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## Aboriginal spirit proves unbreakable

Published on February 03, 2012

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Tyler Clarke

Daily Herald

Despite physical, mental, spiritual, and sexual abuse that came out of the residential school system for many of its victims, the aboriginal spirit has persevered.

"Kill the Indian in the child and there'll be no more Indian problem," residential school survivor Richard Pelletier said, citing Canada's motivation for opening up residential schools. "That policy failed, though it did cause a lot of misery."

Pelletier was one of many to speak during the third of three days of storytelling focused on the residential school system at the Prince Albert Indian Métis Friendship Centre, Thursday.

The storytelling was part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's national efforts - a group mandated with uncovering individual stories about the residential school system.

Ahtahkakoop First Nation man Fred Sasakamoose has



© Herald photo by Tyler Clarke  
Truth and Reconciliation commissioner Marie Wilson, former NHL player Fred Sasakamoose, and commissioner Wilton Littlechild.

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been named one of the premier inductees to the Saskatchewan Hockey Hall of Fame - an honour to be made official later this year, when a ceremony will induct him alongside hockey greats Gordie Howe, Sid Abel, Glenn Hall, and others.

"I challenged the world that I could beat the residential schools," he said proudly.

Before a successful hockey career that saw him play for the Chicago Blackhawks NHL team during their 1953-54 season, Sasakamoose endured abuse at the St. Michael's Indian Residential School in Duck Lake, Sask.

Sasakamoose recalled the day an Indian agent and an RCMP member stopped by his family's home, where they loaded him into a vehicle to take him to the school that for 10 months out of 12 for the next decade would be his new home.

"We didn't even have any time to change our clothes," he said. "They said (to my parents) that if you don't let these kids on, you're going to jail."

The abuse began shortly after his arrival at St. Michael's Indian Residential School in Duck Lake.

"Sexual abuse - boy that's hard to talk," he said.

After one particularly horrific experience as a young child, Sasakamoose remembers escaping from the residential school with his friend, Charlie, their sights set on walking home.

A roadblock was met at the North Saskatchewan River, so they made their way downstream where a ferry operator alerted the residential school's officials as to their whereabouts.

Once officials arrived, the two kids were ordered to walk back.

"They stopped us just outside of Duck Lake - the town," Sasakamoose said. "They said 'give us your shoes and socks. Now, walk to the school in bare feet.'"

Their feet already blistered from the long walk up to that point, Sasakamoose said that he remembers his feet bleeding by the time they got to the school. Upon reaching their destination they were whipped and had coal oil poured on their heads, burning their eyes.

"I want my childhood back that I didn't have in the residential school," he said with tears. "I was an employee - a slave. We used to milk about 60 cows in the evening... That's why my arms are strong, my wrists are strong."

Sasakamoose persevered, his talent for hockey - a game he played within the residential school system - pushing him all the way into the NHL.

He credits the support and love of his grandfather,

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« *I challenged the world that I could beat the residential schools.* »

- Former residential school student and NHL player Fred Sasakamoose

who could not speak or hear, for having helped him along the way.

"My grandfather would make a hockey stick out of a willow... What did he see in life - what did he see in me."

Recruited to play hockey, he was at first reluctant, wanting instead to go home to his family. Upon entering a team with one Asian and one African forward, his confidence was renewed.

The lace on his right skate was black, the lace on his left skate yellow, representing both races.

"The red man, it was me... What an international flavour! It carried me to the dream that the world wasn't open only to the white person... We are one. It didn't matter if you're a black man, or a red man, or yellow... We were there for one another."

Looking to the future with positivity, Sasakamoose was visibly excited when talking about his upcoming induction into the Saskatchewan Hockey Hall of Fame.

"My life will continue on. My struggles will continue on... My gosh I feel good. I feel real good... If I were to end my life today, I would talk to my creator and thank him for my life today."

This is but one of many stories shared by survivors of the residential school system over the past three days' open storytelling forum. Every person that shared their story expressed their own post-residential school success story, be it quitting alcohol, furthering their education, helping their community, becoming a greater parent, or finding another success.

These successes haven't come without their challenges, with many of those speaking up reporting continued challenges - either as residential school survivors or as relatives or friends of those who have been damaged by the system, passing the damage down as per the system's multigenerational effect.

"I thank the creator and my belief system," former residential school student Emil Bell told the commission. "I thank the Catholic Church for putting me through all the abuse we went through. It made me a better person - a stronger person."

"We have to go back to our old ways... It made me very strong, in going back to where I am - an Indian... I am strong. I don't have to use booze and drugs to live from day to day."

"We are going to be strong again, but we've got to deal with this residential school shit."

The Herald recognizes that the stories presented in this article merely scrape the surface of those told during this week through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Tomorrow's paper will feature two stories on this week's Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada meetings. One article will focus on three apologies for the residential school system that were offered, Thursday. The second article will be a substantial full-page feature intended to encompass as many stories shared this week as possible.

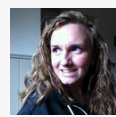
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**"Close isn't good enough" - Sports - The Prince Albert Daily Herald**

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