not to talk about his experience out of fear of the government, or "the out-

side world" as they called life off the reserve. He remembers his brother going into that world one night and returning beaten and bloodied. It wasn't safe out there, Jones determined. It wasn't safe to be Indigenous and it wasn't safe to share his story.

"I buried it so deep, I didn't even know what happened," Jones says, explaining the memories were literally non-existent

for many years. The pain was always there, though. Twice during his childhood, Jones attempted suicide.

During the Sixties Scoop he was again taken from his parents, and later Jones ended up in a juvenile detention home.

Eventually, Jones realized his pain was taking him down the wrong path and he sought help. He finished high school, went to college, and started a security service in the movie industry.

*Continued on A7*

Black Press Media  
Video online

"I buried it so deep, I didn't even know what happened."

— MELVIN JONES

SPECIAL SERIES  
**TRUTH**  
& Reconciliation

## Reconciliation means educating ourselves

Finding the courage to tell one's story, especially when it involves deep levels of pain, is one of the first steps in the healing process.

In today's special issue marking the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, we share intensely personal survival stories about residential school experiences, living with intergenerational trauma, and its effects. Our goal is to give readers the opportunity to take steps towards reconciliation by coming away with a better understanding of what our Indigenous neighbours, their families and similarly courageous people have endured.

There are other ways of practising reconciliation, writes Bob Joseph, a hereditary chief of the Gwawaenuk Nation and the author of the illuminating book, *21 Things You May Not Know about the Indian Act*.

We can also pledge to learn more about our local Nations and Indigenous people and issues in general, including seeking to dispel related myths and misconceptions, he says. We can avoid perpetuating stereotypes in our conversations or observations. And we can actively support and participate in activities surrounding Sept. 30 and National Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21.

After all, actions speak louder than words.

Articles in this series contain descriptions of abuse endured or witnessed by children at residential schools that may be triggering to readers. Articles may mention suicide and violence against children including sexual, physical, mental and emotional abuse.

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Jane Skrypnek  
News Staff

# Orange Shirt Day is born out of trauma, friendship and hope

Eddy Charlie wasn't convinced when his good friend and classmate Kristin Spray asked him to launch a Victoria chapter of Orange Shirt Day with her.

He wasn't sure he could revisit the pain, trauma and anger he had fought so hard to heal from in the 50 years since he was forced to attend the Kuper Island Residential School. Memories of physical, sexual and emotional abuse will always live with him. His one blind eye and inability to hear, caused by a coma-inducing suicide attempt while seven years old, are everlasting reminders of just how bad things got.

When Spray first asked Charlie about Orange Shirt Day it was 2014 and they were in their first year of the Indigenous studies course at Camosun College – Charlie there to rediscover an identity white settlers had tried so hard to stamp out of him, Spray there as a non-Indigenous ally determined to learn and take action. They were fresh friends with incredibly different backstories, but a shared desire to change the future.

Orange Shirt Day, also now known as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, was started by residential school survivor Phyllis Webstad.

At age six, unaware of what was to come, Webstad had proudly worn a new, shiny orange shirt to her first day of school. It was immediately taken from her, signalling all that would be stolen from her in the months to come.

Spray gently nudged Charlie for a year toward taking on the project in Victoria, but it wasn't until he overheard some students diminishing the experiences of residential school survivors while studying in Camosun's library one day that he agreed.

"I don't understand these Indigenous people," Charlie remembers one of the students saying. "I don't understand why they have to keep on talking about residential schools. It's time for them to forget about that and move on."

This is one of Charlie's worst fears – that one day all the survivors will be dead, and if they haven't told their stories often enough, it will be as if nothing happened.

"They (survivors) are walking, talking history books and I think we need to listen to them," Charlie says. "That's the best way to honour them and allow healing to happen little bit by little bit."

Of course, when Charlie says "they," he really means "I" as well.

Sitting on the steps of the B.C. legislature on a Wednesday morning in



Victoria's Orange Shirt Day founders Eddy Charlie (left) and Kristin Spray (right) stand on the steps of the B.C. legislature. (Arnold Lim/Black Press)

September, surrounded by hundreds of stuffed animals and notes honouring the thousands of children lost to residential schools, Charlie recounts some of the horrors they, and he, endured.

"When these children were placed in residential schools, they were physically abused, emotionally abused, called 'stupid Indians.' They were starved and they were beaten for speaking the language they practice in their culture. But that's not the worst of it. The worst of it is that many of the children were also sexually abused. And not just a few times, but many times over a period of one year to 16 years," he says.

Charlie holds one of Spray's two dogs as he speaks. Pinya, or "spirit

of reconciliation" as Charlie calls her, is a calming presence for him.

