

# EVERY CHILD MATTERS

**THE NATIONAL SHOCK STILL RESONATES, BUT CANADIANS ARE FINALLY BEGINNING TO FACE THE TRUTH, WRITES PAUL SMITH**

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Column

Every Child Matters. A simple, powerful, emotional slogan. We all relate to it, through our own experiences as children or of our own children.

Who could disagree with it?

More powerful in the wake of news about the deaths of thousands of children forcibly removed from their families, dying at residential schools, and buried in unmarked graves.

The national shock still resonates — finally after repeated documentation long before 2021. But Canadians are finally beginning to face the truth, the need to learn more and embrace a path toward reconciliation.

Little six-year-old Phyllis Webstad had her favourite orange shirt taken away on her first day at St. Joseph Mission Residential School. She was excited to go to school, but that soon darkened to the "feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission." Since 2013, her orange shirt became a symbol of the mistreatment of Indigenous children on Orange Shirt Day,

a day when survivors are assured that they do matter. And Phyllis Webstad is now a proud, dynamic advocate for awareness of the trauma of residential schools.

Sept. 30, 2021 is the first official, legislated National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to recognize the legacy of residential schools. Guelph marks the occasion all week long with talks, gatherings, films, and exhibitions, at River Run, the Bookshelf, Guelph Museum and Royal City Park.

Canada is not alone in this terrible colonial legacy. Canada's residential schools were modelled on the Carlisle Industrial School and the U.S. boarding schools run under the so-called Indian Civilization Act of 1819. The Biden administration has opened an investigation into those. In 1998, Australia established a National Day of Healing — or "Sorry Day" in Australian vernacular — an annual event responding to the 1997 Bringing Them Home report on the mistreatment of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

My grandmother attended residential school in Manitoba early in the 20th century. Her clever father eventually got her exempted through "enfranchisement," but that is another twisted colonial tale.

But it is not over. Canadian institutions still do not operate as if Every Child Matters. While the infamous residential and day schools are now gone, their legacy continues through intergenerational trauma and other discriminatory colonial policies that impact Indigenous children right now.

Poverty, disproportionate child welfare apprehensions, over-incarceration, low graduation rates, high suicide rates, poor health

status are all a legacy of residential schools and on-going colonial policies. Current treatment of children in all these institutions is a focus for many of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Women and Girls.

Cindy Blackstock won her human rights case against the federal government for spending far less per child for child welfare on First Nations than in provincial child welfare systems. Yet the federal government continues fighting her in court! The abuse suffered by a dying Joyce Echaquan in a Quebec hospital and recorded on Facebook lays bare how discrimination leads to poor health.

Change is coming. This day itself, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, sprung from legislation just passed in 2021. Federal 2020 legislation started the transfer of child welfare responsibilities to Indigenous child welfare organizations. New Indigenous school systems and curricula are emerging. Reconciliation was an election issue for the first time in Canadian history! So much change, and yet so little change given what is needed.

What can you do? Learn more. Canadians are still profoundly ignorant about First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. And there are so many books and resources available now. Donate to charities that support residential school survivors and improve the lives of Indigenous peoples.

Let's make sure the slogan Every Child Matters comes true.

*Paul Smith is a Guelph freelance writer and a citizen of the Métis Nation.*