

Roots of Reconciliation

Everyone at Lakes District Secondary in Nechako Lakes embarks on a year-long journey to better their understanding of Aboriginal culture and the impact of residential schools

This is a slightly abridged version of a three-part series that appeared in the Lakes District News. Contributed by **Heidi Grant** (Principal) on behalf of the schools' **Fine Arts Committee**.

Lakes District Secondary School has been engaged in a journey this past year into a part of Canadian history that was dark and unjust. We, as a group of teachers, administrators and support staff, decided it was time to open up our hearts and minds to the painful truths of the past. We decided to begin to educate ourselves and our students on the impact of residential schools on past generations as well as present and future generations. We believe that understanding is the root of reconciliation. The goals of our project were:

- To deepen our understanding of Aboriginal culture, local and national, so that we can honour diversity and develop positive relationships that support student learning.
- To educate ourselves about the impacts of residential schools so that we can teach the required curriculum with sensitivity, empathy, confidence and accuracy.
- To teach the required curriculum from grade 8-12.
- To recognize the resiliency and strength of First Nations people and culture.

For years prior to our big journey we took time to pre-pave our path. We gathered to discuss and brainstorm the best way forward. By the spring of 2015 we took our first big step and with hereditary chief Robert Charlie by our side, teachers Steve Wilejto, Jeremy Gooding, Pat Dube, Walt Van der Kamp and Rayanne Charlie travelled to the shores of Ootsa Lake to find a tree which would anchor us and give us strength in the year ahead. This tree was under water since the 50s and we lovingly pulled it out and brought it home. In

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AT LAKES DISTRICT SECONDARY SCHOOL

PART ONE

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The goals of our project were as follows:

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In September of 2015 the teachers and support staff were invited to attend a sweat lodge at the Spirit of the Land Healing Camp on one of two Sundays. This was a voluntary experience into one of the many healing ceremonies used by Aboriginal people of our North America. There was a growing awareness that the path we were on was based on a different world view. We were becoming a team and recognizing a whole new perspective based on ancient beliefs of interconnectedness, relationships and love!

Over the next few non-instructional days we worked together to review our goals, incorporated Aboriginal content into our courses where possible, and continued to get to know each other better (many in residential schools to create the idea situation we face today. We did a river of tears as we watched the film "The Stone Children")

and then spoke about our thoughts and feelings in a traditional sharing circle.

On November 20th we brought in Patrick Young, a residential school survivor who worked for Health Canada. He, along with hereditary chiefs Bob West and Robert Charlie and other John Colford, led our team of educators through the story of residential schools in Canada. Patrick talked with gentle honesty about his experiences and others'. His honest intent to soften the blow of the pain that his people faced at the hands of government and religious institutions. We used talking circles to dig into our feelings and try to understand why all of this happened. We were beginning to see the truth of colonization.

The leaders then shifted their focus to resilience and healing. Our afternoon brought new understandings of just how strong the Indigenous people of this land have been to surmount the dire situations they faced. We began to see hope and a way forward. Where the mind and heart meet there is clarity and in that clarity our outcomes grow. We were experiencing the power of a reconnected awareness and we now had the strength of love and compassion to move on out of the past and into action.

The students could step up to the plate in the weeks ahead and we all set to work to ensure the path we set in motion could make it. It could be challenging but we were much better prepared than ever before to guide our students through the questions and the fears.

Part 2 will bring you further along the story of our "Roots of Reconciliation" project. We will talk about the progress the young people went through to live their awareness. Part 3 will highlight the Collaborative art installation and share you all about our celebration on June 2nd! Please feel free to write that day on your calendars as, of course, you will all be invited!

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America. There was a growing awareness that the path we were on was based on a different world view. We were becoming a team and experiencing a whole new perspective based on ancient beliefs of connectedness, relationships, and love. Over the next two non-instructional days we worked together to review our goals, incorporated Aboriginal content into our lessons where possible, and continued to learn more about what happened in residential schools to create the dire situation we face today.

We cried a river of tears as we watched the film *We Were Children* and then spoke about our thoughts and feelings in a traditional sharing circle. On November 20, we invited Patrick Young, a residential school survivor who worked for Health Canada, to participate. He, along with hereditary chiefs Ron West and Robert Charlie and elder John Cuthand, led our team of educators through the story of residential schools in Canada. Patrick talked with gentle honesty about his experiences and others. His humour helped to soften the blow of the brutalities his people faced at the hands of government and religious institutions. We used Talking Circles to dig into our feelings and try to understand why all of this happened. We were beginning to see the truths of colonization.