Abused over and over, Charlie says survivors were twisted into unrecognizable people.

"Residential school created the perfect hate machine out of all these children, and then released them back into their communities," he says. Overf l o w i n g with hate, anger and resentment, and with no place that

felt like home any longer, Charlie says many survivors were driven to destructive coping mechanisms.

Intergenerational trauma ensued.

More than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children are estimated to have attended Canada's residential schools. Between 4,000 and 6,000 of them died there.

There's decades-long pain in Charlie's voice as he speaks, but he says he knows sharing his story, spreading awareness with Spray, and organizing Orange Shirt Day every year is the way forward.

They're planting the seeds of change, Charlie says, so one day, maybe seven generations from now, Indigenous people will face a different reality.

Now is the time for people to listen and do their genuine best to understand, Charlie says. Part of that, Spray adds as she sits next to Charlie on the legislature steps, is sitting with discomfort.

After attending the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing in Vancouver in 2013, Spray spent eight months sitting with the horror of what she'd heard before deciding to enrol at Camosun.

"Feel the collective grief and the hurt and the pain," she says. "And be okay with ... being uncomfortable for

longer than a week or two."

Reconciliation is about more than just grieving, though, Charlie says.

It's also about celebrating Indigenous people's resilience in standing up and reclaiming what was stolen from them. And, it's about Indigenous and non-Indigenous people coming together under the shared umbrella of humanity.

"Change can only happen when we respect each other, when we honour each other, and hold each other up," Charlie says.

There's a phrase his grandfather always used to tell him that has stuck with Charlie to this day: "There is room in the circle for everyone."

Reconciliation requires a collective, continuous and adaptive effort from all sides.

Charlie and Spray hope Greater Victoria residents will put on an orange shirt and join them Sept. 30 in remembering and moving forward.

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# Survivor no longer afraid to share her residential school experience

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& Reconciliation

'We, as the survivors, can tell the stories for the ones who didn't get to go home'

Jake Romphf  
News Staff



A survivor of the Alberni residential school, Kathleen Horne, left, and her husband Doug LaFortune outside the First Peoples House at the University of Victoria. (Jake Romphf/News Staff)

Outside the Alberni Indian Residential School on Vancouver Island, four-year-old Kathleen Horne cried out as the institution's supervisors forced her mother to leave the grounds. The youngest of nine siblings, Horne was scared from that first moment in 1959 because of what happened to her brothers and sisters when they were taken. The supervisors then told her if she didn't stop crying she'd be strapped, meaning they'd strike the child with what resembled a very thick belt.

That was the first threat Horne, a member of Tsawout First Nation, faced at the residential school, where for the next decade of her young life she would be beaten, sexually abused, and punished for expressing any form of her culture. It's why she now shares the truth of what happened to her – for the children who never made it home.

Many of Horne's brothers and sisters were at the residential school at the same time, but they were separated and weren't allowed to see or speak to each other. She hadn't seen any of her siblings for a long time during her first year when all the children were brought to an auditorium. Horne was crying because a film they were being shown had frightened her, through teary eyes, she spotted her sister a couple of rows away. She ran over and collapsed into her sister, who pleaded for Horne to go back to her seat or else they'd both get in trouble.

"She held me for a minute, then the supervisors saw us and I was yanked out of her arms, forced to sit back in my chair and smacked," Horne said. "I was told if I went to my sister I'd be beaten again."

She didn't see her sister for a long time after that and knew if they were seen together, they'd be punished. Those first couple of years were sad and lonely, so Horne forced herself to bottle up her emotions.

"I was so small and I didn't realize how it was changing me at the time."

The children couldn't show any form of affection, just a hug or holding hands would mean they'd face beatings. Long after aging out of the residential school at 14, Horne wasn't able to embrace her own family, except for her mother.

Her mom was only allowed to visit

once or twice a year, and one time arrived with a girl by her side.

"I was hugging my mom and I said 'Who is that?'" she remembered. "My mom said, 'That's your sister Gloria' and I didn't even know her because I hadn't seen her for so long."

Gloria is seven years older than Horne.

"That was really shocking when I didn't even know my own sister."

Her brothers were grown men by the time she left the residential school. They suffered from alcoholism due to the abuse they faced during their time there – with three of them dying from the disease. Her brothers' fighting and drinking eventually became too much and Horne had to separate herself from them.

They've since reconnected, but the togetherness of their family never really recovered.

"I know that it wasn't their fault, they didn't

know how to live a normal family life because it had been taken away from them."

