

Residential school survivors share their journey at Huntsville film fest

Now Elders and Grandmothers, they lived the horror of the 'pure evil'

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Four heroes were in the Town of Huntsville last week.

Elder John Elliot, Grandmother Roberta Hill, Grandmother Diane Hill and Grandmother Sherlene Bomberry, all survivors of The Mohawk Institute, the longest running residential school in Canada, 1831-1970, visited.

The documentary film, "The Nature of Healing," produced by Faith Howe, Indigenous producer, screened at the Three Fires International Film Festival in July. The documentary, filmed at The Mohawk Institute, is the lived experiences of seven survivors.

Each survivor shares their true story of the "living hell, the pure evil," of what children faced day after day. Watching the reality they faced first-hand at residential school on screen, and hearing their Q and A responses after the film, was staggering.

Survivors shared their intense loneliness for family, the mental and emotional pain and suffering, and the constant sexual abuse experienced by children, as young as three and four. The audience hung their heads, and cried, throughout the film as the reality of the injustices unfolded before their eyes. Crimes committed against children, who are alive, still, no justice served.



Elder John Elliot, 10 years old when taken from his home, with his brother, to “the Mush Hole,” named after what children were given to eat. John does not recall how many times he ran away from the dark torture to find his home but he knew he needed to run. He was always caught, and hit with a strap, “until that guy got tired.” John always ran away on Christmas Eve, to see his, “Maw.” John, now 86, cane in hand, smiles as he remembers his sister, and brother, who attended the same residential school. John can no longer run away, but shares his lived experience of truth, despite the childhood hardship of suffering, punishment, and pain. John feels fortunate his family home was close to the residential school. “The majority of the kids, lived hundreds of miles away, and did not know where home was.”

Grandmother Dawn Hill and Roberta Hill attended the Brantford residential school from 1957 to 1961, together as sisters, but feeling a world apart.

“We were taught to be quiet. Punishment was given even if you followed the rules, if one girl talked everyone got it. The authority would pull your pants down, flip you over, and strap you.” Older sibling Dawn, shared how the school was a place of violence. The home the sisters grew up in was not. Being hit and abused began at the school.

“Residential school was a dark and scary place.” Abused for being good girls. “Whatever, happened to the others, happened to you.”

The girls experienced violence against them, the first night. Other girls, whispering, the adult authority, heard the soft whispers, strapped the whisperers, and the sisters. A big leather belt repeatedly hit the arms and hands of the young sisters, leaving large and painful welts.

“There was no one there to help when you got sick, the older girls helped the younger ones out,” Roberta said. “They made you feel like bad kids, like you deserved it. We were just children, I don’t think people really understand the damage that was done.”

From the separation and breaking apart of families to living in a prisonlike setting; solitary confinement, malnourishment, violence, sexual abuse, the traumatic impacts of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual abuse imprinted their lives.

Grandmother Sherlene Bomberry, aged 10, and her siblings ages four, seven and nine, were all taken from their home, along with a brother, who was taken in the Sixties Scoop. Sherlene shared her journey of wearing, “a cloak of guilt and shame,” and how as an adult, breaking the silence and talking about the trauma has led to her healing journey.

“The body remembers trauma. It is in our DNA.”

Sherlene is able to speak her truth and is no longer afraid to be silent. Sherlene works at a holistic healing centre, helping to treat and support the generational trauma of others.

Four young children, now seniors, survivors of residential school, confronting their past, teaching, transforming, and educating. Boldly stepping forward with their life stories, in truth, humility and honour. Let us step forward with the children yet to be found and the survivors of residential schools to courageously walk the path of healing and reconciliation.

SIDE BAR

The national residential schools crisis line is available 24/7 for anyone experiencing pain or distress as a result of a residential school experience at 1-866-925-4419. People can contact the MMIWG2S+ support line for free 24/7 at 1-844-413-6649.

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