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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Canada's Hidden History, My Mother and Me

By Gabrielle Scrimshaw

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I was 2 weeks old when I was taken from my mother. After a late night of drinking, she got into a fight, the police were called and, I am told, they found me swaddled and alone on a motel bed in La Ronge, Saskatchewan. She was in her late 20s. It wasn't until I reached my late 20s that I understood the path that led my mother to that moment.

She isn't a bad mother or a bad person. She is a good person raised in the toughest of circumstances. An indigenous woman in Northern Canada, my mother was born into a world where she was not meant to succeed.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the founding of Canada. From coast to coast hundreds of celebrations are planned for July 1, Canada's official birthday. But while many Canadians are celebrating, others are mourning. For the more than 1.4 million in the indigenous community, this milestone is a reminder of our suffering and loss.

More than a century of Indian policy by the Canadian government included forced migration, segregation, limiting education, outlawing culture and separating children from their parents. As recently as the 1980s, indigenous women would lose their Indian status and rights if they married a non-indigenous person. We were not allowed full voting rights until 1960.

Growing up without a mother to tuck me in at night, I spent 25 years believing she was to blame. Today, at 29, I understand that the situation is much more complicated. I had to learn indigenous history to finally understand her journey. When my mother was a little girl, my grandparents were told to send her to an Indian residential school.

Residential schools were government-funded, church-run institutions found across Canada and the United States that put seven generations of indigenous children through their doors. Children were not allowed to speak their language or practice their culture; as young as 6 years old, they

faced electric chairs for punishment, and siblings were separated. Many, including my relatives, faced physical, sexual and mental abuse. One report estimated at least 6,000 children perished of malnutrition and disease, or while attempting to escape.

By the 1960s, the abuses the children faced in residential schools were well known, but if my grandparents refused to send my mother to one, they risked being thrown in jail or fined. My mother went to Prince Albert Indian Residential School as a young girl until my grandparents made the decision to hide her in the bush on school pickup day so she would not have to continue.

With limited alternatives for education, my mother did not finish middle school and today is illiterate. She speaks her Dene language better than she speaks English. As a result, further education and employment were not options.

Seven generations of my ancestors went through these schools. Each new family member enrolled meant a compounding of abuse and a steady loss of identity, culture and hope. My mother was the last generation. The experience left her broken, and like so many, she turned to substances to numb these pains. This continued up until the night we were separated in the motel. From then on, my father took full custody of me.

In the small indigenous town where I grew up, substance abuse, suicide and poverty touched every family, mine included. Not far from where I lived was a three-story red-brick building that had housed a residential school until 1964.

Yet my friends and I in public school were not taught about the horrors of the residential schools. Instead we memorized the order of Canada's prime ministers, starting with Sir John A. MacDonal, and took a quiz naming every Canadian province. It's much more comfortable to talk about that stuff. Nor did we learn that MacDonal justified the schools this way: "When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training, mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write." In residential schools, he added, "they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."

The history Canada celebrates is comfortable and one-sided. One third of non-indigenous Canadians have never heard of residential schools. In a country where half of indigenous children live in poverty, one-quarter of Canadians believe indigenous people are to blame for their circumstance. The truth is much more difficult. In order to expand Canada westward, the government displaced and confined my people — a stark contrast from the Canada so praised these days for welcoming refugees from Syria and other nations.

For most of my life I saw my mother every two or three years. Visits were characterized by awkward hugs and small talk in hotel rooms. Today my mother and I have no real relationship; there are no birthday calls and no cards on Mother's Day. The desire to be held and to know a

mother's love is a loss so deep it feels hollow.

I have so much to ask my mother but I have no idea where to start. The more I educate myself about my Dene heritage, the more I find strength in our community's resiliency. There is strength in knowing where you come from and understanding the history that led you to where you are.

Learning about our past won't change it, but mandating indigenous history in our school systems is a good start. Without an honest dialogue and recognition of this history, we will hide behind a comfortable ignorance. My hope is that on July 1, Canadians who raise their flag high in celebration will also take a minute to reflect on the loss many have faced along the way.

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