Before being taken, she was walking by and saw one of her brothers calling to her from the fence line. He begged Horne to run to their house and get him something, anything, to eat. The children never knew what they were being fed at the institution, but it wasn't enough as they were always

starving.

They survived by plucking roots and other things growing from the yard and eating those, she said.

Horne only spoke in her Nuu-Chah-Nulth language when she arrived at the residential school and was struck with the strap for it. To this day, more than 50 years after leaving the institution, it's too painful for Horne to learn how to speak or understand her own language.

And like many others, Horne was sexually abused at the residential school.

"Not being able to protect myself or get away – you're stuck there," she said. "That's why I dedicated my life to my children because I never wanted that to happen to any child."

In 1995, a former Port Alberni residential school supervisor, who worked there from 1948 to 1968, was convicted of 18 counts of indecent assault against students and sentenced to 11 years in jail, according to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

In May, the discovery of 215 unmarked graves at a former Kamloops residential school site was traumatizing and heartbreaking for Horne. In trying to explain what she felt in that moment, she let out a long and defeated sigh before going silent for

a couple of moments.

"We knew it was happening but we had no way of saying it," Horne said.

Kids in the dorms would suddenly disappear and the supervisors would say they went home or ran away, Horne said. If the children kept asking about them, the supervisors would punish them and tell them not to speak about it anymore. Horne said they just wanted the punishments to end and so, out of fear, they never brought up the disappearing kids again.

"When you were threatened like that, you just didn't say or do anything because you just don't know," she said. "It made me realize how lucky we are to have gone home, to be alive."

That fear and trauma instilled in the children lived on for decades and stopped Horne, her siblings, and countless others from talking about what they went through. Many in Horne's family felt ashamed they'd been abused and, about half a century later, they were still scared.

Things started to change when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) started having hearings with local survivors to learn the truths about residential schools. Horne and some of her brothers initially didn't want to speak, but her oldest daughter convinced her to go.

"She said, 'Mom you have to go,

you have to tell somebody what happened to you.'"

Decades after leaving the Port Alberni residential school, with her husband and daughter by her side, Horne finally voiced her experience for the first time at a 2013 TRC hearing.

"We, as the survivors, can tell the stories for the ones who didn't get to go home and the things that we had to endure to stay alive."

After hiding the horrors for so long, Horne found it was liberating to tell her story.

"I felt like it was gone, it was lifted off of me and I didn't carry that around with me anymore," she said. "I wasn't afraid anymore of being reprimanded or being ashamed."

She hopes stories like hers will help build a better foundation of history so future generations can embrace their Indigenous culture and language without fear.

A family was stolen from Horne at the age of four, but the one she's built is what saved her and helped her overcome what she faced as a child. Today, Horne's husband, three children, six grandchildren and two soon-to-be-born great-grandchildren are what she treasures most.

"The ones who didn't get to come home never got to experience that, so I feel really blessed and I'm not scared anymore of telling people what happened."

“She held me for a minute, then the supervisors saw us and I was yanked out of her arms, forced to sit back in my chair and smacked.”

— KATHLEEN HORNE



**SPECIAL SERIES**  
**TRUTH**  
 & Reconciliation

# John Elliott a leading voice in revitalizing language, culture

Locals working hard to ensure first languages not lost forever

**Wolfgang Depner**  
 News Staff

The Saanich Peninsula ranks among the leading regions in Canada when it comes to reversing one of the central legacies of the residential school system — the loss of Indigenous languages.

However, this assessment from Policy Options (a publication that tracks policy proposals and legislation) should neither distract from the historical damage the residential school system has done nor downplay the future challenges that lie ahead.

While the deliberate destruction of Indigenous languages happened through instruments of the Canadian state, their revitalization is happening through the joint efforts of local institutions such as the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, based in Brentwood Bay, and individuals like J,SINTEN John Elliott.

Long before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada identified the revitalization of Indigenous languages as a key to reconciliation, regional efforts were taking steps toward this goal and perhaps no one personifies these efforts better than Elliott, a First Peoples' Cultural Foundation board member and SENCOTEN language teacher and speaker.

Building on the ground-breaking development of a unique SENCOTEN writing system by his late father David Elliott, the younger Elliott and his sister Linda Underwood have been leading current efforts to revitalize and spread SENCOTEN among local Indigenous peoples.

"Our main goal is to have parents and children speak the language at home once again and we haven't reached that yet," he said.

Elliott is not blind to the challenges that lie in that goal. For one, he and like-minded individuals have to overcome the historical legacy of the residential school system. As he said, "a planned and organized way to disconnect us from what was our right and our God-given rights to the interpretation of words and language that are holy and sacred to our People," nearly wiped out SENCOTEN, along with other first languages, and the remaining number of fluent speakers is dropping.

