

NO END to the Pain

Are the government's apologies and payouts adequate compensation for the abuse Aboriginals suffered in Canada's residential schools?

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The adjudicator spoke softly, but the questions struck Dale Myra to his core. Myra and his lawyer had prepared for months for this session, rehearsing the words, going over his testimony. A Cree in his early 40s, Myra had never before spoken about being raped in his Yukon residential school, but sitting in a lawyer's office in Whitehorse, he was being pressed for details. He became nervous and tongue-tied. At times he broke down.

By the end of the afternoon, he had told the adjudicator everything, reliving his abuse, episode by painful episode. All that remained was the judgement and the payment. Or so he thought.

A few weeks later, the Canadian government apologized to Myra. This was followed by \$265,000, given in two instalments. Suddenly, he was rich. The experience, however, had left him gutted. It's a terrible irony: The money—and what he had to do to get it—made Myra's life worse.

Myra's story is not unusual. While there are no reliable statistics, **thousands of men and women who were compensated for their mistreatment in the residential schools never received the psychological and emotional help they needed.** The money was meant to start their healing, but for many it became a poisoned chalice. When the money was gone, they had nothing, only their pain and unresolved trauma. And by accepting the cash, survivors waived the right to initiate lawsuits

against either the government or the churches, although they are still able to initiate legal proceedings for more compensation claims based on cases of individual abuse.

This cycle of pain, payout and more pain is the latest chapter in the sorry history of Canada's residential schools, which became compulsory for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children in 1920. Separated from their parents, children lost their language, their culture and, in many cases, their sexual innocence. The last of the schools closed in 1996, and by then, lawsuits charging sexual and other abuse were already in the courts. The federal government, the churches and Aboriginal groups eventually agreed that survivors should be able to bypass the courts in their bid for compensation. As a result, direct payments and closed hearings were instituted in May 2004.

So far, the federal government has paid out \$2.1 billion to school survivors; the churches (Presbyterian, Anglican, United and Catholic) contributed about \$100 million of that amount. The money was distributed in two allotments. The lion's share, called the Common Experience Payment, went to nearly 100,000 former students who simply had to prove they attended one of 139 residential schools. The rest went to compensate survivors who could show they suffered sexual abuse.

Tony Martens, a Surrey social worker whose agency has worked with hundreds of Aboriginal families, says

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residential-school survivors are especially vulnerable when telling their stories because they're placed in a position to drop their guard after decades of shamed silence. "Those defence mechanisms—drugs, alcohol, alienation, denial—have probably saved their lives, despite how unhealthy and detrimental to their overall well-being they may be," Martens says. "When we eliminate those things, in short periods of therapy, feelings of hopelessness can arise, and when defence mechanisms are not effective, people become depressed and suicidal." Indeed, Myra tried to kill himself after he revealed the trauma of his school years. "All the things you want to forget in your life, they come back," he says. "It's a dirty secret."

Myra says his lawyer, Laura Cabott, told him where he might get some advice about trauma and managing money, but she didn't press him to follow up on it. He had other ideas, anyway.

"I can handle it," he told her. "And if I need to cry, I can go up into the mountains by myself." Plus, he had his counsellor—and friend—Phillip



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Gatensby, whom he could call when things got really bad.

But this friendship, and the mountains, weren't enough. Over the next several years, Myra burned through his compensation money like a man possessed. He gave \$60,000 to the woman raising his son and spent the rest on epic drinking binges with

Self-Help

On a cold February day in Winnipeg last year, a grey-haired man walked into the Siloam Mission for the homeless. He introduced himself to staff as William Woodford and handed over an envelope. Inside was a bank draft for \$40,000.

Woodford, an Aboriginal man in his mid-80s who had spent his childhood at the Elkhorn Indian Residential School, came back a few days later with an additional \$10,000. He said he wanted to share his government settlement money with people needier than him.

Shelter staff said the money would be used for meals and emergency beds. Most of the people who use their services are Aboriginals, and many are residential-school survivors like Woodford.