The leaders then shifted their focus to resilience and healing. Our afternoon brought new understandings of how strong the Indigenous people of this land have been to survive the dire situations they faced. We began to see hope and a way forward. Where the mind and heart meet there is clarity and in that clarity our excitement grew. We were experiencing the power of a newfound awareness and we now had the strength of love and compassion to move us out of the tears and into action.

The students would step up to the plate in the weeks ahead and we all set to work to ensure the path was as clear as we could make it. It would be challenging but we were much better prepared than ever before to guide our students through the questions and the tears.

We began to unravel the journey we have been on as a school this past year. The history of residential schools and the intergenerational trauma they created was faced full flush by all of the teachers, support staff, and administrators at LDSS at the beginning of the school year. The focus was then turned towards guiding our youth along the path in the safest and most sensitive way possible.

We gathered our leadership group together and



swiftly felt the absence of an essential component to our healing process. There were very few Indigenous students in our Student Voice. Seizing the moment, we pulled together students from each of the six nations in our district and attempted to represent all the clans in a new group. These students became our *Dakelth Circle* and they would come together to generate a more reflective picture of the makeup of our school.

These two circles spent time getting to know one another and learning about the impact of Residential schools. They combined efforts in September to speak with every class in the school on Orange Shirt Day, which was recognized nationally to honour the residential school survivors. This was a kicking off point for a new awareness at our school. On December 1st our youth were fortunate to watch a performance of the *Dancers of Damalahamid* (<http://damalahamid.ca/>). They are a company of Aboriginal artists from BC's Northwest Coast who weave traditional performance and contemporary practice to create a captivating experience. This dance show led the students gracefully into their next encounter with an Aboriginal focus.

Dr. Allan Downey from Montreal joined us on December 4th for a student forum. Dr. Downey had roots in Fort St. James and found his way into academia through his pursuit of what he called *God's Game* or lacrosse.

He used lacrosse as a tool to get into university and continues to play even now. His approach was to give two high level lectures. One was on the historical truths of Canada's residential school system and the inter-generational impact of what has been coined *Canada's National Crime*. The other was on the resiliency and resurgence of Indigenous communities. Each of these presentations were listened to intently by all of our students and staff.

Following each lecture we put the students into multi-grade and multi-cultural groupings where they participated in traditional sharing circles. Most groups had elders from our community sitting with them. Invited guests Jeremy Paul, Alex Erickson, Jolene Prince, and Julian Brown also sat in the sharing circles to help guide them in a good way. These circles helped students search within themselves for answers and often find those same answers by listening to one another. There was a new awareness building in our youth. Compassion and understanding would be the focal point going forward. After a beautiful lunch set out by our amazing support staff and topped off by the best bannock ever made by Carmen Alec, we celebrated our new found knowledge by participating in *God's Game* or lacrosse. Our rugby and soccer teams had been practicing up and they had a great time blowing off steam with Allan and other teachers who took up lacrosse sticks for some fun! Our day wound up on a high note and we said goodbye to Allan; a leader and role model for all of our youth. In the weeks ahead the teachers felt compelled to ensure that no student was left out of the educational process. We gathered all of our students together one more time to watch footage from the films *We Were Children* and *The Eighth Fire*. Teachers Janice Beck and Pat Dube spoke briefly but powerfully about historical truths. Heidi Grant, our principal, spoke of the emotional impacts and resiliency. Jeremy Gooding and Steve Wilejto spoke of the Eagle project we would create together in the months ahead. After lunch our students were able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the impacts of residential schools by participating in a school-wide write. These testimonials of the students' newfound understanding were moving, powerful and insightful. (See box, page 11, for examples).

Occasionally we are given an opportunity to meet tragedy and pain with courage and conviction. This year has been all of that and more for LDSS students, staff, and administrators as we reflected on the horrors of



residential schools and colonization. Amidst the river of tears we collectively cried there emerged a sense of unity, determination, and profound transformation. Rather than allowing ourselves to drown in sadness, we rose to the surface, and started paddling forward together.


