

Concluding visions of reconciliation



The Arrest the Legacy: From Residential Schools to Prisons dialogues brought 300 people together in regional forums, across the country. Participants heard residential school survivors' stories, including those of intergenerational survivors, many of them criminalized Aboriginal women and girls. New relationships and understandings were developed. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, with very different backgrounds and life experiences, came together to listen and to share; many of whom, if not for this project, would never have found themselves sitting at the same table.

Corrections staff and anti-poverty and homeless shelter advocates; women who had exited prostitution and police officers; Crown prosecutors and Traditional and spiritual Elders, RCMP and Aboriginal women and girls who had been in custody; high school students and an Assistant Deputy Minister of Education and many others, worked collaboratively on building the forward-looking recommendations found in this report.

We were fortunate to have so many grandmothers, Elders, strong women and girls sharing from their hearts and souls, the truth of their lived experiences. We heard incredible examples of positive work being done, which we would like to see more of. We identified gaps, and pointed the way for what more is needed to transform some of the most damaging of the inter-generational residential school impacts affecting the lives of Aboriginal women and girls today.

A telling moment happened when one of the RCMP participants (quietly) said "all of this (residential school information) is new to me". While that prompted some raised eyebrows, and at least one person to whisper "that is what's criminal", the truth is, that they were many First Nations, Inuit and Métis young students with us, who also knew very little about residential schools and even less about the recent Settlement Agreement.

As we moved across the country, we were reminded that up until recently there has been a palpable silence

around this subject. Many of the survivors' stories were buried with them. Others are just beginning to speak about their experiences, and we, as witnesses, saw how hard it was for many of them to re-visit that time. Their stories and those of the inter-generational survivors are critical to the reconciliation process we have all committed to. Ensuring survivors with us today have all the support, love, understanding, and caring they need is vital.

Sometimes simple truths-are what we need most to make some kind of change. The students at Britannia Outreach Program, message to survivors was that "We are Listening", and "We care". Some students also said "We forgive".

Where best to begin on the path to Reconciliation? For some in our circles, reconciling with their parents

or grandparents was one of the most significant milestones in their healing journeys. For others reconciling their own inner pains was key to being able to pass on to the next generation all the love and strength they wanted their children to have.

Our dialogues were significant because they encouraged an affirmation of the experiences of Aboriginal women and girls and invited those who typically have been "unlikely allies" to become part of the reconciliation process.

This dialogue process represents one small contribution to increasing understanding and improving conditions for Aboriginal women and girls impacted by residential schools. There will be many pathways to reconciliation-as land claims are settled, as treaty rights are respected, as sovereignty is gained, as First languages flourish, we will move closer to reconciliation.

In addition, over time, as the recommendations in this report begin to be implemented as increased inter-agency cooperation, deeper listening and attempts to better understand the experiences and world views of those impacted by residential schools, we will slowly but surely, get to the next step.

