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NEWS

Residential School reality Survivors speak up to educate

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Judy Couchie

NORTH BAY - Emily Haws, The Nugget

"Prison" and "nightmare" are the words Judy Couchie and Patricia Sutherland use to describe their experiences in the residential school system.

"It looked spooky before you got there," Couchie said. "[An agent] just took me up to the dorm, there was just a bunch of beds. There was nobody around, and it was very quiet... He never [introduced himself]... He said 'wait on the bed, someone will come and talk to you.' I sat there the whole afternoon."

Couchie was raised on Nipissing First Nation before being sent at age 12 to the Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie. Her father attended a residential school, and the family had issues with alcoholism and family violence. When she was put on a train to Shingwauk, Couchie thought she was escaping the violence. Instead, her story is common to many residential school survivors – one filled with pain, abuse, loss of identity, along with the guilt and shame related to being a victim.

Couchie experienced racial tension at school, as her skin tone is not as dark as a stereotypical native person.

"You had the school telling you you're not like

them," Couchie said. "Even though I came from a reserve, they told me I was smarter than them... The native children who didn't know me [thought] I was white, that I was a plant for the school.

"And then you go home, you're angry and you don't fit in."

Patricia Sutherland relates to anger. Originally from Moosonee, her childhood was spent in Saint-Therese-de-l'Enfant-Jesus Residential School in Fort George, Que., attending from age four until 16. Her mother also attended residential school and faced many issues.

"I didn't want to be called a native person – I felt [judged]," she said. "I wanted to be white because I thought white people didn't get hurt."

Both hope the commission's recommendations will be implemented, and the report will help start the healing process for aboriginal populations, and for Canada as whole. They hope by educating Canada, some of the negative stereotypes of aboriginal peoples will be exposed and healed.

The say education is paramount, and it should be taught in schools at a young age so the cultural genocide is never repeated.

Both Couchie and Sutherland said the abuse was physical, emotional and traumatic. Sutherland recalled playing in the playground, which was a garbage dump.

"One day I went sliding and I hit my tailbone, I got paralyzed from the waist down. They told me to get up and I said I couldn't, I couldn't move my legs," she

said. "I dislocated my back... and they didn't even take me to the hospital. They just made me lay on my stomach. I started walking about a month later, but I couldn't walk properly because I had a lump in my back. They never bothered to give me any [medical treatment]."

For Sutherland, with the abuse came a host of mental illness issues, including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. She credits her children for her survival.

"They were rented to me by the Creator to get the help I needed," she said.

Couchie started working through her repressed emotions in the 1990s, and is still working through her post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sutherland started understanding her residential school victimization after the Stephen Harper government's apology in 2008, and has also started to heal. Sutherland speaks to schools to educate young Canadians, which she finds helps.

Both said it took them awhile to be able to talk about their experiences, but both hope by talking they can help aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians understand the residential school system and how its multigenerational abuse has contributed to many social issues among aboriginal peoples today.

They both testified at during a class action lawsuit against the Canadian government before the 2008 apology, and Sutherland testified to the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission.

"That was really hard," Sutherland said of the TRC testimony. "It was just like when you go to a court system."

Both were disappointed by the copy of the apology given to each residential school survivor by the government in 2008.

"They could have at least personalized it, after everything that happened," said Couchie.

The apology is a piece of slightly thicker than normal paper with the apology and a border. It does not have the name of the recipient, a government seal common to most formal government documents, or an actual written signature.

"He could have at least actually signed it," said Sutherland, indicating Harper's computer-printed signature at the bottom of the page. "It feels like it was a stamp... that's how I feel [we've been treated]."