

I want to share my life experience, and give some insight into the experiences of other Aboriginal people in Residential Schools.

Personal:

Growing up with Cerebral Palsy had its challenges and advantages. I was born into a large First Nations family on a reserve in Lytton, B.C. I am a twin, and my twin sister is not disabled, and I have an older brother and a younger sister.

I did not know I had a disability until it was forced upon me. The early bond between my family and I was strong. My family packed me around, or dragged me, in the case of my twin and younger sister! I did not walk until I was 10, when I learned to use a walker, and then eventually crutches at age 12 or 13.

There was very limited knowledge of CP in the early years of my life. Since we were Native people, we had to go through the Indian Agent, who controlled the finances for all the First Nations people of the area. All medical services had to be arranged through him and then the health nurse, so there was lots of paperwork and delays that had to be endured.

My parents had no training to deal with my condition, and they did the best they could, but eventually the strain took its toll on their marriage, and they separated. My mother became a single parent with a disabled child. She was my primary caregiver. There were no services in our community to deal with a person with a disability. She had to learn on her own. The health nurse made arrangements for me to be diagnosed by a doctor in Vancouver.

My life then became a series of trips from Lytton to Vancouver for checkups and treatment, hospital stays and surgeries.

Residential School Experience

The Indian Agent and health nurse thought it would be best for me to go to the Residential School. I attended St. Georges Residential School in Lytton, B.C. I spent 13 years in the Residential School, which was located in my community, but I could only go home at holiday times and in the summer.

My years there were interrupted by stays in the hospital in Chilliwack and Vancouver. They thought the school would be better equipped to handle my disability.

I learned there that I was disabled when others would put me down, called me a Freak, and even threw rocks at me. I had learned to pull myself around with my arms or get others to carry me. The Residential School was not equipped to handle a disabled child. The staff was not trained in ways to assist me, and the facility was not accessible to disabled students either. I had to rely on students and staff to pack me around.

The bond with my family was broken to bond with strangers. These became my caregivers. I was betrayed by some of these caregivers and sexually abused. It was not the female caregivers that abused me; their instinct was to nurture and care for me. We exchanged the bonding and nurturing.

I became aware that I was not equal to the other students. I could not participate in activities and the life of the school like the other children. I couldn't run away like others did. Relationships with girls were affected by my disability, I wasn't a "jock" and involved in the sports like other boys.

We did not learn to have healthy relationships with the opposite sex, and learn the life skills that were needed to prosper and succeed in life. I learned later in life that I resented girls for rejecting me because of my physical disability and not considering me for my intellectual abilities. Many of us are just surviving today, and many struggle just to do that.

I had to become independent from my family. My mother had been overprotective in the early years, and it was hard to see me go away to school and then to the city. It has only been in the last 3 to 4 years that she has been able to accept the fact that I am able to care for myself and deal with life without her having to worry about me.

One of the positives of Residential School for me was that I learned to be outgoing, able to make friends with many people, I had to or I would have been left out of everything! I learned to speak up for myself and others. However, even that can have a negative side, those who left the community and learned to live on the outside are considered "Apples" (red on the outside, white on the inside) and are caught between communities and

cultures, and do not feel accepted by either community. This is one factor that led me to be involved in the Arts.

Another of the effects of the residential schools was the destruction of the family structure. The bonds of parent and children were not created. When you see Aboriginal people struggling with addictions, it is the result of the lack of healthy bonds with family and community, compared to other cultures that were affected by contact with the European system of colonization and education: their family structures were not destroyed.

I was part of “The Language of Love” project with Marie Clements. It is about my experience in the residential school and not just being a survivor but moving beyond surviving to living, thriving, and sharing something much bigger than myself in the hopes that it would open up the floodgates of the past so that our nations might begin their healing journey on their terms and stop the rippling effect over generations.

There has been a lot of talk about Reconciliation over the abuses in Residential Schools. To me, reconciliation, in this context does not really apply: the reason being that it takes 2 that have wronged one another to reconcile. In my case and in thousands of other cases, we did nothing wrong to reconcile. We have no reason to reconcile any wrong doing. Reconciliation, from my perspective, if I am to reconcile anything is from my terms, from our terms post apology.

When you look at the term, survivor, it means many things to different people, survival from the mainstream perspective, may have a different meaning than it does to those who have gone through the Residential School experience. Survivor to an individual who has gone through it can only be understood from their perspective. In order to understand it, one must go through it, and face it head on. They need to experience it in order to apply it to themselves.

I was at the Aboriginal Film Conference in Winnipeg last year, similar to the one in Toronto just ended, the biggest Aboriginal film festival in the world. In Winnipeg, I was at one of the presentations where professional Native women shared their stories and experiences when dealing with family members and loved ones that do not want to share their past. And the women shared that they needed to break the cycle and that they need to connect with their families in the kind of relationship that they so long for.

They have a deep longing to move beyond the pain of their experience. On the one hand the daughters want to move beyond the past and move forward, on the other hand, their parents and grandparents were reluctant to go back to the past because of their pain. There was sharing back and forth between audience and panel members. Tears were shed on both sides, in a sense a tug of war of emotions.

