

How the Sixties Scoop left me and many others rootless

Calgary Herald 1 Jul 2012 RICHARD WAGAMESE RICHARD WAGAMESE IS THE 2012 RECIPIENT OF THE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FOR MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS.



A woman came up to me at a book signing in Winnipeg recently. She was smiling, but there was a shine in her eyes that most people who meet me on book tours don't have.

She walked up confidently. She spoke quietly. She said she had driven a long way to see me. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but I could not place her face. She told me her name and I was floored.

She was my foster sister from my second foster home. Her name is Cyndy and we had not seen each other in 47 years.

We hugged and the feeling of reconnection was amazing. When we were kids, we played together all the time, and until I reconnected with my blood sister, she is what I equated with that word. I had always held her fondly in my memory.

She told me that she had brought me something. She reached into her purse and handed me an envelope. In it, was a handful of photos. They were pictures of me as a foster kid circa 1963. They showed me in my Grade 1 class, on an ice rink and at a birthday party. But the one that got me the most was a picture of her and me, standing in the backyard.

I had never seen a picture of me as a child. I've seen very few of me at all until I was in my 20s. Those years are shadowed and the person I was then was lost. So to see my image, as the displaced person I was back then, was monumental. My hands shook. We hugged again and I thanked her profusely, but I look back and realize words were not nearly sufficient.

I am a survivor of the Sixties Scoop. I was one of thousands of aboriginal kids who were scooped up by government social workers and placed in foster care. Canadians do not hear nearly enough about that practice. It overlapped the residential school era and shared the devastating impact on aboriginal communities. Some residential school survivors returned home only to later have their children taken away from them through the Sixties Scoop. That's what happened to me.

In 1951, Amendment 88 of the Indian Act made all provincial laws enforceable on reserves. This allowed social services to begin apprehending children in reserve communities. In fact, social services was guaranteed payment for each child apprehended. Children were routinely sold across the border to U.S. adoption agencies for as much as \$4,000 per child. If the idea of Canada allowing the sale of children does not shock you, consider that currently, it is estimated that there are more aboriginal children in foster care than ever attended residential schools at any one time. At the schools' peak in 1953, they held 11,090 kids. Today, native youngsters represent about six per cent of all Canadian children, but they are an estimated 30 to 40 per cent of children in care, or up to 31,200 children in all. The beat, as they say, goes on.

I was grafted onto the family tree of a white family in southern Ontario after spending my first nine years in northern Ontario. That transition was shocking enough. But I have met people in my travels who were transplanted from northern Manitoba to Florida. That they ever made it back to their home communities is a miracle and a testament to their resilience.

All of those apprehended kids have dark years like mine. We essentially grew up without a history. We were denied the most basic of human rights; the right to know who we were created to be. When that right is removed and you grow up learning how it feels to always enter a room skin first, you come to understand displacement in its harshest measure, because there is no one around to give you answers.

When I held those photographs in my hand, all those years came into sharp focus. The face of that small brown child carried an expression of fear, as though he did not trust that the ground beneath his feet was stable. It wasn't. There was a knowing, too, as though he understood that he rode the whim of a system that did not care for him. It didn't and it did not protect him.

The Sixties Scoop is a largely unwritten chapter in Canada's history. It is as shameful as the residential school chapter and as susceptible to derision from the unknowing and the ignorant. But we need to look at it. We need to accept it as part of our national story. It is irrefutable. It will not go away.

Like the residential school experience, it cannot be cured by money. It requires healing. We await the beginning of the process.