

## Teaching the Residential School Story

By Brian Giesbrecht

Canada's sad Indian Residential School history is by now very familiar to Canadians, and it is increasingly being taught to our children in school. This is both necessary and proper. A caring and compassionate society should know its history, warts and all.

But the history that is being taught needs to be accurate.

And the IRS story entering classrooms is not accurate at all.

Take, for example, the now very well-known story of Chanie (Charlie) Wenjack. He was the unhappy Indigenous boy who supposedly ran away from the Residential School he was attending after suffering physical and sexual abuse from Roman Catholic priests and nuns. This version of the Chanie story is the subject of a popular song, and appears as well in several books, CBC videos, and numerous articles. His story is very moving, and increasingly our nation's children accept it as fact.

Except that it isn't fact. It comes nowhere close to being the truth.

The fact is that Chanie Wenjack did not attend a Residential School. As reported by respected journalist and author, Robert MacBain (C2C Journal, Oct.2, 2017), Chanie attended a public school in Kenora, Ontario. At the request of his parents, he was being boarded at the Cecilia Jeffery Residence, a hostel which at one time had been a residential school, and was Presbyterian, not Roman Catholic. Colin Wasacase, a Cree/Saulteaux, was the hostel's Administrator, and his wife was the Matron for the 150 children boarded there. By all accounts, this Indigenous couple was caring and compassionate towards all the children.

There is absolutely no evidence that Roman Catholic priests or nuns abused Chanie as implied in the song, books, and in the video about his life. There is no evidence that he had any contact at all with priests and nuns, much less abusive contact.

Chanie's story is indeed a very sad one, but the fact that so many people have played fast and loose with its truth should greatly trouble Canadians.

What has been done with Chanie's story typifies the types of distortion — half truths, exaggerations, and misleading information — that characterize so much of the Residential School story many Canadians now believe to be fact.

One often sees in respected publications such blanket statements as "Indigenous children were compelled to attend residential schools", giving readers the impression that all, or at least a great majority, of Indigenous

children attended Residential Schools.

This is not true.

As reported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, about 150,000 children attended the schools during the entire history of their operation, between the 1870s and 1996. These children were drawn from the entire population of aboriginal people — status Indians, Inuit, non-status Indians, and Metis. But the 150,000 children represent only a small fraction of that total population, and a significant percentage of that number attended for only a few years.

And what about the great majority of children who did not attend an IRS? What was their life like?

In fact, most of those children received either very little or no education at all. That is one of the reasons Residential Schools came into existence in the first place — often at the urging of progressive Indigenous leaders who were desperate for a means of educating their children — because day schools were often not available on the sprawling reserves in the south, or in the hunting camps in the north.

Sitting in a classroom was alien to Indigenous cultures. The sighting of a moose in the area, or the running of the caribou, would cause schools to empty out for weeks or even for months at a time. Many Indigenous languages do not even have a term for formal education. The closest they come is the phrase “to sit”. So a parent bringing a child to a school to be educated was said to be bringing the child there “to sit”. The quality of the widely-separated federal day schools for native communities was not good, and most children on reserves received either a very poor education — or no education at all.

The children who did not attend Residential Schools had very hard lives. Tuberculosis, smallpox, and scrofula carried off thousands of children. (The fact that children died from these diseases away from home at Residential Schools is very sad, but consistent with the grim mortality figures for all children – and particularly for Indigenous children at the time. It is also sad that so many died at home.)

And what about the sexual abuse that happened at the Residential Schools? The Residential School story has Canadians believing that teachers, supervisors, priests, and nuns were the villains.

There certainly were sexual predators in the Residential Schools. In any situation where children are vulnerable, there are likely to be such people. But the vast majority of the teachers, supervisors, priests, and nuns working in the schools were ordinary, decent people, who thought that they were helping to educate children who would otherwise not have received an education. Now all these people are being slandered by being lumped in with the relatively small percentage of predators. It should also be noted that many of the supervisors who worked directly with the children were, in fact, Indigenous.

However, the sexual abuse is not made up. Where did it come from?

The fact is that the overwhelming number of sexual assaults were almost certainly perpetrated by older students preying on younger ones. This worrying fact is mentioned in the TRC Report, and has been a discussion topic by Senator Murray Sinclair. But it is not widely presented in the popular media. It is not known by ordinary Canadians.

Why did this happen?

Again, in any boarding school situation — given the fact that we are talking about adolescents — there will be sexual abuse. Read any account about English or Upper Canadian boarding schools and you will find it.

But in Residential Schools, the sexual abuse by older students appears to have been far more prevalent.

Often, these children came from dependent communities. Dependent communities are almost always sick communities. Pathologies such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence, incest, and sexual aberrations set in soon after dependence becomes a fact. (Read Thomas Sowell, noted African American author and journalist, on his excellent analysis of dependence and its results.) These communities had been dependent since the semi-nomadic foraging lifestyle of their Indigenous populations had been abandoned.

