

Bodies of 215 children found at former residential school a reminder of cultural genocide in Canada



By Nate Smelle

Since 2009 Canadians have celebrated the month of June as National Indigenous History Month. This year, however, instead of celebrating the unique heritage, diverse cultures and outstanding achievements of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from coast to coast to coast are mourning the loss of the 215 children found buried beneath the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.

On May 27, Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir confirmed the horrific discovery, which has exposed some of very hard truths about Canada's history. Acknowledging that the Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc Leadership are responsible for the caretaking of these lost children, Kukpi7 Casimir said "We had a knowing in our community that we were able to verify. To our knowledge, these missing children are undocumented deaths. Some were as young as three years old. We sought out a way to confirm that knowing out of deepest respect and love for those lost children and their families, understanding that Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc is the final resting place of these children."

The Kamloops Indian Residential School opened May 19, 1890 under the administration of the Roman Catholic Church. With enrolment peaking in the early 1950s at 500, the institution eventually became the largest school in the Indian Affairs residential school system. The federal government took over the administration of the school in 1969, and continued to operate it as a residence for students attending local day schools until July 31, 1978.

The Tk'emlúps teSecwe?pemc Language and Culture Department along with the First Nation's ceremonial Knowledge Keepers located the bodies of the 215 children using ground penetrating radar. In hope of bringing "peace and closure to those lives lost and their home communities," Kukpi7 Casimir indicated that they plan to continue working in collaboration with the ground penetrating radar specialist to complete the survey of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School grounds.

"We are thankful for the Pathway to Healing grant we received to undertake this important work," Kukpi7 Casimir said. "Given the size of the school, with up to 500 students registered and attending at any one time, we understand that this confirmed loss affects First Nations communities across British Columbia and beyond. We wish to ensure that our community members, as well as all home communities for the children who attended are duly informed."

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed that large numbers of Indigenous children who were sent to residential schools never returned to their home communities. While some of these children ran away, and others died at the schools, the students who did not return to their homes have come to be known as the "Missing Children." Through an initiative called the Missing Children Project which documents the deaths and the burial places of children who died while attending Canada's residential schools, there has now been more than 4,100 missing children identified.

To help people process and heal from the reality of this heinous hate crime, a gathering in honour of the 215 children discarded under the residential school in Kamloops was held outside of St. Paul's United Church in Bancroft on Tuesday, June 1. In tribute to each of the lives stolen, the church bell rang 215 times that evening. Mourners also placed stuffed animals and toys on the steps leading up to the church as a token of respect.

Marsha Depotier is an Indigenous community leader from the Algonquin First Nation Kwe Eagle Village. Before offering songs as prayers for the lost children, she spoke with the assembly outside the church. Sharing the grief she is experiencing as a second generation residential school survivor, Depotier said, "My father Alfred Johnson, went to mission school B.C., so we know the stories, we know the truth, and really we have just needed Canada to listen for a long time. We have needed you guys to understand that this happened. And, that we live this truth every single day. Most Indigenous families don't get up to a regular day, because we have this as our world; this, as our legacy. So, I say today we change it. I am grateful that many of our non-Indigenous people are standing up. But, I need you to stand up, and I need you to be loud, and I need you to say, no more!?"

In reality, Depotier said it has never been a priority of the federal government throughout the history of the nation "to bring these children home." Despite this long history of looking the other way when it comes to Indigenous issues, she remains hopeful that the discovery of the 215 dead Indigenous kids in Kamloops will wake Canadians up to the urgency of the crisis surrounding missing or murdered Indigenous children.

"We have always stayed true to who we are. We've always been kind, and we've always shared out," Depotier said. "So, today I say with a heavy heart, welcome to our war, welcome to what we've been through. To the 215 children that were found - many of our ancestors - I say please rest in peace, and, know that our voices are going to make change. To the thousands of other children that are buried in all the other residential schools that haven't been searched yet, I suggest to you and everybody else, and to Justin Trudeau, that we start to open up that land, and we find our children, and we bring them home."

As a member of the congregation and volunteer with the church, Judy Edgar helped organize the ceremony on June 1. Catching up with Bancroft This Week the day after the gathering, she explained why she felt compelled to speak out.

"We were uninvited visitors," said Edgar. "The settlers were uninvited visitors, and we behaved like monsters. They didn't see that, because these people didn't live the way they did. You wouldn't even treat an animal that way. It's just horrific. We could have learned so much from them. We could have learned so much, and instead we just turned around and tried to eradicate them."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also took time to address the discovery of the 215 children's bodies, during the launch of the Black Entrepreneurship Loan Fund on May 31. As Canada's Prime Minister, he is appalled by the shameful policy that stole Indigenous

children from their communities.

"Think of their loving families that they were ripped away from. Think of the communities that never saw them again. Think of their hopes, their dreams, their potential," said Trudeau. "Of all they would have accomplished, all they would have become. All of that was taken away. These were children who deserved to be happy. Most of all, they deserved to be safe. As a dad, I can't imagine what it would feel like to have my kids taken away from me."

To honour the 215 children and their communities, Trudeau promised "concrete action" and support for survivors of Canada's residential school system, families, and Indigenous peoples. Drawing attention to the legacy of intergenerational trauma still negatively impacting Indigenous people and communities today, he said It is important to raise awareness and provide education on this "dark chapter" of Canada's history.

"Sadly, this is not an exception or an isolated incident," Trudeau continued. "We're not going to hide from that. We have to acknowledge the truth. Residential schools were a reality " a tragedy that existed here, in our country, and we have to own up to it. Kids were taken from their families, returned damaged or not returned at all, with no explanations until this week. People are hurting and we must be there for the survivors."