

PROJECT OF HEART: COMMEMORATING THE CHILDREN



Sylvia Smith

While studying with the University of Regina, Sylvia Smith, an Ottawa-based history teacher, developed the Project of Heart, which is a commemorative project that facilitates student learning about residential schools. The project is an inquiry-based, collaborative, intergenerational, and artistic journey to examine the history and legacy of Indian Residential Schools in Canada, leading to the acknowledgment of the losses incurred by former students, their families and communities. The project includes the creation of a commemorative tile to honour those who attended residential schools and those who died while attending a residential school. Following is an interview with Sylvia in which she briefly outlines what a Project of Heart looks like.

Initially, Project of Heart (POH) had five distinct parts, and now it has six.

Part 1 deals with learning about the Indian Residential Schools (IRS), why they were created, how many there were, what the conditions were like for the students, and so on. Because there were virtually no resources for teaching about the IRS at the time, materials donated by Legacy of Hope (LOH) filled the kits. With respect to the loss of life and deaths due to the IRS, I relied on primary source documents that I got from visiting Library and Archives Canada. The primary source documents were ways for the students to see that these children actually existed and that they never stopped resisting attempts to make their lives better, even if it meant fleeing the schools and many of them, dying while trying. These primary source

documents brought the horrors of so many of these schools to life!

Part 2 is where the students choose a particular Indian Residential School and then learn something about the Nation on whose land that School stood, and their contributions to Canadian society. The facilitator or teacher can proceed with doing this part in whatever way that best meets the learners' needs. Often, it is the first time that students find out the name of the Original Peoples of the territory that they're living on. What students find out after doing this part is that no matter how hard the Canadian Government tried to "kill the Indian within the child" they were not successful. Students are able to see—and feel—that Indigenous peoples and their cultures must be incredibly resilient to have survived an onslaught that started 500 years ago and continues to this day.

Part 3 is the first gesture of reconciliation. It is the part where students take what information they've gleaned from doing Parts 1 and 2, and use their skill/talent at communicating, through art, their feelings. They may feel sadness, anger, or they may not even know how to feel. They may feel hope, especially after finding out that Indigenous people are not a dying race—that there are many who are devoted to rebuilding their communities and relearning their languages...and know that there is a place for them in today's society. But whatever it is they are feeling, they communicate it through art. They decorate a small wooden tile, each tile symbolically representative of the life of one child who died. This child's memory is brought back to life.

Part 4 is where an Indian Residential School survivor (or a cultural worker or an IRS intergenerational survivor, or an Elder) comes to the school (or church or business) and answers questions, gives a teaching, or just talks to the students about life. Normally, if it's a survivor, she will answer questions from the group. This is where lived experiential

knowledge is transmitted to the learners.

Part 5 is the social justice piece, the second gesture of reconciliation where settlers who are doing this project, "walk the talk." This part is missing from most government promises. Our Canadian Government, under the leadership of Mr. Harper, said we were sorry. But we didn't mean it, because there were NO actions undertaken that would prove that we (as a country) were sorry. Project of Heart provides a way for its learners to truly enact our citizenship responsibilities, putting empathy into action, in a respectful way. (We want to build trust. We want to walk with, not over, Aboriginal people.) It demonstrates to Indigenous people that non-Aboriginals are prepared to act in support of their resistance struggles, whether it be for justice for the horrific number of Indigenous women and girls who have gone missing or murdered, or the over-the-top numbers of Aboriginal kids who are in state care through various ministries of child and social services.

Part 6 is a relatively recent addition. It was instituted after the TRC National Event in Saskatchewan while under the care of Charlene Bearhead. One of the teachers in Saskatoon Catholic Board, Lynette Brossart, and her students, who had completed Project of Heart, were invited to come to the National Event. Lynette was very concerned to find out that there were IRS Survivors there who had never heard of Project of Heart and felt the need to do something about it. She came up with the idea of the learner groups making cards for the survivors. With this step, when there are events that Survivors are attending, they could be given a card with one Project of Heart tile attached to it, which would let them know that the learners cared about them, and that they were learning about their situation so that this would never happen again. It worked! Project of Heart had now come full circle.