As the third and latest edition of the report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages (2018) noted, the



J,SINTEN John Elliott, here seen speaking at the Indigenous language conference HELISET TTE SKÁL – 'Let the Languages Live,' in 2019 says local First Nations languages are deeply connected to the surrounding land. (Photo courtesy of the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation)

number of individuals who fluently speak first languages continues to decline with the "loss of many of our aging first language speakers."

According to the report, almost 52 per of the 4,132 self-reported fluent speakers across British Columbia are aged 65 and older. Leaving Elliott fighting against time.

"Very few Elders are remaining," he said. "When I first started like 40 years ago, we had 18 fluent first language speakers that myself and my sister worked with. We still have about three or four of them that we still work with and help us to keep the language clear and true the way it is naturally spoken."

But that same report also speaks of successes. While younger fluent speakers aged zero to 24 make up 2.8 per cent of fluent speakers, the number of younger fluent speakers reported has increased since the 2014 report, as has the number of learners (13,997) with almost eight out of 10 within that youngest age category. The report has also found that more and more adults are learning first languages.

These rising numbers reflect the

growing educational options for different age groups, as offered through the WSANEC school board, including immersion programming at the pre-school, kindergarten and Grade 1 to 5 levels. The school board has also partnered with the University of Victoria to offer a diploma in Indigenous Language Revitalization, designed to improve the teaching of first languages. Technology is also changing the delivery of programming. Founded almost 20 years ago, FirstVoices, an initiative of the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, serves as an online platform that allows communities to work on language revitalization.

"The idea is that Indigenous communities document their languages and their language data online and it is fully controlled by the communities," said Daniel Yona, FirstVoices development manager. As such, the platform serves as an online dictionary but also as a repository for cultural information, he said.

Learners cover a wide range. The majority of the site's 15,000 monthly visits comes from Indigenous people who are trying to reconnect to their language. "And then we really have a

lot of demand from teachers – both formal and informal teachers – who use it to create curriculum and use it to educate people, to create fun activities with the site," Yona said.

Another large category of users is non-Indigenous members of the general public, who want to learn a specific phrase and its pronunciation, "which is really great," Yona added.

The First Peoples' Cultural Council also recently launched the First Peoples' Map of B.C., an interactive online map featuring information about Indigenous languages, arts and cultural heritage in the province.

"Our hope is that this map will help non-Indigenous people to better appreciate Indigenous perspectives as one small step towards reconciliation," said Karen Aird, acting CEO of the First Peoples' Cultural Council at the time of the map's release. "By combining all of this rich information together in one place, the map reflects an Indigenous perspective by braiding important cultural elements together with the land."

Drawing links between language and land is also something that animates Elliott, whose father once

described language as the voice of the land. So what would that voice be saying now?

"The voice is changing right now," he said. "Our connection with the land has been inhibited by the loss of culture, the loss of land base."

By rebuilding their language, local First Nations are then in a way also reclaiming ownership of their land in giving language learning a significance that goes beyond the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar for the purpose of communication.

Elliott said students start to realize that language is more than just about speaking to one another. "That is the way a lot of our people are starving for," he said. "They are starving for that acknowledgment of connection to our homeland and territories."

Elliott knows it will take time to strengthen that connection, to repair what decades of official policy have destroyed. More work lies ahead, but Elliott also has time to reflect on what has been achieved.

"Although it has been a long, long struggle, it has been a very meaningful long struggle to get to the point where we are now."



# Acknowledging hard truths the first step in reconciliation

SPECIAL SERIES  
**TRUTH**  
& Reconciliation

The path forward starts with a commitment to learning and listening

**Jake Romphf**  
News Staff

In talking about truth and reconciliation with Indigenous people in Canada, the process, like the phrase, needs to start with truth – acknowledging the truths about what happened on this land.

That's where Kendra Gage, the executive director of the Hulitlan Family and Community Services Society, said we need to start. A path forward starts on the personal level, with everyone taking the responsibility to learn about what's been done to Indigenous people since European colonists arrived and the systems they're forced to navigate today.

"It's about really understanding our history," she said. "You have to know the truth before you can reconcile."

Just outside her office window is a tree with orange shirts draped on the trunk and children's shoes placed by the roots. They're reminders that Canada's history includes the horrors of residential schools, the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop and all of their lasting impacts.

Governments forced people off the lands where they had lived since time immemorial and moved them onto reserves. Gage noted they were moved to where the Canadian state wanted to put them, often not in the same territory where people lived, and



**Kendra Gage, executive director of Hulitlan Family and Community Services Society, at the society's Langford location. (Jake Romphf/News Staff)**

they'd be moved again whenever the government wanted resources in that area. And now, Indigenous people are still subject to policies that systematically leave them disadvantaged or ignored entirely – all spurred from that displacement.

