



POSITIVE STORIES ABOUT INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS MUST ALSO BE HEARD

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Positive stories about Indian Residential Schools must also be heard

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A quick Internet search for stories about Canada's Indian Residential Schools would only yield negative ones.

Accounts from self-proclaimed "survivors"—an inflammatory label deliberately selected to make former students seem like Holocaust survivors—include [reports](#) that *"The physical abuse was every day. And being assaulted verbally—if I didn't do things the way that they wanted me to do, I was called a dirty, stupid Indian that would be good for nothing."*

Another "survivor" of a different school [claims](#) to be *"Poked with fingernails, pencils, pointers—they threw books, keys, broke wooden rulers over us, leaving scars. They slapped our heads, faces or ears, pulled our ears, nose, tongue. Red-hot hands puffed, cut by stiff straps. Cringe or move your hand, you get more."*

Following the example of the IRS Settlement Agreement and the testimonies it allowed as part of the Independent Assessment Process (IRSSA) for claims of abuse at the boarding schools along with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings where an unrepresentative sample of some 6,500 former students spoke about the abuse and other adversities they suffered, such stories allowed neither cross examination nor witness corroboration to prove "survivor" declarations were truthful.

Also ignored in the unquestioned acceptance of testimonies made since 1996, the year the [Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#) was released, also the year the last of the residential schools were closed, is that before that date, accusations that these schools were houses of horror were almost unheard of.

This discontinuity between present and past stories of school life suggests something is amiss. More particularly, how can stories recorded while the schools were in full operation be less credible than those told 30 or more years later?

This discontinuity can easily be explained by those willing to dig deeper than allowed by Internet search engines whose IRS algorithms may well favour horror stories. Curious readers can go beyond the IRSSA-sponsored testimonies whose terms of reference encouraged thousands of eager [rent-seekers](#) to come forward, thereby inviting exaggeration of the nature and extent of school abuse.



Meanwhile, those accused of abuse are rarely named, a gross denial of their right to defend themselves or for those who have died to have their reputations defended by students and family members.

If the good names of our parents or grandparents were falsely disparaged and disgraced, we would want to do something about it. No innocent person's memory should be dragged through the mud of the currently flawed and one-sided narrative about Canada's IRSs.

An easy way to question the prevailing narrative of sadistic and racist members of earlier generations abusing and exploiting the IRS students in their charge is to read the outstanding long-form piece of historical scholarship written by [Ian Gentles and Pim Wiebel](#), an essay whose findings correspond to those reported below.

On July 30, 2010, the Calgary Herald published a short piece titled "*Residential Schools Generate Anger But Also Pride*" by Lea Meadows. It told the story of Meadows' parents, Harry Meadows and Elsie McLaren Meadows, the latter of mixed Indigenous descent, who worked as teachers at

IRSs in Manitoba. Elsie was also a student at the Brandon IRS, and her positive experience there inspired her to become a teacher. Meadows writes against painting everyone who worked at the schools as an abuser. She also notes that “survivor” may not be the most suitable term for all former students. She writes:

“I do not deny there were people in those schools who greatly harmed students. We all must speak out against such abuse. But to label the schools themselves and all who worked there as evil, and to describe everyone who attended a school as a “survivor” is facile—and it dishonours those who were truly abused and did have something horrific to survive.”

In response to Meadows’ letter, on August 5, 2010, Truth and Reconciliation Commission chair Murray Sinclair wrote, also to the *Calgary Herald*:

“We are grateful for people such as Meadows, who speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Their memories and contribution to history will be preserved. The input of former staff is of tremendous value because their number is declining. Each story lost to us represents an experience that will be missing from the public record, diminishing our ability to reflect the reality of the schools and assess their ongoing impact. While the TRC has heard many experiences of unspeakable abuse, we have been heartened by testimonies which affirm the dedication and compassion of committed educators who sought to nurture the children in their care. These experiences must also be heard.”

In her editorial, Lea Meadows asked:

“What was the alternative? What were we supposed to have done in that day and age? Were we to leave people by virtue of no common language, illiterate, innumerate and unable to deal with the larger society?”

In 2015, Meadows also [wrote](#):

“... the TRC report does not honour the truth because it does not reflect all residential school students’ experience—like my mother’s and grandmother’s.

They would be incensed at being labelled a “survivor” or “exploited.” They said their opportunities were immeasurably improved by their schooling. Nobody denies that abuse occurred, but we need to also understand where good was done and acknowledge that, too. That is honouring the truth.”

To date, no Indigenous leader has answered Meadows’ basic questions. Indeed, people who ask them are attacked as IRS deniers. Such arbitrary and insulting dismissal of contrary views has prevented a proper understanding of our history, and it continues to stand in the way of healing for our country.

Not so up to a few short decades ago while the boarding schools were still in operation, a period

when Indigenous leaders and the Treaty Indians living on lands reserved for them strongly supported the IRSs. Three of the many examples include the following ones.

