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# future generations

By Lisa Phu | November 25, 2015



Alaska Native Arts & Culture , Arts & Culture , Education , Family , History , Juneau , Juneau Schools , Spirit



*Tlingit elder Della Cheney talks during a panel discussion on boarding schools at the “Sharing Our Knowledge; A Conference of Tlingit Tribes & Clans.” In the 1920s and 1930s, Cheney’s parents attended Sheldon Jackson School in Sitka. (Photo by Lisa Phu/KTOO)*

By talking about boarding school experiences, Tlingit elders in Juneau are turning painful memories into sources of healing – healing for themselves and generations still living with

the consequences.



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Della Cheney and other elders have been meeting once a month at [Goldbelt Heritage Foundation](#) since August.

“We’re helping to write down the story of how boarding schools are affecting us and our families today, so that our children and grandchildren will know the history and realize the changes our families, our people faced,” said Cheney, who’s originally from Kake. She was part of panel of Tlingit elders during the recent [clan conference](#) in Juneau.

From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, the federal government split up families and forced Native children into boarding schools to assimilate. Many were also raised in orphanages.

“That time is still walking with us today,” Cheney said. “The people who were raised with no love or affection in a very hostile environment also raised their children without much nurturing or affection. So today we see some of our families suffering from abuse.”

Cheney said both her parents attended Sheldon Jackson School in Sitka. Her mother was only 10 when she was brought there in 1923.

“It just breaks my heart to think that I was raised in such a loving family and to know that my mother and father weren’t,” Cheney said.

But those who went to boarding schools persevered, Cheney said. In Kake, they fought to make the village a first class city in 1951, allowing the community to operate its own school system.

Emma Shorty is from Teslin, Yukon. She was 4 years old when she was taken away from her home in 1937 to go to residential school in Carcross.



“We were never allowed to go anywhere,” Shorty said. “We had to stay in one yard. They ^

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“I learned to forgive. I wasn’t always kind. Residential school just about killed my spirit. Today I forgive them,” Short said.

She fought hard to have her first daughter go to public school, even though she was turned away again and again for being Tlingit.



*Tlingit elder John Martin said boarding schools “was a form of prison.” (Photo by Lisa Phu/KTOO)*

John Martin went to boarding school in Eklutna and then to the St. Pius X Mission in Skagway, “but instead of Christianity, there were some ugly things that went on.” Martin

said he would not speak about it.



elders were teaching us now to gather food.”

Martin said telling the stories from that time and identifying the hurt is the beginning of healing.

Developing the new Goldbelt Heritage curriculum is a multi-year process. Besides boarding schools, it will also share the history of the [Douglas Indian Village burning](#) and the Douglas Indian cemetery relocation.

The curriculum will be used during summer academic programs at Goldbelt Heritage and will be available for the Juneau School District.



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