As an example, Gage pointed to Jordan's Principle, which honours a Norway House Cree Nation boy who needed specific home-based care, but never got it and died in hospital

because the federal and provincial governments argued for years over who should pay for his care. It shows, Gage said, how even after governments forced Indigenous people onto reserves, they've failed to allocate basic resources on those reserves, while non-Indigenous communities don't face those same problems.

It pains her to still see people and politicians in this country downplay the intent and abuse of the residential

school system, along with the ongoing trauma it inflicted on generations.

"I don't think anybody that has children in this country would be okay with someone coming and taking their child, stripping them of everything they know and love, telling them they're horrible human beings and beating them into submission."

Now is the time for Canadians to look inward and acknowledge such tragic truths.

Gage said accepting and talking about how the country has wronged Indigenous people risks Canada's international reputation but also shows how Canada isn't currently living up to it. By acknowledging and acting on repairing that relationship, it could one day meet that perception, she said.

"An apology is only a real apology if you change the behaviour, it's a recognition of the harm and a commitment not to do that again," she said. "I'm not saying we can't accomplish that."

People also can't turn a blind eye to what's happening right now, she said, like the child welfare system's targeting of Indigenous communities.

"We're still removing Indigenous children away from families, removing them from their culture, but we were just placing them in foster homes," she said. "If we think the same things aren't happening, we've chosen not to open our eyes."

Gage encourages people to question why and how racial bias still exists in Canada. She hopes people will educate themselves about the importance of an equitable society that lifts everyone up and gives all people the opportunity to thrive.

After more than 20 years of working with Indigenous communities, she's still learning, but Gage said that commitment to listening and talking about hard truths is essential on the path to reconciliation.

"Being invited into community and being a member of community is the most beautiful gift I've ever been given in my life."

## There are good days and bad days, but each one is a new day

*Continued from A3*

It was only then, about 10 years ago, when his life had stabled out that his suppressed memories emerged. One night, Jones was showering before going to work and blacked out. A friend found him curled in the bottom of the tub in the fetal position.

"That was the beginning," Jones says. "Every single day I live to try to have a better day without thinking about this. But it keeps creeping into my head. It keeps driving me crazy."

"I wish there was a way they could just pluck it out of me. I wish I never remembered it."

On bad days, Jones says he sometimes imagines swimming out into the ocean from Dallas Road, as far as he can go until he's so tired he knows he has no chance of making it back. But he says he doesn't really mean it, not like he used to.

"I love life. I love the people that brought me to where I am and helped me out. I did the legwork, they just kind of showed me the right way."

Jones has three children and three grand-

children he loves dearly. His brother calls him daily and he has a whole host of friends and support workers he raves about.

There are good days and there are bad days, but Jones says all that matters is that each one is a new day. And, when he looks out at the children playing in the courtyard of his Indigenous housing complex, he says he feels some relief.

Trauma is passed down from generation to generation, but healing can be too.

Jones says he prays for every survivor and their families, that they, like him, receive the help and support that they need.

"I am for every Indigenous person here on this island, or anywhere else. I'm for them. And for whatever happened to them, I'm sorry."

The Nanaimo Indian Hospital ran from 1946 to 1967 across from what is now Vancouver Island University. During those two decades, it saw at least 14,000 patients. On Sept. 15, Snuneymuxw First Nation announced it will soon be searching the old grounds for unmarked graves.



**An orange shirt forms part of a memorial on the fence surrounding the former site of the Nanaimo Indian Hospital. (Black Press Media file photo)**



**SPECIAL SERIES**  
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 & Reconciliation

# Uprooting the 'old narrative' by sharing experiences, stories

Indigenous history needs to be recognized

**Kiernan Green**  
 News Staff

Steve Sxwithul'twx spent his 20s trying to find his way.

The Penelakut Tribe member and Kuper Island Indian Residential School survivor said at that age, you really don't know what you're doing. "You're trying to find your way, break the strings of the past and reliance on your family," he said.

Today, Sxwithul'twx is 56 and living in Victoria's Cook Street Village, having started a family of his own. After more than three decades of confusion with identity and place, he reflects on a career attempting to erase what he calls that "old narrative" of trauma and despondence seared into a derogatory perception of B.C.'s Indigenous peoples.

As a police constable, broadcast journalist and TV producer, Sxwithul'twx's work has centred around community-led and community-based practices that create a fuller picture of different peoples.

