

# Roots of Reconciliation

## AT LAKES DISTRICT SECONDARY SCHOOL

### PART TWO – THE STUDENTS

Last week in the *Lakes District Newspaper*, 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 "Dakelh Circle" and they would come together to generate a more reflective picture of the makeup of our school.

These two circles spent some time getting to know one another and learning about the impacts 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". 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 the academic arena 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 very high level lectures. One was on the historical truths of Canada's residential school system and the intergenerational impacts 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 Allen; 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 pro-

cess. 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. We selected four examples so the community could feel the momentum that we teachers were feeling.

#### STUDENT #1

I have known about residential schools because 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 two than survive going to a residential school. I think residential schools put First Nations People through a lot of pain and mental abuse. I think that the "Roots of Reconciliation" is an amazing idea!

#### STUDENT #2

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 soul 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 #3

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 #4

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. In part 3 of this series we will look at the collaboration process and share the joy of healing and creative cooperation with our community.