Only then will we be able to move beyond surviving and begin to live life to its fullest. The heart must be ripped open so the healing can begin. Aboriginal film festivals and meetings of this nature provide the platform for this to happen and they need to carry on so that others may have the opportunity to share their stories.

Disabilities

When people ask, “what’s wrong with the Indians, why don’t they just get over it?” “Why don’t they get a job?” What we see are the impact of the destruction of family on our culture. All across this nation there are people who are attempting to deal with their hurts. As a result you see people in addictions, prostitution, and various forms of abuse, which has resulted in women going missing and nobody knowing that they are missing for a period of time because they don’t have close ties with others. They have a false sense of security and a false sense of love. They cannot see a way out of that lifestyle.

People with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged groups in this country. They face social and economic barriers which prevent them from being full and equal participants in community life. More than 60 percent of the total Canadian population with disabilities have incomes below the poverty line.

My job experiences were mostly in government subsidized job training programs. The employer received money from the government to cover the wages for a period of time, and when the time ended, so did the job. As a person with a disability, I was let go, where some able bodied people were kept on. The person with a disability had to far exceed the requirements for others in order to be considered for continued employment. Those who do succeed demonstrate a commitment to the job far beyond other employees.

I have volunteered for many organizations, and that is a good thing, but in it one can be overused and burned out. Dignity is lost and bitterness and resentment can set in. Our society has become volunteer oriented, not job oriented.

The major issues facing Aboriginal people with disabilities include poverty (the lack of income to cover the cost of the necessities of life, housing, food, transportation, etc.), lack of accessible and affordable housing, lack of home support services, lack of access to medical equipment and devices, lack of accessible and affordable transportation (especially on-remotely situated First Nations) and job training and career opportunities.

Many people with disabilities are forced to leave their communities in order to have access to services they require because of their disability. This compounds the feeling of loneliness and isolation. The opportunities for people with disabilities are not the same as those without disabilities in the Aboriginal communities let alone the mainstream society. There is limited access to adequate housing in the reserves and ability to function in the community. They need their health issues addressed in their communities, and often this is not available.

Disability respects no boundaries. It encompasses all people regardless of gender, race, social class, age and nationality. It concerns and impacts on all members of a community and on Canadian society in general. At the same time, the impact of disability weighs more heavily on Aboriginal people with disability. It is an even greater disadvantage to be a female with a disability than to be a male with a disability in Canada. Similarly, Aboriginal people with disabilities in Canada face a compounded disadvantage.

When it comes to Mental Illness, it is another problem. It is not outwardly visible. There is a stigma, we fear the unknown. In our society we accept drug and alcohol addictions as the norm and they are treated continuously with no stigma attached compared to that of mental illness. Movies about Mental Illness have created a culture of fear and abuse of the mentally ill. Such as "One Flew Over the Coo coo's Nest, A Beautiful Mind, and Snake Pit" They result in people suffering with mental issues being shunned, abused in their communities, being used as drug runners, sex trade workers, and other behaviors that put them at risk. They end up being tossed aside by society, when all they really want is to be included. Some of the missing women had mental health issues.

What part does fetal alcohol syndrome play in the picture? We need to educate society on the issues facing the mentally ill.

There are needs that must be addressed in care for the mentally ill: How should they be treated, institutionalized, incarcerated, or in community? Who will advocate for them? The workers who care for the Mentally Ill need support so they do not become abusive within the workplace. Burnout can be a danger to the patient. When one is hospitalized, they are often released too soon. They do not have a safe environment to return to, and the help they received is soon lost and they return to their old ways. The environment of the hospital prevents friends and support people from visiting them in the hospital.

The Role of the Arts

I have found ways to express my thoughts and feelings through involvement in the arts. I have written poetry to share my experiences and struggles. In 2003 I got involved in theater in the play, "In the Heart of the City." It was a wonderful experience to have the audiences invites you in to their world to share your perspective on life. When doing plays about real life issues, like addictions or dysfunctions, it must be taken seriously, because you never know what those who see the performance will take away from it and/or may be triggered by it.

The power of pictures and metaphors is building bridges between people and allowing understanding to flow. "In The Heart of the City," revealed the soul of the DTES, so that people could know our strength, not just what they see from the outside.

Involvement in plays has helped me develop my character. I got involved to learn from the community. I want to change the fear factor of those outside the DTES, to change the attitude of those who discriminate against my own people because of where they live and their economic situation. I want people to see that even the disadvantaged can come together as a community when the chips are down and share hope, compassion and care for one another. The presence of people with mental illnesses demonstrates the need for greater understanding in our community.

I have been on the board of BCANDS for many years, working to change the living conditions for people with disabilities across BC. They do not have the advantages, access to services, medical professionals, and care

givers, and they experience loneliness, isolation and the impact of poverty to greater degrees. I want to see them set free to become all that they can be.

In closing, sharing my experience has done wonders in my growth, in my relationships, and has catapulted me forward immensely. It has made me stronger, made me realize prior to sharing my story I was a male child and after sharing I saw the difference between the male child and the adult man I have become in the last 8 years.

I cannot change the past, but I can move forward, and sharing my story has been the best thing that has ever happened to me. At the end of the day, we are left to pick up the pieces and move forward in the hopes that others will follow our example. If they will share their stories, they too will find peace of mind and freedom from the wrongs of the past.

Stephen Lytton