Part of that came with Sxwithul'twx's experience with a "different style of policing." It began with a sign – a job poster looking for security guards while he was unemployed in his 20s. Eight months of training landed him a gig outside an Army and Navy department store in Vancouver's East Hastings, "at the heart of where people have the toughest times in life," he said.

He carried that experience with him as he started his own policing service in his home region near Ladysmith and Chemainus after going from a corrections officer at 26 to a police officer at 30.

But while policing on his own Nation on Vancouver Island built transferable skills, Sxwithul'twx said the work was made challenging by a lack of budget, equipment, and personnel and downtime came with the price of feeling woefully unappreciated.

The pressure of it caused Sxwithul'twx to leave the force in 2003, only revisiting it years later in his capacity as a journalist.

The move in that direction came from another job ad discovered during one of his last police postings. "They were looking for radio personalities for the community station ... so I signed up and did four hours every Thursday night," Sxwithul'twx said.

The phone was soon ringing off the hook with song requests for "Constable Steve," he said, which encouraged him to pursue courses in broadcast journalism.

Sxwithul'twx learned he had the knack for it in 2007 but while he enjoyed working in front of the camera for major outlets, he didn't like the direction newsrooms were taking at the time. The regular features on dancing, drumming, drinking or death – coined the four Ds of stereotypical coverage by Indigenous journalist

“There has to be some empathy ... and some understanding.”

— STEVE SXWITHUL'TWX

Duncan McCue – drove Sxwithul'twx away from mainstream media as they failed to portray a complex history.

Instead, he began a relationship with the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network as an independent producer.

One original show, "Warrior Games," featured Indigenous athletes across North America and allowed its subjects to reclaim Indigenous identity through cultural sport. But it was "Tribal Police Files" that brought Sxwithul'twx back to the policing community.

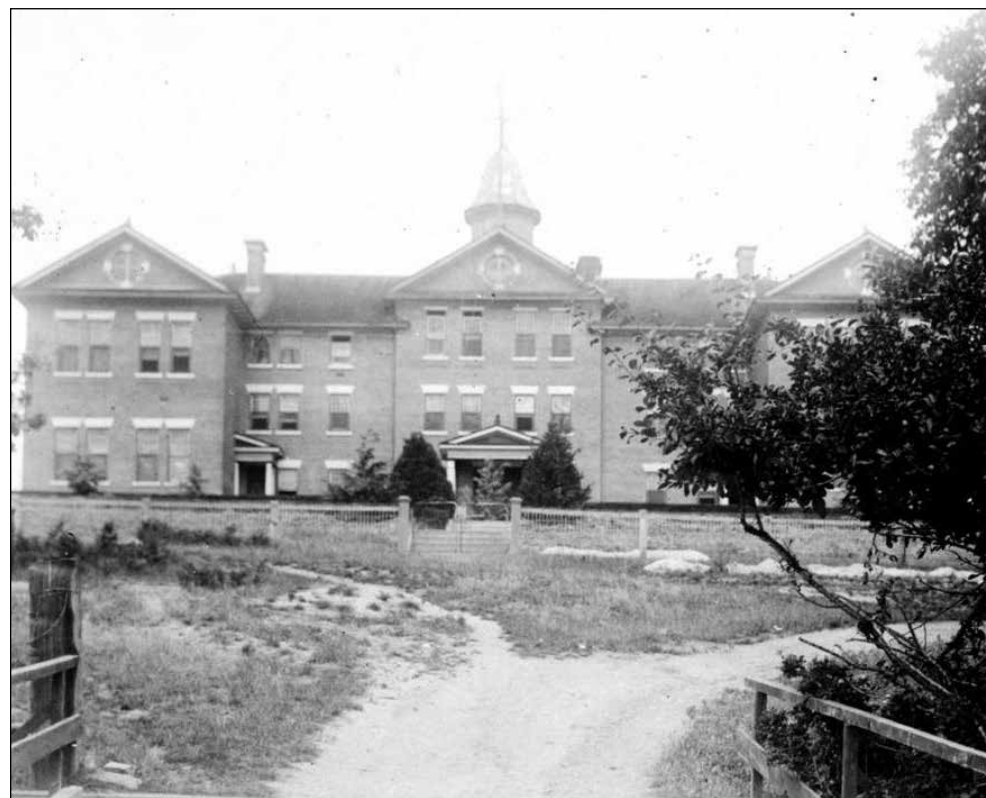
The most surprising element of the series for Canadians, Sxwithul'twx said, was the different style of policing. The First Nations police services showcased were community-led and community-based, Sxwithul'twx said, and demonstrated that policing in Canada is only as strong as its community ties.