Woodford's is not the only example of such altruism: In the late '90s in Whitehorse, a group of 11 survivors from the Yukon and northern B.C. communities, who called themselves the Trailblazers, pooled ten percent of their compensation money to help launch a local organization, the Committee on Abuse in Residential Schools Society (C.A.I.R.S.), which has provided the therapy, along with carving, art and other handicraft programs, for survivors.

Worse Off?

A recent report prepared by the

Aboriginal Healing Foundation confirms the uneven and sometimes negative effects of residential-school settlements. Based on interviews with 281 Aboriginal Canadians, almost one fifth of those who collected the Common Experience Payment—money paid to all Aboriginals who attended a residential school—say the process was a “very negative period in their lives and left them feeling worse off than before.”

Forty percent of those questioned complained that there was a lack of support services—counselling and therapy—during the process of claiming compensation.

On the positive side, two thirds of those questioned said they were engaged in healing of some kind.

get them the hell out of here.” Large payments of cash, without effective community-based healing to go with them, Cachagee says, are creating a “culture of substance abuse fuelled by money; it’s like throwing gasoline on a fire.” Brasfield adds: “You don’t fix rape with a dollar bill.”

And even the lawyers working on behalf of survivors say the money by itself has little therapeutic value. “We give them money because there’s really nothing else to give them,” says Regina lawyer Tony Merchant, whose law firm has represented over 13,000 Aboriginal litigants. But Merchant says it would be “paternalistic” to tell the recipients how to spend or invest their money.



Georges Erasmus, president of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which was set up to help residential-school survivors.

Vancouver-based outreach psychiatrist and psychologist who has worked in Aboriginal communities for 25 years, says there are perhaps seven or eight qualified trauma counsellors—psychiatrists and psychologists—to serve all of northwestern British Columbia. Thousands of residential-school survivors in that province, especially in distant rural areas, never get the help they need.

Mike Cachagee, executive director of the National Residential School Survivors’ Society in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., is deeply critical of how Canada’s churches and government are dealing with school survivors. “They’re like Pontius Pilate: We compensated them, we apologized, now

In Edmonton, survivor Leonard Martial, a small, soft-spoken alcoholic, used his \$13,000 compensation to buy clothes, a laptop and food, and to help his brother with his bills. For a while he lived in a tent, but the money gave him a financial cushion and social workers helped him find a small apartment. He also got help to recover from his addiction.

Martial died last February, but his resilience and generosity made a profound impression on other residential-school survivors. Karen Bruno, manager of Aboriginal services at the Boyle Street Community Services in Edmonton, says Martial was a mentor and icon to the survivors. “Five hundred people attended his funeral. He had a better life in his year and a half with us than he had in his life before,” she adds—a tribute to the positive effects of compensation when it is accompanied by long-term-counselling and social assistance.

But Martial lived in a big city, where there are numerous social safety nets to help people. That’s not the case in many of Canada’s outlying areas.

Even if Myra had taken his lawyer’s advice and asked for help, he might not have had timely access to what he needed in Whitehorse. At a local Aboriginal support-group centre, there’s up to a two-year waiting list for some of that city’s professional services—in particular, specialists in sexual abuse.

The Far North is not the only place with a major supply-versus-demand imbalance. Dr. Charles Brasfield, a

friends. He became a brawler, spent time in jail and travelled around on a drunken odyssey. “Stayed at the Days Inn in Vancouver for a while, very high-class, more than a hundred dollars a night,” he says. “I would call room service, tell ‘em I needed another case of beer, and they went down to the liquor store and got it for me. Met some of my cousins and got them all wasted.” That party lasted two weeks. Once he hit bottom, he tried to slash his wrists.

Today, Myra lives on the streets of Whitehorse with “two cents in my back pocket.” His downward spiral is mostly a blur. He’s a trained heavy-equipment operator, but he’s too damaged by addiction to work. His hands shake when he talks.

Yet lawyer Cabott argues that the media exaggerates stories with bad endings. “I’ve been doing this for 13 years,” she says, “and I’ve had hundreds of clients. I’ve found that generally, people do wise things with their money.”

