

**UNRESERVED****Residential school survivors share their story of healing**

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Roberta and Audrey Hill are two survivors of the Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, Ontario. They share their story of healing with CBC Unreserved. 0:55



The more people you talk to in Six Nations of the Grand River, the more deeply you feel the legacy of the Mohawk Institute. It was an Indian Residential School in nearby Brantford, Ont.

On Six Nations, people call the school The Mush Hole. That nickname comes from the poor quality of food served to the children who were taken there.

The large, red brick building with white columns still stands, and you don't have to look far to find survivors and their dark stories.

Roberta Hill attended the school from the time she was six years old in 1957 until she was 10. Her niece, Audrey Hill, attended with her younger siblings for one year starting in 1963.





Roberta Hill (left) and Audrey Hill. (Erica Daniels/CBC)

Audrey was taken to the school by her mother after her parents split up. She promised that it was just until she could sort out housing for them as a family. Audrey was 10 years old when her mother dropped them off and she had no idea what to expect.

"I was used to growing up around where adults played with you. You'd come in and they'd give you hugs or they'd warm your hands up if you were playing outside in the wintertime. We had assembly line bathing and everybody would eat at the table," she recalled. "But I could tell it was different there and I knew things weren't right."

For Audrey, it quickly became clear that the reality of school life was much different from what she knew at home.

She heard about sexual abuse, witnessed physical abuse and remembers being slapped and having her hair pulled at the school.

Their mom came to visit and checked in on them often, something that Audrey says kept them relatively safe.

"She was talking to us regularly and we were talking with her and I think that protected me. I think it protected my younger sister."

Audrey and her siblings spent one year at the school. And then, just as she promised, her mother came for them.





The Mohawk Institute was in operation from 1831 to 1970. (Erica Daniels/CBC)

Roberta wasn't as fortunate. Over her four years at the school, she recalled being sexually assaulted by the same administrator in an office and in the church. She said they learned early on to be wary of some of the staff members.

"We bathed only once a week, so you'd go upstairs to get your clothes, come down and you'd have these little stalls of tubs," she explained.


Roberta said three or four girls would hop in a tub, then get out and get dressed, talking and playing on the benches.

"One of the little girls beside me said, 'You'd better hurry up and get dressed, so-and-so's coming.' Sure enough, here comes this big, tall guy, walking through, looking at all the naked little girls. So after that, you learn to dress quick."

Both women say it took a long time to deal with the trauma of attending the Mohawk Institute. About 10 years ago, Audrey spoke about her time there, but didn't delve very deeply into her experience. But, she said, that's when the memories returned.

Even with a master's degree in psychology and a career of working in child welfare, Audrey found it difficult to get the help she knew she needed.

"It was horrible.... it was years that I had to wade through that. I wouldn't go and get help for it, I tried a couple of times and the counsellors didn't have a clue what we were talking about. So, I felt like I was educating the counselor," she said.



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- *Roberta Hill*

For her aunt Roberta, who spent years at the school and became a registered nurse, it wasn't until 2008 that she began the long and painful journey to heal.

She recalled finally finding help at a sexual assault centre, decades after she left the school.

"It took me at least 50 years to deal with it because I'm 65 now. So that's a lot of years of bottling stuff up and not dealing with it," Roberta said.

"You can't get over it. You can deal with it, but I don't think you ever get over it. It never seems to leave you. So we're still dealing with it even at my age and I probably will until I'm gone from this world."

Both women see a tremendous value in the work the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done to share stories like theirs.

"Canadians are just absolutely shocked that this history has been hidden," Roberta said. "I think Canadians want to hear this history — even though it's ugly — and they deserve to hear it."

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