- After a 1930 fire destroyed their IRS, a [petition](#) signed by over 100 Cross Lake residents showed a strong desire to rebuild the school.
- Saddle Lake First Nation residents demonstrated when, in 1970, the government proposed to close their school, Blue Quills. They [protested](#) by occupying the school. The protest resulted in Indigenous control of the school, which continued until 1990.
- As reported in the *Regina Leader-Post* on November 19, 1971, eight Saskatchewan bands passed a resolution requesting that the Marieval Indian Residential School be kept open. The *Leader-Post* reported: “Various spokesmen said the pupils are generally children from broken homes, orphans or are from inadequate homes. There is a great need for the school, and the need is increasing rather than diminishing. Many of the children have no other place to stay, as many have only grandparents, who through lack of space, health or age are unable to look after them.”

We can’t have it both ways. If positive experiences “must also be heard,” why are people like Lea Meadows and a growing number of Canadians treated as pariahs at a time when they are doing their best to bring about a genuine understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians?

There are countless examples of kindness and caring by residential schoolteachers but also by others who made a positive difference in the lives of Indigenous children. These included school principals, Indian agents, chiefs and—yes—even Indian Affairs bureaucrats. Letters obtained from Library and Archives Canada demonstrate that Lea Meadows is justified in wanting the record to be clear and truthful. The letters present evidence of the advocacy of Indian agents for Indigenous families; school principals protecting children, especially orphans and children who were victims of parental abuse and neglect; Indigenous chiefs asking that children be admitted to the schools; and even bureaucrats permitting the admission of many disadvantaged children.

There is clearly much more to tell than what appears in the “official” IRS narrative. An abundance of documented evidence of all sides of the story can be found at indianresidentialschoolrecords.com, including [entries from detailed chronicles](#) kept by the Sisters of Providence at Cluny, Alberta, the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) at Cardston, and the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin at Delmas, Hobbema and Onion Lake demonstrating the warmth, kindness and dedication of the women who nursed, taught and cared for aboriginal children at Canadian residential schools.

Suppose the whole truth is to be told as Murray Sinclair instructs. In that case, we must include the stories of successful leaders like former federal cabinet minister Len Marchand, composer and playwright Tomson Highway, and Order of Canada recipient [Chief Dan George](#), all of whom have

spoken highly of the "*dedication, compassion and commitment*" of the people who were entrusted with their nurturing and care. These and many more former students have had prominent careers they have attributed to their residential school experiences.

The Honourable [Len Marchand](#), who died in 2016, was Canada's first status Indian member of parliament, a federal cabinet minister and senator. Most Canadians don't know that part of his education was acquired at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS), notorious for the baseless 2021 allegations of the murder and secret burial of hundreds of Indigenous children.

Now, Marchand's son, His Lordship Leonard Marchand, Jr., has become Chief Justice of British Columbia. He is the first indigenous person to do so.

The experience of the late Len Marchand at the Kamloops Indian Residential School was a positive one, leading to the unqualified success of his life in politics and indigenous leadership.

In his memoir, *Breaking Trail*, the elder Marchand wrote extensively of the significant contribution the KIRS made to his life's success. Despite the "watery potatoes," served at the school, his memories of a girlfriend in the kitchen, the school's sports achievements, and the dedication and commitment of his teachers stayed with him.

He wrote:

"... another motivation took root in the back of my mind: that somehow, by getting educated, I would be able to do something to help my people. I don't remember the first time that idea came to me, but it probably sprouted sometime during the year that I spent at Kamloops Indian Residential School."

Len Marchand obviously passed on to his son his positive outlook, his work ethic, and his sense of duty to his country and its people.

Whatever trauma has been suffered by others who attended the schools, the Marchand family clearly suffered no such thing. A chief justice suffering from lifelong trauma would obviously not be a suitable candidate to lead British Columbia's highest court.

In his remarkable book "*Permanent Astonishment*" [Tomson Highway](#) describes his residential school experience as "nine of the best years of my life."

This doesn't mean that Highway and his family didn't love their traditional Indigenous lifestyle of living off the land in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba where they mainly fished for a living. However, given that half of Tomson's siblings had died of pneumonia as babies because they were born in such harsh conditions, Tomson's parents were convinced the surviving children must attend a residential school if they were to have a chance at a better future.

They were sent to Guy Hill Indian Residential School, a Catholic school, near The Pas, Manitoba. There, Tomson learned to play classical piano, as well as acquiring the skills that made him one

of Canada's foremost writers and playwrights.

Tomson's parents were not compelled, legally or otherwise, to send their children to residential school. They did this of their own accord because they thought it best for their children. The fact is that Indigenous parents were as involved as any other parents in matters pertaining to their children's upbringing and education.

Highway's family were Roman Catholic, as were most northern Indigenous families. They wanted Tomson and his siblings to have a Catholic education. There was no "cultural genocide" involved. They knew what was taught at the school and could have removed their children at any time. But mostly they wanted their children to learn to speak, read, and write the English that they did not have.

