

Through the mouths of children

BY TAINA MAKI CHAHAL



ONE CITY
MANY VOICES

Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

dens, then a working-class semi-rural area of Port Arthur with old wood-frame houses, cabins, and a few bungalows built by immigrants such as my dad. Among all the Finnish immigrant and settler homes, there was one house lived in by an Anishnawbe family one summer.

My older sister and I would stand at the edge of the field that skirted their yard to see if anyone would come out the back door. At school we had learned to sing Land of the Sil-

ver Birch and admired the teepees in our school books and now we hoped to see some 'real Indians' - 'Indian' being the word that we had learned at school, through TV shows, and through an everyday Finnish language pejorative of it, 'Intti,' from our neighbours.

Yet we never came to know much about the children who lived there, even though my sister and I had the run of the outdoors. In fact, we sensed we should not play with them. This wasn't an explicit directive, just something unspoken.

Once, my sister's doll went missing. For months we searched for it. At summer's end, we found it in a ditch. We examined its legs mottled with black spots and quickly decided: the Indians had stolen it. We reasoned, weren't Indians always stealing things? In our young minds the doll's legs were blackened because the Indians had tried to burn the doll in their campfire. I look back on this and feel shame for the systemic racism that I had learned to speak.

Supposedly innocent, we had already learned to translate the racism around us into our own simple stories. In learning to become Canadian, we had learned the lesson of seeing

the Anishnawbek as different, as not like us. Our distorted thinking was reinforced by the fact that Anishnawbek children were not our classmates but had been put in residential schools, apart from us. We didn't have the chance to be friends.

Today, I am on my path of decolonizing, which includes ridding myself of internalized racism and learning about the violent history of colonization and its effects, such as residential schools, the '60s scoop, youth suicide, and treaty disrespect.

Today, I know that racism is not someplace else. It is part of our institutions and media, found in our communities, neighbourhoods, workplaces, places of worship, social circles, and families. It is inside of us. It surfaces suddenly in the most mundane places of everyday life, including the mouths of children and youth. We must recognize and challenge its many forms so that our children can play together, so all children are our children. Our community's future depends on it.

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