

PHYLLIS' STORY: The Original Orange Shirt

September 30th has been declared Orange Shirt Day annually, in recognition of the harm the residential school system did to children's sense of self-esteem and well being, and as an affirmation of our commitment to ensure that everyone around us matters.

Phyllis (Jack) Webstad's story in her own words...

I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. I lived with my grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember going to Robinson's store and picking out a shiny orange shirt. It had string laced up in front, and was so bright and exciting – just like I felt to be going to school!

When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn't understand why they wouldn't give it back to me, it was mine! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared.

I was 13.8 years old and in grade 8 when my son Jeremy was born. Because my grandmother and mother both attended residential school for 10 years each, I never knew what a parent was supposed to be like. With the help of my aunt, Agness Jack, I was able to raise my son and have him know me as his mother.

I went to a treatment centre for healing when I was 27 and have been on this healing journey since then. I finally get it, that the feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don't matter. Even with all the work I've done!

I am honored to be able to tell my story so that others may benefit and understand, and maybe other survivors will feel comfortable enough to share their stories.

Source:

This is a direct passage written by Phyllis Webstad.

It can be found at the official page for Orange Shirt Day: www.angeshirtday.org

The direct link to her story is: <https://www.angeshirtday.org/phyllis-story.html>

SUPPORT ORANGE SHIRT DAY, SUPPORT LOCAL:

As more people learn about Residential Schools and Phyllis' Story, many people want to wear an orange shirt to show their support of Residential School survivors and their families. Should this feel like something you would like to do, we encourage you to support local Indigenous artists.

Locally created orange shirts are available at:

Island View Business Centre
7751 Black River Road, Sutton West On, L0E 1R0
705-437-2533

Residential Schools

The Residential School system operated for more than one hundred years, from the 1870s until the last one closed in 1996. There were 140 Residential Schools, funded by the federal government and run by Christian churches, and located in most provinces and territories. The schools were for Indigenous children, and more than 150 000 Indigenous children went to them.

The reason Residential Schools were created was because the federal government wanted to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into a Euro-Canadian society. This means they wanted Indigenous Peoples to lose their languages, spiritual beliefs and cultural practices, and instead adopt a Euro-Canadian way of life. The government thought it would be easier to assimilate Indigenous Peoples by taking their children from their homes, which meant children were away from all of the influences of their family, community and culture. The children were away for a long time, not returning to their families for months or years at a time. The thinking was that the children would forget their language and culture, and therefore, they wouldn't be able to pass them along to the next generation.

Unfortunately, many children did not have positive experiences in these schools, suffering abuse and neglect. Indigenous families have known for a long time what Non-Indigenous people have been learning in recent months - many children died in Residential Schools.

The last Residential School closed in 1996. Many Indigenous individuals and families have been working to heal from the legacy of Residential Schools, and in 1994, the Indian Residential School Survivor Society was formed by a group of survivors to provide support.

In the 1990s, many Indigenous people turned to the courts to search for justice. In 2007, the largest class action suit in Canadian history was settled, which brought forward some support for survivors. From this class action suit, the Canadian Prime Minister at the time, Stephen Harper, issued a formal apology on behalf of the federal government. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also established, which has since completed its work and issued 94 Calls to Action for all Canadians.

Sources:

City of Vancouver. "First Peoples: a Guide for Newcomers" Chapter 8 "Residential Schools" <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/First-Peoples-A-Guide-for-Newcomers.pdf>

Assembly of First Nations. "Progress on Realizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action" https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020_TRC-Report-Card_ENG.pdf