The Highway family was representative of countless other Indigenous families in remote areas. They wanted what was best for their children. Some of the parents made the painful decision to send their children to a residential school. Some of the parents decided not to do so—unfortunately, resulting in at least one third of Indigenous children receiving little, or no education. The decision belonged to the parents. They were not "forced."

As for former TRC Commissioner Wilton Littlechild who spent 14 years—14 years!—as a residential school student, years later [he said](#) to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at St. Albert, Alberta, *"I've said many times that for me, I probably would have been found on skid row somewhere dead years ago had it not been for, had it not been for residential school."*

The voices of Indigenous priests who ministered to the children attending the residential schools also need to be heard.



One of these voices is that of the late Reverend Canon Stan Cuthand, an Anglican priest who later became a university professor.

Father Cuthand's first-hand experience with the residential schools could not be further removed from the [remote views](#) of his son, Doug Cuthand, the Indigenous affairs columnist for the *Regina Leader-Post*.

The younger, off-reserve born, Cuthand argued that:

"The legacy of the residential schools is a recurring nightmare in Indian Country" because "Parents refused to let go of their children" so they could attend an IRS because "These so-called schools were dangerous places for our children. Neglect, overcrowding and a lousy diet all combined to weaken the children's immunity.... The loneliness, memories of violence, sexual abuse and the lateral violence from bullying all exist within our communities and it had its genesis in the boarding schools.... Their poor education has left many illiterate and unable to compete in a modern world."

The elder Cuthand, born on the Little Pine Indian Reserve in 1918, was a full-time priest on- and off-reserve in Alberta and Saskatchewan for 25 years beginning in 1944. Before that, his primary school education was received in the band's day school, followed by high school attendance in Prince Albert, where he lived in the now vilified boarding houses for Indigenous students.

Though Father Cuthand was never a student at an IRS, he was resident chaplain of Saskatchewan's La Ronge and Gordon Residential Schools and St. Paul's School on the Blood Reserve in the 1960s.

These are some of his [first-hand recollections](#) of life in these schools.

"The schools weren't terrible places at all," he recalled. "They were certainly not prisons, although the principals were a little strict."

Reverend Cuthand recalls one incident of sexual abuse of a student at the Gordon Reserve IRS where one of the staff members was later convicted and sent to prison for several years. *"Most of the kids had no complaints about sexual abuse; if they did, they would have told me. However, they did get homesick, and some tried to run away. There was also plenty of food: raisins, fish, potatoes, bread with lard, stew."*

As for mandatory IRS attendance, Father Cuthand recalled that the only children who were "forced" to attend were orphans or children from destitute families:

"The idea that all children were forced into the schools is an exaggeration. The idea of the separation of students [from parents] came from England. Practically all the [upper class] English were brought up in residential schools. In Canada, the main idea at the time was to civilize and educate the children; and that couldn't be done if the kids were at home on the trapline."

Reverend Cuthand said he enjoyed his time on the Blood Reserve in southwest Alberta:

"It was an exciting place to live The Bloods were rich and very traditional. The school was a fine place with some very good teachers." The parents were involved in the school, with some parents living there as staff members. "[Blood] Senator Gladstone sent his kids there, and many of the students from St. Paul's went on to university."

Cuthand remembered that his school was particularly committed to recognizing Indigenous culture. *"One principal had tepees set up on the front lawn."*

That principal, Archdeacon Samuel H. Middleton, with the support of the tribal leadership, was a resourceful school promoter starting in the 1920s. Cuthand recalled the archdeacon, who spoke Blackfoot, changing the Sunday School curriculum to make it more relevant to native culture. *"The school was well respected by the Bloods,"* Mr. Cuthand said.

One of Father Cuthand's [most significant achievements](#) was translating the bible into Plains Cree Roman orthographic and syllabics. His secular work included working for the federal Department of Indian Affairs from 1969 until 1975, when he became an assistant professor of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba. He retired to Saskatchewan and worked at the First Nations University of Canada and the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. Father Cuthand taught until he was 80 years old. He enjoyed teaching immensely, and his greatest reward was getting his students to think for themselves.

As for his experience with the IRSs, it is instructive to compare the incompatible descriptions of a father who lived in residential schools with his son who only knows about them second or third hand.

Equally instructive is the need to follow Murray Sinclair's 2010 admonition that *"these experiences must also be heard."*

But they are not allowed to be heard, at least by the mainstream media, which is too committed to the grievance narrative to reverse course anytime soon, even as a growing number of Canadians are coming to understand that Canada's apartheid Indian Act and associated legislation benefit only a few, the few who control the residential school narrative, the few who enjoy the power and prosperity it brings them, and the few who continue to hold sway over the lives of Indigenous Canadians.

This country needs to hear much more about the lives of people like Len Marchand, Tomson Highway, Dan George, Stan Cuthand, Lea Meadows, and the thousands of others like them. The good intentions and reputations of innocent people who worked to improve the lives of Indigenous children should not be allowed to continue to be tarnished. They, their students, and their students' children deserve better. They deserve the truth.



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