Considering an upbringing in a colonial system, living within the Indian Act, mediating the intergenerational trauma of residential schools and experiencing racism, Sxwithul'twx said the "rough ride" endured by North America's Indigenous peoples needs to be understood if it's to be addressed – whether that's through the media or policing policies.

"There has to be some empathy ... and some understanding."



Steve Sxwithul'twx in his home in Cook Street Village. His experiences and those of the people he's worked with have shaped his career path. (Kiernan Green/News Staff)



A photo of Kuper Island Residential School taken in the 1920s. While 107 students are known to have died while in attendance, Steve Sxwithul'twx was one of the survivors. He keeps a brick from the school as a reminder. (B.C. Archives photo)

# ORANGE SHIRT DAY



"This is a feather made of many smaller feathers, representing both the children who attended residential school and the reality that it will take everyone working together to achieve reconciliation. Although the original was done as a single colour, to make it more inclusive, I later added colours from across the spectrum to represent LGBTQ2S+ and others the many other IBPOC affected by the injustices of colonialism."

~ Carey Newman



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# EVERY CHILD MATTERS ORANGE SHIRT DAY



Kristin Spray and Eddy Charlie

Residential school survivor Eddy Charlie and friend Kristin Spray are organizing the Orange Shirt Day: Every Child Matters event in Victoria, which they developed in 2015 while attending the Indigenous Studies program at Camosun College.

In 2017, they began partnering with the City of Victoria to mark the city's commitment to reconciliation.



