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A story of surviving residential school as reconciliation makes strides in Saskatoon

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The nun wanted to make Gilbert Kewistep cry.

The boy didn't cry easily, so she made him pull his pants down. After strapping him hard, she forced him into a scalding shower. The water seared his skin and his tears served as a warning to other students not to speak their native language.

Kewistep, now a 60-year-old survivor of Muscowequan Indian Residential School in Lestock, shared that memory during an interview at the Rock Your Roots walk for reconciliation event held in Saskatoon's Victoria Park on Wednesday.

A member of Yellow Quill First Nation, about 250 kilometres east of Saskatoon, Kewistep was living in the town of Hudson Bay when he was separated from his family and hauled three hours southwest to the school in Lestock.

As a seven-year-old he remembers a priest coming to take children from his community away to school. At the time, he wasn't sure why his grandmother was crying.

"Little did I know, the RCMP were called and they were parked a few cars away. If she attempted to hold us back, she was going to be arrested and charged for not releasing us, I guess."

He endured Muscowequan for four years, from 1963 to 1967. He said the experience stripped him of his identity.

"They left us very empty. They took away our culture, our language, our way of life," he said.

"As a child, coming out of there, we didn't know who to turn to after the fact."

Thousands came for Wednesday's Rock Your Roots walk. Planned by the City of Saskatoon and the Office of the Treaty Commissioner (OTC), it came at the tail end of a two-month string of events designed to promote awareness and dialogue about the history of Canada's indigenous people.

The challenge for organizers of the event, which included free food and entertainment, was to draw people who weren't already a part of the conversation around reconciliation.

"People are worried about saying the wrong thing or using the wrong language," said Rhett Sangster, OTC director of reconciliation and community partnerships. "We're trying to create spaces where it's not a judgmental type thing, where people can come and learn and not be afraid."

"It's person to person, and meeting your neighbour."

For Kewistep, the recognition of a tragic period in his people's history means everything.

“To see this as a survivor, to have the mainstream recognize what we went through as young children in these schools, to see it really encourages me,” Kewistep said.

“It really encourages me to see the little ones out here,” he added. “I’ve got my sons and my grandchildren walking with me today, knowing that their grandfather survived that dark time in our history and Canada’s history.”

“Reconciliation,” he said. “I thought I’d have to leave this mother earth not knowing that I’d see this day.”



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