To be sure, many compensation stories are positive. Some recipients paid off debt, bought new homes or fixed up old ones. Aboriginal culture is a sharing one, and a lot of the payments were distributed among family and friends. Other recipients, such as Whitehorse’s Norman Drynock, used their money for their children’s education. “I will watch my daughter graduate. She’s the first one in our family to go from high school to college,” he says.

COURTESY ABORIGINAL HEALING FOUNDATION



Norman Drynock, executive director of the Committee on Abuse in Residential Schools Society (C.A.I.R.S.), in the workshop used for some of its programs.

Survivors such as Willie Blackwater of Chilliwack, B.C., say Ottawa needs to stop looking for quick results. "It took generations to destroy us," he says, "and they want us to heal in five years or less." Seriously traumatized sex-abuse victims, says social worker Martens, need months and even years of therapy before real healing starts.

Residential-school survivors suffered a further blow this past March: Ottawa ceased funding the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), established in 1998 to target the trauma of residential schools. AHF supported 134 innovative community-based programs, some of which incorporated traditional healing activities, and now, says AHF president Georges Erasmus, most programs will disappear. "In many areas, includ-

ing the already underserved regions of the North, one-of-a-kind programs developed over years will be gone." He says AHF "is the best hope we have for a better future."

While it cut off the AHF in its 2010 budget, the government did set aside \$199 million for higher than expected funding needs for residential-school survivors. **Health Canada says it is committed to ensuring all former students and their families are able to get "effective and culturally safe mental health and emotional support."** To that end, it offers 1,600 "service providers"—Aboriginal elders and healers, community-based mental-health workers, psychiatrists and psychologists. Aboriginal groups are still waiting to find out if the extra \$199 million will be spent directly to help people.

Some communities, such as Alkali Lake in British Columbia and Hollow Water in Manitoba, are not relying on government agencies, and **have their own unique Aboriginal-run programs to deal with the legacy of residential schools.** But even these programs are few and far between, and some compensated former students end up worse off. One such example is 53-year-old Ben Pratt. Born in Lestock, Sask., he spent his adolescence in the Gordon Residential School, where he says he was raped. Thirty years later, he told his story and was given \$46,000 in compensation. He says he was ostracized by people in his community, who accused him of accepting "arse money." A born-again Christian, his marriage broke up and he turned to alcohol, ending up addicted and without a family or friends. The money was gone within a year, and Pratt says if he could do it over again, he would "never, ever have come forward with his story of childhood abuse."

But if the government money is such a curse, why do survivors continue to apply for it? Counsellor Phillip Gatensby says the answer is simple: the horrible pain of memory. "It's an attempt to rid themselves of the tor- ture. It has led to lives of hell, full of shame, anger and self-hatred." Un- happily, Gatensby adds, many of the survivors don't have access to appro- priate psychological expertise, nor do they have a strong enough commu- nity to nurture and sustain them through the healing process.

Critics of the payout program say the federal government and Canada's Aboriginal leaders need to focus on restoring the "caring functional com- munities" with programs that pro- mote sobriety and strong families, and that provide jobs, to help people like Myra rebuild a life and to give dignity back to people like Pratt.

Aboriginal leaders say healing is essential not only for the survivors of the residential schools but for the **next generation of Aboriginal Cana- dians.** "If Canada fails to take up these opportunities in good faith," says Erasmus, "the youth will inherit the legacy of this failure, just as surely as if they had been in the residential schools themselves."

According to a senior communica- tions advisor with Indian and North- ern Affairs Canada, the federal government "realizes the journey to healing is difficult for some former students. And that is why we con- tinue to work to ensure they have ac- cess to culturally appropriate health support."

For Myra and those like him, though, such a statement may be too little, too late. As he walks out into the sub-zero Whitehorse night, Myra's looking for his familiar support group: his street friends, nicknamed Timbits, Razzle and Rockin' Robin. One of them will have a bottle of wine. Later, a friendly volunteer will be holding Bed No. 4 for him at the local Salva- tion Army shelter. Until something better comes along, this is Myra's only community of compassion. ■

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