Our collaborative art installation was started in February 2016. Everyone who set foot in our school, from students and staff to trustees and community members were invited to spend time in the metal shop cutting, filing, and shaping out a feather to place on the eagle that would sit atop our majestic tree. On each feather there is engraved a message chosen by the individual to represent what they have learned. These are messages of hope and love and new understandings which will be held in trust by the eagle in our midst.

The spirit of joy and healing wafted through the school as each class joined Jeremy Gooding in the shop to craft their own unique feather. You could sense a resolve in the students as they hammered away. Mr. Gooding's Choices class and Mrs. Giesbrecht's Endeavors class were instrumental in this process. They were the first groups to learn how to use the various instruments to shape the metal feathers and they designed and built the prototypes. These students became the experts as they helped their peers through the process. The First Nations studies class also held leadership roles

as we led each class through the creative process. The whole school watched in amazement as Steve Wilejto and Jeremy Gooding built the internal structure of the eagle. It had to be both sturdy and beautiful to satisfy and of course it was both.

Red Seal Welder, Jordan Gooding, joined the process as the welding continued and the feathers were tacked into place. Countless hours were spent shaping the eagle and ensuring that every message had a spot. The hopes and dreams of all of us were embodied in that beautiful bird and the vision that it carried had to feel just right.

We chose the eagle as a fitting symbol for rising above the destructive and stormy impact of our collective experience with residential schools. From high above, he can see what we cannot. The eagle represents strength, new beginnings and resilience. The eagle is the resolution. From the towering peaks of Tweedsmuir Park to

the vast shores of Babine Lake, the Eagle is a symbol for us all and the beautiful place we call home. Shortly after Spring Break the Eagle took a journey of its own to be coated in a copper solution in Kelowna. Copper was used in our region by many First Peoples and we believed it would be both appropriate and stunning. As we await the Eagle's return we are placing our focus on the tree which will be used as a pedestal. It was hand-picked from the shores of Ootsa Lake and contains six roots symbolizing the six traditional groups in the Lakes district area. 

The eagle was scheduled to be unveiled during a day of celebrations on June 3. In addition to the unveiling, members of the community will hear from guest speakers and musicians, and share in gift giving and food.

Student Voices Both of my grandmas were taken away from their parents. They were taken out of their homes when their parents were forced off of their land and put onto the reserve. My grandma on my mom's side was never the same when she came back. I have learned that you would be more likely to survive World War II than going to a residential school. I think residential schools put First Nations People through a lot of pain and mental abuse. I think the *Roots of Reconciliation* is an amazing idea!

Student Voices Learning about the traumatic losses the First Peoples of Canada have suffered has taught me several things; one being the cruel and unjust loss of culture and loss of identity they suffered at the hands of our government. The second being the vast amount of abuse and violations the children suffered for the sole purpose of "killing the Indian in the child." The third lesson I learned was how strong the First Peoples of Canada have been to overcome this unfathomable time in history. If there can be forgiveness for an action as horrible as this anything is possible. With forgiveness comes hope as a nation for change and healing. Revealing our dark truth and working together as one, will push our nation towards togetherness and ensure nothing like this ever happens again!

Student Voices Being an immigrant, the knowledge of the oppression that Aboriginal people experienced at residential schools was new to me at first. But I started finding out more about it and recognized many terrifying parallels to the Holocaust. Children were denied the right to speak their native language, treated like animals, stripped of their culture, heritage, and identity and abused in every way possible. This treatment left those who survived broken. Twenty years ago the last residential school closed, a first step towards reconciliation. Nevertheless Aboriginal people still suffer from having been there or having parents or grandparents who went there, making them still feel neglected and treated unfairly today. But now is the time to heal those broken wings and let the eagle fly once again!

Student Voices This is something I knew about for quite some time prior to it being introduced into our school system. What I never knew is how much of a nationwide impact it had and how oblivious so many people have been about what happened. Of course it is no fault of anyone. It was all swept under the rug while our generation came in. What is important though is we take time today to remember it and make amends to better the future and seeing as how I am writing about this unfortunate fragile topic in school I can see we are well on our way to proper reconciliation. I only wish my grandmother was alive today to see it. She would be grateful. As we continue down this path of reconciliation with students and staff we look ahead to a new day. We begin to fine tune our thoughts and develop the messages we will place on our collaborative art project.