



New Heritage Minute explores dark history of Indian residential schools

'This is something we need to talk about,' says author Joseph Boyden. 'Our history is not always good'

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A new Heritage Minute, released on National Aboriginal Day, follows the story of Chanie (Charlie) Wenjack, who attended Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School in Kenora, Ont., in the 1960s. (Historica Canada)

Making its premiere on National Aboriginal Day, Historica Canada's newest Heritage Minute explores the dark history of Indian residential schools and their lasting effects on Indigenous people.

Novelist [Joseph Boyden](#) says he welcomed the opportunity to write the script for the video.

"This is something we need to talk about, and we need to recognize as Canadians, that our history is not always good," he said.

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The Heritage Minute follows the story of Chanie (Charlie) Wenjack, who attended Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School in Kenora, Ont., in the 1960s. At age 12, he ran away. He had been gone a week when his frozen body was discovered beside the railroad tracks near Redditt, on Oct. 23, 1966.

Wenjack's death prompted the first inquest into the treatment of children at the schools.

"He's a powerful symbol of those innocents who ran, just trying to be home, and didn't make it, who didn't survive residential school," said Boyden.

Still a current issue

The newest Heritage Minute breaks convention by having a family member narrate, rather than an actor.

"We've included a real life person ... to make clear how current this is," said Historica CEO Anthony Wilson-Smith.





Wenjack was 12 when he ran away from the residential school. His frozen body was found nearby next to a railway track.

Chanie Wenjack's sister Pearl Achneepineskum, herself a residential school survivor, provides the narration.

"My brother, when he died — he didn't take life for granted. He knew where he was wanting to be. His whole happiness was home," said Achneepineskum, in a video interview provided by Historica.

"When other people see this film, I hope they take away that they're very fortunate that they can do whatever they like and not being stopped of being who they are; that they're proud of who they are."

Not easy to watch

Doris Young, a Cree educator and residential school survivor, said this is not an easy Heritage Minute to watch.

"It brings back my own memories of experiencing, of having to watch a child being beaten to death. So when I see that, it brings back those horrors. I hope I don't have a nightmare tonight," she said.

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While Young says the Heritage Minute might help Canadians understand what residential school survivors went through, she doesn't think National Aboriginal Day — a day of celebration of identity and culture — is the day to focus on it.

"This little child on this railway track is not our culture. This is about what happened to him because of a political and legal decision that was made for him, for his family, for his community."

Inspire people to learn more

The non-profit organization Historica Canada is devoted to enhancing awareness of Canadian history and the values of Canadian citizenship.

"I always say that if all people know of Canadian history or a particular issue is what they've learned from one of our minutes, that's not nearly enough," said Wilson-Smith.

"What we hope to do is get people to watch a minute and say, 'I never knew that ... and I really want to know more about that.'"

Boyden said it's important that these new Heritage Minutes are told from the perspective of Indigenous people.

"We've all seen the Heritage Minutes, and they're great, but it's always from the side of the settler," said Boyden, who also wrote a Heritage Minute episode about treaties.

"But talk about trying to squeeze a lot into one minute. It was not an easy process."

With files from Stephanie Cram, Tim Fontaine and Alana Cole