

Reconciliation is meaningful

BY ELLEN CHAMBERS

IDENTIFY as a cis white woman, a first generation Canadian of parents who chose Canada as their country. I am also a baby boomer whose knowledge of Canadian history was what I used to consider as quite good. I have an undergraduate degree majoring in anthropology from a Native studies program. I learned about the Indian Act in university along with the archaeological record of the ancient Indigenous ancestors of the Anishinaabe of this area.

It was all through colonial eyes. I knew no other perspective. An Indigenous elder once explained to me that I was not supposed to learn the truth.

Then the Truth and Reconciliation Commission toured our country, and I heard the truth of residential schools from survivors. Listening to the radio while driving to work, I pulled over and cried when I first heard of families whose children never came home, weren't notified where their beloved child was buried or what caused their death. Children disappeared. I was shocked that this could have happened and couldn't imagine what that would be like to endure.

Thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the courage of survivors, and the strength of the recently late Murray Sinclair, we are all familiar (or should be familiar) with this tragic reality of thousands of Indigenous children and families. This is a truth about our supposed gentle country that we were not taught. It is a hard truth and thankfully children are now learning and facing our real history.



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Equity Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

The father of my children is Red River Métis. His mother grew up in the Prairies. Their ancestors were part of a distinct and vibrant Indigenous community — the Métis. My late former mother-in-law never saw her grandchildren embrace their identity — the identity she was careful to subjugate because of imposed shame and racism.

My daughter researched her genealogy and pieced together the history her Nanny never shared. Her six grandchildren know their family tree that traces back to the beginning of the Métis Nation. Their ancestors were part of the buffalo hunt of the Great Plains. They were the first citizens of Manitoba, founded by Métis Louis Riel. The Métis were vilified and discounted and the government pushed the Métis off their lands and they were left to live on the sides of roads. Governments tried extremely hard to destroy their culture, and their spirit. But it did not.

My children and grandchildren, their aunties, uncles, and cousins know who they are. My children are proud of their Métis

heritage and will not hide who they are, as their grandmother was compelled to. Their grandmother loved her family fiercely and hid her beautiful Métis self to protect her children from the prejudice she surely experienced in the prairie town and beyond; racism that was endemic in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s . . . as a young Indigenous woman.

Reconciliation to me is every Indigenous child proud of their ancestry, having opportunities to learn traditional ways, no person needing to hide who they are, and settler Canadians learning our true history of forced assimilation and cultural genocide, working together to decolonize our structures through education, self-learning and fulfilling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action.

My personal reconciliation means that I must learn about our colonial structures, must face our real history, must work to end racism and discrimination.

My children's grandmother would be proud of her family who no longer hide their Métis identity. I am proud and grateful to support them as their mother and to climb the mountain Murray Sinclair talked of, knowing that education is the key for me, and for Canada in reconciliation.

Ellen Chambers is co-chair of Diversity Thunder Bay and DTB's Education Committee. She has advocated for the safety of 2SLGBTQIA students here and across the province. She has spent her life in education. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.