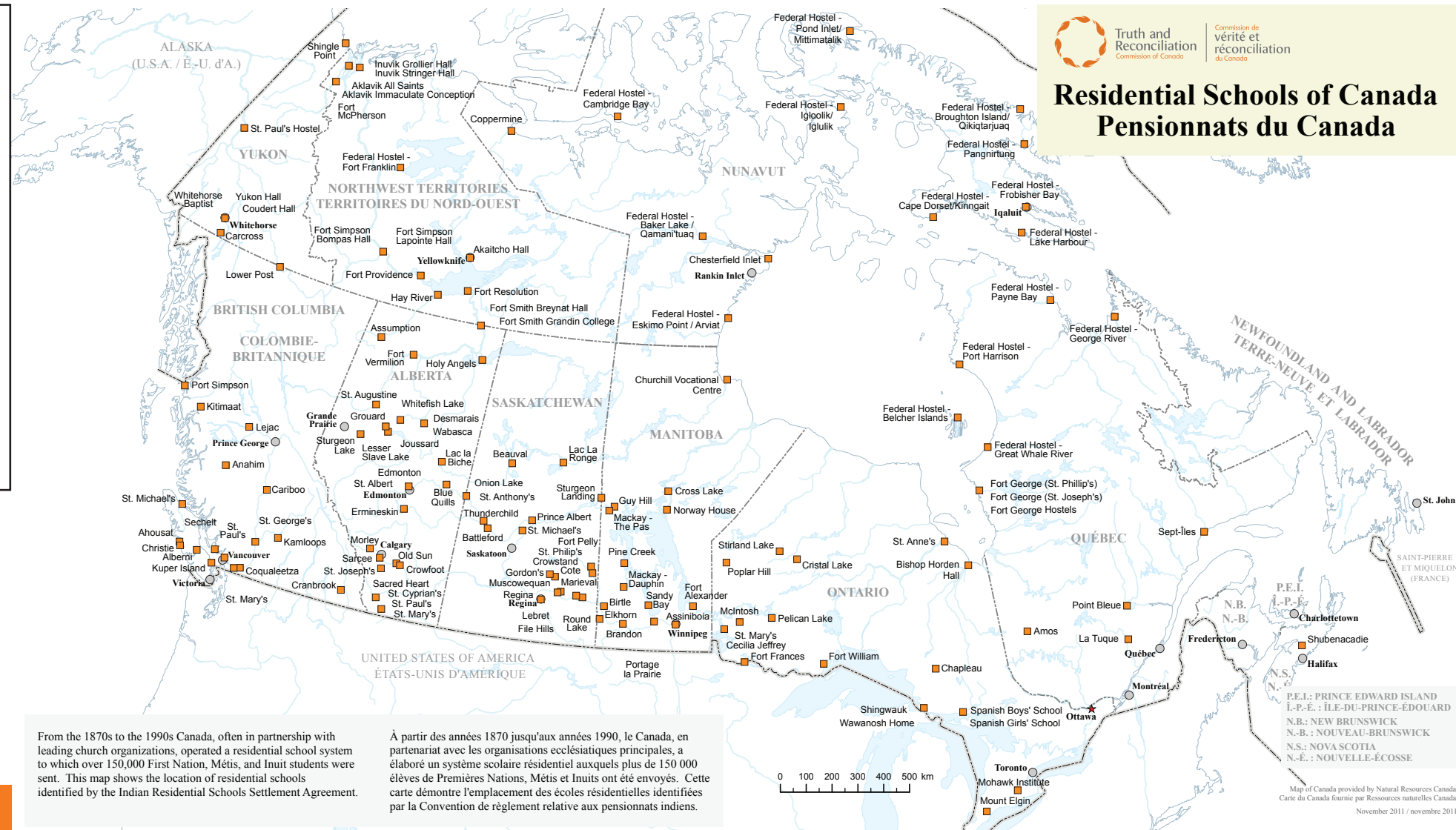
## ABOUT THE DESIGN

Local artist Bear Horne designed the Victoria Orange Shirt t-shirts. Horne's design features a bear to help us follow the right path, an eagle to help us have a vision of a bright future, a hummingbird to keep our mind, body and spirit healthy, and a flower to feed the connection of all these elements.

## THE LEGACY

The vast majority of the children in residential schools experienced neglect and suffering. The suffering included, physical, sexual and mental abuse, shame, and deprivation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission determined that more than 4,000 children died in the residential school system. The abuse continues to impact generations of survivors, their families and their communities today. It is estimated of the 150,000 survivors of residential schools, 80,000 are still alive today.

Remarkably, in the face of tremendous adversity and the horrific legacy that survivors had to live through, many of them managed to retain their language and cultural practices, and they continue to work towards healing and reconciliation.



From the 1870s to the 1990s Canada, often in partnership with leading church organizations, operated a residential school system to which over 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students were sent. This map shows the location of residential schools identified by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.

À partir des années 1870 jusqu'aux années 1990, le Canada, en partenariat avec les organisations ecclésiastiques principales, a élaboré un système scolaire résidentiel auxquels plus de 150 000 élèves de Premières Nations, Métis et Inuits ont été envoyés. Cette carte démontre l'emplacement des écoles résidentielles identifiées par la Convention de règlement relative aux pensionnats indiens.

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives, Residential School Map, T00005, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

Standing in support with



## SEPTEMBER 30

The program on Orange Shirt Day (September 30) coincides with an anticipated future national Day of Truth and Reconciliation, which is seen to be an opportunity for all Canadians to honour Residential School Survivors and recommit to the journey of Truth and Reconciliation on an annual basis.

Orange shirt day is a movement that officially began in 2013 but in reality it began in 1973 when six year old Phyllis Webstad entered the St. Joseph Mission Residential School, outside of Williams Lake, BC. Young Phyllis was wearing a brand new orange shirt for her first day of school – new clothes being a rare and wonderful thing for a First Nation girl growing up in her grandmother's care - but the Mission Oblates quickly stripped her of her new shirt and replaced it with the school's institutional uniform.

While she only attended for one year the impact affected Ms. Webstad's life for many years. "I finally get it, that feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don't matter."

Ms. Webstad's story is the nucleus for what has become a national movement to recognize the experience of survivors of Indian residential schools, honour them, and show a collective commitment to ensure that every child matters. The initiative calls for every Canadian to wear an orange shirt on September 30 in the spirit of healing and reconciliation.

The date, September 30, was chosen because that was the time of the year the trucks and buses would enter the communities to "collect" the children and deliver them to their harsh new reality of cultural assimilation, mental, sexual and physical abuse, shame and deprivation.

## MOVING FORWARD

Today Indigenous Communities are taking the first step towards reclaiming their lost identities through participation in culture and language revitalization. Healing initiatives are taking place in every Indigenous community. Sharing circles, healing circles, smudging, sundances, sweat lodge ceremonies, and many more have been revitalized through ceremony with Elders in the communities. Survivors and their families are reconnecting to their cultural roots and this is providing focus and empowering a true reconciliation from a cultural perspective.

Indigenous peoples have an opportunity to reconnect with strong family values that have been lost through the legacy of genocide that

is the residential school system. Orange Shirt Day is a path to reconciliation for residential school survivors who are returning to their cultural roots, reviving traditions once lost to them, and finding strength in family to create a better future for all Canadians.

Sadly, Canadians are only just learning the details of this hidden, horrific part of Canada's history. It is important to acknowledge the harm that Canada's residential school system had on generations of Indigenous families and their communities. Every year on September 30, Canadians are asked to wear orange as a sign of support.

**CRISIS LINES AVAILABLE**  
IRSSS Toll-Free Line: 1-800-721-0066  
24-Hour National Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419

**We created this wrap as a small but urgent step on the journey to understanding truth and reconciliation.**