

Children were often taken by force

SUGARCANE continued from front page

Oct. 8: The long-hidden story of the St. Joseph's Mission Residential School near the Sugarcane Reserve in British Columbia, Canada. A particularly ugly part of that hidden story was the number of infants born to young female students at the school, and what happened to those children. Some were adopted out. Others were killed.

In January of 2022, 93 potential unmarked graves were found on the property of the former St. Joseph's Mission Residential School, which had closed in 1981. The discovery sparked news stories across Canada and the United States, about some of the horrific abuses of the residential schools, including the deaths of thousands of students.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has confirmed more than 4,000 students died in the country's 139 residential schools. A report by the Department of the Interior in the United States, released in two volumes in 2022 and July of this year, confirmed 973 deaths, across 417 schools in this country.

The story and prior 2021 stories about a mass of unmarked graves discovered at residential schools across Canada moved award-winning Canadian investigative journalist Emily Kassie to begin reaching out to NoiseCat and the Williams Lake First Nation on the Sugarcane Reserve, to begin the documentary.

The schools were intended to separate Indigenous children from their culture and language. Children who did not go willingly, or whose families tried to withhold them, were often taken by force. Physical and sexual abuse were rampant, as was chronic malnutrition. In one scene, the camera

focuses in on long-ago scrawled messages on the walls from students, desperately counting the days until they could return home.

The stop in Grand Ronde to show the film was the 10th on the crew's "Rez Tour" across the U.S. and Canada. The response, NoiseCat said, has been "incredible."

"You know, this documentary follows an investigation into abuse and missing children at the Indian residential school that my family was sent to, near Williams Lake, British Columbia, Canada," NoiseCat said. "It's a very personal story, but it's also a story that's shared by people all across Indian Country, not just in Canada, but also here in the United States, where there were 417 federally funded Native American boarding schools.

He continued, "And every place we bring this film, someone stands up at the end of the screening or comes up to us afterward, and says something to the effect of, 'You know, I saw so much of myself, or my family's story, in this film, and this has sparked a conversation or has made me think a little bit more about my parents' experience, my grandparents experience.'"

That's exactly what the film is intended to do, he said.

"Here in Oregon, there was one of the biggest ones in the country, Chemawa, which took kids from all over the United States, even up to Alaska, kids were sent to Chemawa," he said. "I know kids from this community ended up at that school as well as others. It's our hope that this film, which is about instigating a conversation about history, about making the record be known about these schools, instigates a similar conversation here, in this community."

The Grand Ronde Canoe Family drummed and sang before the

film showing and Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George gave the invocation.

Afterward, Tribal Council Vice Chair Chris Mercier conducted a question-and-answer session with NoiseCat.

"Sugarcane" follows the efforts of First Nation investigators, including NoiseCat's aunt and the Williams Lake First Nation, to learn more about what happened to children who went missing from St. Joseph's school. It also follows the quest of NoiseCat's father, Ed Archie NoiseCat, to learn more about his secret birth at the school, and abandonment in the trash destined for the school incinerator. A janitor heard the baby's cries and found him, but survivors said other infants were not so fortunate.

The film discusses the effect of intergenerational trauma on the children of the survivors, including the NoiseCat family.

Survivors' accounts are interspersed with views of British Columbia's spectacular landscapes, reserve land and the mission, including a prominent statue of the Virgin Mary holding an infant Jesus, glimpses of everyday life on the reserve, and the 2022 quest of former Chief Rick Gilbert of the Williams Lake First Nation, to seek accountability from the Vatican, where representatives of the church seemed more interested in seeking forgiveness than in holding anyone to account. However, the delegation of Inuit, Metis and First Nations representatives did receive a long-sought formal apology from Pope Francis for the Roman Catholic Church's actions.

Scattered in among the modern-day segments are excerpts of films from the mission school itself, depicting the illusion of happy, well-cared-for children. The images are chilling set against survivors' accounts of beatings and other harsh discipline, sex abuse and deaths.

NoiseCat and Kassie won the 2024 Directing Award at the Sundance Film Festival, and more than a dozen other awards, and the film has been acquired by National Geographic. Kassie, who was on break from the emotionally intensive tour, did not join NoiseCat in Grand Ronde.

NoiseCat is a member of the Canim Lake Band Tsq'escen and descendant of the Lil'Wat Nation of Mount Currie. He said that he never intended to make a film. An award-winning print journalist, NoiseCat said he was surprised and initially hesitant when Kassie first asked him about collaborating on the project.

"I had just signed a book contract. I didn't know how to write a book. I had never made a movie. I definitely didn't know how to do both," he told Mercier.

NoiseCat said that Grand Ronde "will always be a special place to me," because he had finished his forthcoming book, "We Survived The Night," and sent it to his publisher from the Spirit Mountain Casino hotel. It will be released by publisher Alfred A. Knopf in 2025.

NoiseCat said he knew his family "had an intense connection to residential schools," but "I didn't know what it was" before the film.

But Kassie happened to write to Williams Lake Chief Willie Sellars just after their council had declared that the search for unmarked graves needed to be documented, he said, noting that the timing was "just gobsmackingly unlikely." With his family connection, NoiseCat said, he knew he had to be involved.

"Hopefully, that story inspires others to go on their own journeys," he said.

NoiseCat shared a home with his father for more than two years during the filming, and spent time with Williams Lake members and other survivors, gradually earning their trust before the most difficult conversations took place on film. That time was essential, he said, for people to be ready to speak with him.

"It became clear that (my father's) story was part of a pattern at this school, and at other schools, I might add," NoiseCat said. "My dad's story is awful, but there are other stories that have never been told, and with good reason."

He said that to see people beginning to talk more about their experiences in response to the film is an honor.

"I see it as an extension of my Auntie Charlene's work (undercovering residential school abuse)," he said. "We shot this film across three years, which is awhile, but she's been doing this work for 30 years."

NoiseCat said the full extent of what happened at the residential schools is still unknown, noting that "The Department of the Interior was until this year figuring out how many of these schools there were."

Canadian First Nations and U.S. Tribes will need to do their own investigations, he said, to uncover the fate of the children who never came home, and to learn about and heal the suffering of those who survived.

"The Catholic Church and the Canadian government are very eager to get to the reconciliation part," he said. "But to get to the reconciliation part, we need to give the truth its due. ... There were unspeakably awful things that happened at these schools and then those actions rippled out to affect generations."

As part of each appearance, NoiseCat's team provides mental health information for survivors and their descendants. There is a 24-hour 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the United States available by phone or text.

The StrongHearts Native Helpline, 1-844-762-8483, is an anonymous domestic and sexual violence line for Native Americans and Alaska Natives, available around the clock and intended to offer culturally appropriate support. For ease in remembering, the number is often written 1-844-7-NATIVE.

For more assistance in coping with the painful legacy of the schools, visit boardingschoolhealing.org, a website of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. ■

Artwork on display



Photo by Kamiah Koch

Tribal member Miguel Anderson, right, explains his artwork during the Tribe's Creative Ways of Being Art Summit open house held in the Chachalu Tribal Museum & Cultural Center gym on Thursday, Oct. 24. The two-day summit included Indigenous carvers, weavers, glassmakers, painters, writers and designers sharing their artwork and projects. Discussions at the event focused on the Indigenous Place Keeping Artist Fellowship created by the Tribe in 2023 and included several of the Indigenous artists selected for the fellowship.