

Dealing with residential school abuse

Daniel Nippi shocked professionals last month with his memories of being physically and sexually abused while attending residential school. He told the workshop participants about how he chose to abuse alcohol as a way of coping. He talked about his violence and criminal activity that cost him both his freedom and his first family. He talked about how his actions affected his children.

Nippi's purpose in sharing his story to the audience at Kikinahk was to assist those working with victims of residential school abuse to understand the mind of one who had been particularly traumatized by the experience. He was joined by another survivor of residential schools, former vice-Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, Albert Scott.

It was a time of colonialism. Canada had lost the fertile land south of the Great Lakes to the United States and was attempting to replace that loss by expanding into the "North West". The churches enthusiastically volunteered to take charge of the assimilation of the aboriginal inhabitants of the "North-West". Northern Saskatchewan was divided between the Anglican and Roman Catholic faiths.

The churches found that it was easier to assimilate the children if they were separated from their parents for long periods of time. Initially many children were kidnapped. Finally, by the middle of the 20th century, it simply became accepted in much of the north that children had to go away to become educated and that physical punishment was good for them.

In fairness to the churches, physical violence against children was the norm in the European society in which they evolved. The purpose of "caning" for example, was to cause the child to hurt badly enough that he or she would obey authority without questioning.

No church, however, authorized sexual abuse. It was inevitable; however, that sexual abuse would happen. Large numbers of priests and nuns were attempting to repress their sexuality. Some would not succeed. Those that could not succeed in repressing the sexual part of them found themselves with a captive population that did not understand the rules of the dominant culture. One man in one residential school has been convicted of sexually abusing 354 boys over a 10 year period.

Large numbers of aboriginal children failed to learn parenting skills as a result of the residential school experience. This is not surprising. We learn to parent by watching our parents. The original purpose of residential schools was to remove the parents from the loop. Many residential school survivors lost the ability to bond with their children and replaced bonding with violence.

Violence against children begets rage. Many aboriginal children grew up to be angry while at the same time not liking themselves. Many, like Daniel Nippi turned to alcohol.

Many victims experienced post traumatic stress from their experiences. Some suffer even today from anxiety disorder, depression, or from obsessive-compulsiveness. These effects can be passed on to future generations long after the residential schools are closed.

Many victims of residential school abuse can be helped by psycho- education. This may include group sessions in such areas as re- parenting skills and anger management. Others survivors need individual counselling and therapy to heal from the residential school effects.