

Good day! My name is Corita Vachon.

With regards to the recently discovered unmarked graves at the Marieval Indian Residential School, in Chief Delorme's press briefing on Thursday morning, he stressed that the 751 graves was not due to a mass burial; that it could possibly be a community graveyard; that all of the grave markers and records were removed by the Roman Catholic Church when they handed it over to the Cowessess Reserve in the 1960's. Because of this, they were unaware that this gravesite existed until recently. I can confirm that I have family buried at a Marieval Roman Catholic Cemetery; my aunt, grandfather, and great-grandmother. My late aunt was a student of the Indian Residential School in Marieval for three years when she contracted tuberculosis. She suffered with it for one year, then died one month before her tenth birthday. My grandfather and great-grandmother were adults when they passed, so if they were buried at this gravesite, it supports Chief Delorme's suggestion that the gravesite may contain children of the school and adults from the community. Also, since many of my ancestors resided in this area for a number of years, I very likely have numerous relatives that are buried there that I am currently unaware of.

I am a survivor of intergenerational trauma resulting from the Indian Residential School System. On the maternal side of my family ancestry, there are at least three generations of mothers that I am aware of that attended Catholic-run Indian Residential Schools in Lebret and Marieval SK; my mother, her mother and her mother's mother.

For those of you who think that this all happened years ago and that I should just get over it, then you really do not understand the impact of the teachings that these schools had on their students and subsequent generations. Like so many intergenerational survivors, this is what it looks like: Making sense of childhood neglect and abandonment, subsequently being placed into Child Protective Services, surviving abuse of all kinds (physical, sexual, spiritual, mental, emotional) which occurred while in the Child Welfare System, fighting suppression/denial/rejection of our identity and culture that was handed down by our parents because of the teachings taught by these schools. All of this childhood trauma led to low self-worth, lack of self-identity, lack of understanding of how a healthy family unit is supposed to function, and crutches like drugs and alcohol abuse to numb the pain. Understandably, many of my siblings just could not get past the intense pain of the haunting memories. You may ask why I turned out so differently. I was spared some of the unspeakable beatings and abuse that I witnessed my siblings endure. Consequently, as a direct result of this intergenerational trauma, I have lost two sisters, one brother, one nephew, my biological father, and one uncle to addictions. Burying my third sibling, my youngest sister two years ago caused me to fall on my knees and to finally accept the carnage that these schools had on my family. And yet, amidst all this loss, addictions still run rampant in my family.

I will survive this pain. I am learning to stop denying who I am and where I came from. I am Métis, bearing the blood of my Indigenous ancestors (Ojibwe, Cree, Saulteaux, Sioux) and European ancestors (French, Scottish, Irish, British). I am also Roman Catholic.

Accepting my identity as Métis is teaching me the importance of walking in and accepting both worlds. Am I proud of who I am? For years I had difficulty being proud of my Indigenous blood. I never dreamed that the tables would ever turn. A cultural genocidal attempt was made at the behest of my European heritage in efforts assimilate and colonialize an entire civilization of people. In concert with this attempt was our Church in the name of our God. Atrocities were committed to little innocent children for seven generations. As a practising Roman Catholic, this knowledge gives me great shame. This is not the work of the God and Creator that I know and love. For the blood of my European heritage that I have on my left hand, I profoundly apologize to my Indigenous ancestors on my right hand. I promise to be part of the solution that will mend some of the wounds caused by this ungodly act. According to the TRC findings, 86% of these Indian Residential Schools were Christian-based (listed alphabetically Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Mennonite, Presbyterian, and United), 46% were Catholic-run schools, specifically Roman Catholic.

What can we do as Christians to help reconcile our treacherous past with our present? What should reconciliation look like? Closing our eyes and doing nothing produces nothing. And praying is not enough. As Christians, each of us are called to be good witnesses. Good witnesses must speak out and act when they witness wrongdoing. What happened at these schools was wrong on so many levels: Wrong, horrific, immoral, sinful, illegal! I call on all members of St. Louis Parish to speak out and act.

We have an opportunity to act right now; to create a positive environment for healing and reconciliation. With the permission of Bishop Terrio and Fr. Rene, I stand before you to ask for help on a community-parish driven project that is very dear to my heart: To erect a Monument in Honour of Indian Residential School Survivors in our Bonnyville community; a place to go for remembering, honouring, healing, and learning; a place that is easily accessible to the general public and local schools; a central meeting place for special occasions like Orange Shirt Day, Red Dress Day and National Indigenous Day. Think of it as an olive branch to open the doors of communication and understanding and to let the healing and reconciliation in our community begin.

There is so much work to do. So far I have reached out to the Kehewin Band Council, Métis Nation of AB Zone II Council, the Bonnyville Friendship Centre Board of Directors and I have also spoken with a few Town Councillors verbally for input and potential volunteers. The responses that I am receiving are very positive. I have also asked for various styles and prices of monuments from our local funeral homes. Prices range from \$7,500-75,000. But I need parishioner support to really get this engine running. If you would like to discuss this project further with me, whether to share your ideas or to be part of a committee, I would be happy to meet with you after church or discuss by phone, text or email. My contact information can be obtained through the St. Louis Parish Rectory.

This may be a long shot, but if we are able to move forward quickly, it would be fitting to have this Monument in place for Orange Shirt Day on September 30 2021, with a ceremony centered around healing and reconciliation. If this target date is not attainable, then I would really like to see this Parish not only pray, but to be actively out there in our community remembering and honouring those children lost and those that currently survive the Indian Residential School era on Orange Shirt Day because "Every Child Matters."

Corita Vachon

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

We need a Planning Committee established to organize and oversee the entire project, who will meet with various Indigenous People, Métis People and community-based organizations

- ▶ To determine which not-for-profit community-based organization is best suited to spearhead this project
- ▶ To seek and review various monument styles
- ▶ To seek funds for the purchase of this Monument; more specifically, to look into funding from the court-ordered Best Efforts Campaign, In-Kind Contribution Funds and wherever else we can access funds
- ▶ To assess potential locations and determine the optimal location for this Monument
- ▶ To determine the inscription on the Monument and to ensure that our Indigenous Elders play a respectful, active contributing role in this process
- ▶ To facilitate and help organize the Opening Ceremony, in conjunction with our Indigenous community