What led to the development of the Project of Heart?

There were a few 'circumstances' that led to the development of the project, but the easiest to explain is the fact that I couldn't justify to my Grade 10 students why such a major part of our history was invisible. Young people will challenge their teachers if something doesn't make sense, and in the only mandatory history course there is in Ontario high schools (contemporary Canadian History), there was a huge, absolutely gaping void. When a particularly inquiring student, Andrea, was finding evidence in her research that was creating a cognitive dissonance for her (it was the number of students that had perished while at the schools) she would not give up trying to figure out why this egregious part of history was so neglected. I had no choice but to be gently led by her curiosity, fast-becoming-anger. Our textbook dedicated two paragraphs (63 words) to the IRS era. Andrea couldn't believe it, and I couldn't either. So between her righteous anger and my integrity on the line as a history teacher, we decided that if the textbook couldn't tell us the truth, we would find it and learn it on our own! And not only that, but also we'd help others whom we knew were as ignorant, maybe even more-so, than we were! So Andrea got to work, continuing her research and at the same time, building contacts in both the Aboriginal and settler community that could help her and her classmates make sense of their past. They all felt betrayed. They had grown up proud to be Canadian, and now that identity was being challenged in a major way.

In a nutshell, there were a lot of relationships made, guest speakers invited, (IRS survivors in the community), and activists who supported the students in this educational endeavour right from the start. The students did what was within their capability to do (write proposals so we could get some money to buy the wooden tiles, and pay honouraria for Aboriginal guests to come and talk to us) and I did my part. Project of Heart began with

the first ceremony to honour the children who had died.

After the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been struck, and there was a call for proposals to do "Commemorative Projects," I thought, "Why not? Let's do what we're doing in the class already, and just formalize it?"

To fulfill the requirement of a master's course I was taking, the project of Heart was envisioned, and its parts fully explained. Supporters came through to help us build the teaching module. The Canadian Union of Postal Workers supplied all the boxes, free of charge. The Legacy of Hope Foundation gifted them with thousands of dollars worth of resources with which they would fill the kits. Sylvia would purchase the small tiles and fill the kit with a pre-arranged number. And perhaps the most important thing—cost—Sylvia wanted potential users to know that they could experience this transformative learning, for less than the cost of textbook. The only caveat was that their heart had to be in it, and they had to be willing to engage the Indigenous community. Project of Heart would only work if it was centered on Indigenous people and their experiences.

So, it is these resources that Sylvia sent out to any learner group who wanted them. "It was truly a labour of love. My partner created the website (www.projectofheart.ca) where groups who do the project could upload pictures and a report on their experiences doing Project of Heart." This part was essential because as schools and other learner groups reported on their experiences, they gave ideas and inspiration to other groups. I insured that facilitator directions were packed in the boxes and that an inventory of what was included in the kit was included.

Interested in doing a POH with your students? Check out Saskatchewan's POH website:



Charlene Bearhead

Project of Heart is now a program within the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Education. In 2017, Charlene Bearhead was the Education Lead for the NCTR and the National Coordinator for Project of Heart. Charlene says that the Project of Heart was brought to her attention by a friend and colleague Elder Maggie Hodgson in 2009. Charlene says, "When I was recruited to the role of Program Manager for the National Day of Healing and Reconciliation in 2011 one of my first priorities was to take the time to find out more about Project of Heart." What she loved about the Project of Heart was that it was prescriptive enough that it offered teachers a place to start and a path to follow, but it was also open enough that it invited each facilitator and student to make the Project their own. "This is engaged and authentic learning in my view," says Charlene. She hopes to see Project of Heart continue to offer a starting point for teachers, families, and community groups to embark upon their journey of seeking truth and walking a path of genuine reconciliation.



While student-teachers, Jane Brundige and Brooke Alexander co-facilitated a Project of Heart with students from Imperial Community School in Regina