

## A Residential School Survivor Shares Her Story Of Resilience

“Despite all efforts by the Canadian government and the churches, our culture is still intact.”

Maria Myers

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(Photo: Linda Smith)

*In May 2021, [as many as 215 unmarked graves](#) were detected on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) in British Columbia. The discovery led to a reckoning across Canada—a call to grapple with the country’s history of colonization, violence and systematic racism against Indigenous peoples.*

*In [Tsqelmucwíl̓c: The Kamloops Indian Residential School—Resistance and a Reckoning](#), survivors share their stories. The title comes from the Secwepemc phrase loosely translated as “We return to being human again”—reflecting the survivors’ courage and resilience through the years.*

*In this excerpt, KIRS survivor Maria Myers, from Yunesit’in Band, one of the six*

*Tsilhqut'in Bands, shares her experience, and how her time in residential schools encouraged her to keep the Tsilhqut'in language and culture alive.*

I am a survivor of the Kamloops Indian Residential School [from 1965 to 1966] and St. Joseph's Mission Residential School at Williams Lake. The school records there were never properly kept. Those records with mistakes after mistakes followed me to every school, obliterating the fact that I had already attended school for three years, starting when I was six. The records made it seem like I took the same modules three times. There are times when I think maybe I actually did take three years to do one grade. Maybe I was too Tsilhqut'in with an accent and didn't learn my lessons properly. What I would like to think is that I was too Tsilhqut'in for them, and they did not even know what I had learned.

One of the memories that never leaves me is that when I arrived at the residential school, I was sick with the mumps. Some time after our arrival, I remember it being very dark, and I was hurting from the mumps. I looked out the window and remembered my mom. I started crying quite loudly, and no one came. I saw a child with the same sickness not very far from my bed and felt much better because I was not alone. Another memory that sticks in my mind is a boy who had TB, throwing up blood. I spent 10 months of the year separated from my family. It was a lonely childhood journey. Our family, upon leaving the school, were not close anymore. We were strangers to each other and not a close-knit group. That outcome was intentional on the part of the nuns and priests who ran the mission school.

The church especially caused us to see our parents as sinners who would burn in hell. Being young, I believed the priest who yelled these words from the pulpit. During Mass, I was so hungry, I would shake from not eating. This had been going on for quite a while; I would attend Mass early in the morning without eating. I had low blood sugar levels, and I would start trembling, kneeling at the pews, and feeling nauseous. I had one nun help me get up, and she told me to sit and hold my head between my legs. I had the shakes like that twice at the Kamloops and St. Joseph's residential schools. I thought my shaking was because I was a sinner.

I was so malnourished that I would resort to stealing bread or apples from the kitchen. Other students would get dried fish and dried meat from home, but I was not so lucky; protein beats bread and an apple any day. Upon my arrival home, we would have deer and moose meat and garden crops to eat. Home was a source of good food, which strengthened me.

I have worked now for a little more than 40 years teaching my Tsilhqut'in language to elementary, high-school and adult students. I saw the change when fluent speakers came to the residential schools and slowly started speaking English. The

residential schools mocked us for speaking the language and outright forbade it. Making us white Indians is what they intended; the priest and nuns had this as a goal. Now with a resurgence of pride and the healing of time, people are feeling a strong need to learn the language. With help from some outsiders, we in the Tsilhqut'in Nation are trying to meet the increasing demand for classes.

Despite all efforts by the Canadian government and the churches, our culture is still intact. We still live off the land, but now in a more contemporary style. Tsilhqut'in rangers look after the land and the animals. We are doing more work to promote the wellness of our community members, women and men. The infrastructure on the reserve is improving.

Personally, I have been going to counselling for 30 years or so. I have come a long way from feeling like a victim wherever I went. I joined Hey-way' -noqu', an organization in Vancouver, when I was emotionally very low and in need of help. I have verbalized everything that happened to me as a child. I continue to heal with counsellors through art therapy or other counselling methods.

As for my children, they did not go to residential school, but the effects of residential school have carried on to their generation. My grandchildren are at the age that I was in residential school, and they relate to their parents very differently than I did as a child. They are more open, and their family is close-knit. Their parents support their interests in sports, school and books. They play with the children whenever they can, and I hope they don't ever have to be separated from their family, like I was.

I have continued to think about the church and its role in our lives. Christianity led us to believe in a religion that caused my people to have mixed feelings after the residential school. These mixed feelings caused us to hate words like "sinners," "the devil," and "evil." We may have had similar beliefs, because we have the word "Nentsen" for those things that are bad like "evil" and the "devil." But I like to believe those things were also good in some ways, even though there might have been things to be afraid of in our spirituality.

I am now at a stage in my life where I have said my goodbyes to the church. I do not like what the residential school staff did to my people. I still believe in the Creator and would like to learn more about how we were when there were no white people around. I know there were sweats, both ceremonial and cleansing. I know that with our stories, we had rules, life rules. Why didn't the priests see that and leave us alone? I am tapping into our traditional laws through stories. Our belief in deyen is

still here, but I don't hear of very many traditional healers. There are some coming up.



but not enough of them. I hear from my mom that her father and mother were healers, and my dad's mom and father were too. It wasn't very long ago that we spiritually lived the old ways with added Christianity. It should probably not be too hard to retrieve what was once our own spirituality.

*Excerpted with permission from the book Tsqelmucwíl: The Kamloops Indian Residential School—Resistance and a Reckoning by Celia Haig-Brown, Garry Gottfriedson, Randy Fred, and the KIRS Survivors. Excerpted section by Maria Myers. Published by Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022.*

