

There is hope after residential schools, says activist

By Brock Weir

There were a lot of things left unsaid when Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux was growing up. Unfortunately, what was not being said was all too often acted out.

She grew up in a world where alcoholism and violence was close to the norm, but she was unable to pinpoint just where things went wrong. And, if the older generation knew the answers, they simply were not talking.

Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux, now 57, didn't see the key to unlocking this puzzle emerge until the true extent of the impacts of Canada's Residential Schools system became clear. A member of the Chippewas of Georgina Island, she is part of that intergenerational group raised by survivors of the system, a system which has left significant impacts in its wake.

'There was a lot of what I would say inappropriate sexual behaviour when I was growing up because people had come directly out of residential schools and that had been their experience,' she recalls. 'They didn't have any of what I would call 'normal role models' to follow and what they experienced in there was a fair bit of brutality, unkindness and sexual molestation and they brought those things out into the world.'

'Like a lot of people, I don't think they could say to themselves, 'Oh, I am doing this because of the residential school experience.' I don't think they had that wherewithal to do that until much later when people became more aware of the implications and how they carried that into adulthood.'

Future generations will have no doubt of the implications and the impacts they have had on generations of Canadians following the conclusion of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which concluded last week.

As an intergenerational survivor of the system, Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux was an important component in the development of the study since its inception in 2005, serving the Commission as an Honourary Witness alongside the likes of former Prime Ministers Paul Martin and Joe Clark, and the Vice-Regal couple.

Through her work as a university professor, Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux serves as a member of the Governing Circle for the National Centre on Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba.

At the start of the commission, she says she hoped their work would be considered a 'Canadian Commission' rather than something pertaining solely to Canada's First Nations. All of Canada needed to be engaged and participate, she says.

'I tried valiantly over the whole six years to impart that message to everyone that this is Canada's responsibility as a country, not just the indigenous people saying they forgive Canadian society and the government for what happened, but everybody needed to be a part of this,' she says.

Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux will bring her message of Truth and Reconciliation to the Aurora Cultural Centre next Thursday, June 18, as part of the second annual Community Iftar Dinner, hosted by the Intercultural Dialogue Institute GTA and the York Region Children's Aid Society. It is one of a series of fast-breaking dinners coinciding with Ramadan and is intended to foster dialogue and cross-culture awareness.

For Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux, this message of truth and reconciliation began very close to home.

As she grew up, she came to understand what happened to her parents. Leaving school at the age of 16 believing there wasn't anything there for her 'I found it to be an unfriendly place because when then the language was still very much about the savages that killed all the nice settlers' ' she picked up her education at the age of 23, graduating high school and pursuing her post-secondary education, including her doctorate, at the University of Toronto.

It was around this time she sat down with her stepfather to begin the healing process.

"I said, 'I forgive you for all the craziness you caused,'" she recalls. "He never sexually assaulted me or anything like that, but he was pretty verbally and emotionally abusive. I told him I could forgive but can't ever forget. We became friends for the balance of his life."

Her mother, on the other hand, was a slightly different story.

"I said I forgave her but I had to talk about it and that was the biggest issue between us," she says. "She didn't like that and said and I was making her look bad by talking about the things that happened to me. I just said, 'It would be inappropriate for me to go out there and try and help people find their healing and say my life was perfect, I am sorry you had a bad time but my life was fine, because that is not true.' I had to go out there and speak to them from the place of understanding and show them there is life after that and it can be good."

Speaking at last week's ceremonies in Ottawa marking the conclusion of the Commission, this was very much what Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux imparted. Her mother, she says, was a far better grandmother and example to her grandchildren because as she grew older she came to understand what was necessary as a parent and grandparent because they didn't have that inside residential schools.

"A lot of intergenerational people - kids, grandchildren, great-grandchildren - are going to do much better because of their ability to be educated, their ability to forgive, and their ability to step beyond that and do something productive with their lives," she says. "There is hope. People are very hopeful, supportive and engaged in this. Everyone needs to be a part of it, even if it is in a small way, in taking this country back and ensuring Canada never forgets and do things to make this country the kind of welcoming place it purports itself to be."

For more information on the free Community Iftar Dinner, which will be held from 7 - 9.30 on June 18, contact janetaylor@auroraculturalcentre.ca or call 905-713-1818.