The unfortunate students brought the problems of dependent communities with them to the schools, just as they often brought *bacillus tubercle*. It was not their fault, but the result was a cycle of physical and sexual abuse that ruined many lives. The prey in turn became the predator for the next generation.

The teachers, supervisors, priests, and nuns who sexually abused children deserve every bit of opprobrium that has come their way, and their victims deserve every penny of their compensation. But the fact that older children — and not supervisors or teachers — were responsible for much of the sexual abuse needs to be acknowledged. The whole story should be taught in schools.

And finally, we have the idea that no good came from Residential Schools. I have written on this topic before and pointed out the fact that the good, as well as the bad, must be acknowledged. The criticism directed towards me for daring to say this obvious truth was swift and harsh. Several commentators said that my articles — like this article you are now reading — were just “racism disguised as journalism”. One critic even went so far as to say that anyone who dared to question the accuracy of the Residential School story that has been presented to Canadians was the equivalent of a Holocaust denier.

But I will say it again. Of course some good came from residential Schools. I point to a recent *Winnipeg Free Press* article about the Assiniboia Residential School that was located in the Tuxedo area of Winnipeg. It closed in 1973. (*The Winnipeg Free Press*, May 27, 2017). That school had a famous hockey team that won the respect of everyone they played. Eight members of that team went on to become chiefs in their home communities. Eight! That was not a coincidence. Those eight men had received the education and confidence necessary to become leaders, thanks to their Residential School experience. Many people on isolated reserves did not have that opportunity.

One famous example of an Indigenous person who has been quite vocal about the fact that the good, as well as the bad aspects of Residential Schools should be recognized, is Tomson Highway. He is, without a doubt, Canada’s best-known Indigenous playwright and novelist. He was born in a dogsled, and grew up in the remote Barren Lands First Nation in northern Manitoba. Mr. Highway does not shy away from the negative parts of the Residential School experience — in fact, he has written books and plays about those experiences. However, he is more than willing to talk about the positive aspects as well. Here is what he told the *Huffington Post* (reported 12/15/2015) about his Residential School experience:

All we hear is the negative stuff, nobody’s interested in the positive, the joy in that school. Some of the happiest years of my life I spent at that school.” He continues “You may have heard stories from 7,000 witnesses in the process that were negative” he adds “But what you haven’t heard are the 7,000 reports that were positive stories. There are many very successful people today that went to those schools and have brilliant careers and are very functional people, very happy people like myself. I have a thriving international career, and it wouldn’t have happened without that school. You have to remember that I came from the far north, and there were no schools up there.

It was also at Residential School that Mr. Highway learned to play the piano. He is now an accomplished

classical pianist.

Another example of a successful Assiniboia alumni is Phil Fontaine, who's disclosure of his physical and sexual abuse, in part, initiated the Truth and Reconciliation process. Mr. Fontaine has no trouble acknowledging the obvious fact that there was good, as well as bad, that came from the Residential School experience. Here is a quotation from Mr. Fontaine from the same *Winnipeg Free Press* article:

"I don't have a problem separating the good from the bad". He continued, "The story that's emerged [from residential schools] hasn't been the most positive. In fact, it describes a pretty tragic part of Canadian history. But there's no doubt...in fact, it defies logic that there weren't good people at these schools who actually cared about the kids. And there were some aspects of the residential school experience that were positive."

There are many other examples of people who received something of value from their Residential School experiences. In fact, it seems to be the case that a disproportionate number of the most successful and powerful Indigenous leaders in many First Nations communities have Residential School histories, while a disproportionate number of struggling people have either very little or no history of any school experience.

So, of course, Residential Schools did some good. The harm that they did is well-documented and widely known, as it should be. But the fact that a good many Indigenous people received an education that they would otherwise not have had should be known as well.

From all the evidence, it is clear that most teachers, administrators, and supervisors at the schools were decent people, and that good, as well as bad, came from Residential Schools. But I have often been asked why I don't simply shut up about them. Why try to tell the real story? What does it matter?

In reply, I ask this question: "Shouldn't we first try and discern what the truth is before we pass it on as truth to our children in school?" If so, we need to learn the truth about Chaine Wenjack's short and tragic life, just as we need to learn the true Residential School story.

#### About the Author



**Brian Dale Giesbrecht** received his education at United College and The University of Manitoba, where he obtained his LLB in 1972. He worked with Walsh, Micay and Co., and then joined Legal Aid Manitoba in 1975 to become Senior Attorney and the first Area Director for western Manitoba in Brandon. Appointed to The Provincial Court (Family Division) in 1976, he heard child welfare cases and general family matters until he transferred to the Criminal Division in 1989. During his career he served on the National Family Court Committee, and various provincial court committees. He was an Associate Chief Judge from 1991 to 2005, and he became Acting Chief Judge in 1993. Among the notable cases he heard was the Lester Desjarlais Inquiry. His report strongly criticized the government's decision to devolve child welfare responsibilities to racially based child-care agencies. Following his retirement from the

Bench in 2007, Mr. Giesbrecht has written extensively for various publications. His main theme has been the need to abolish The Indian Act and the separate systems of government that exist in Canada.

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