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Sleeping Children Awake

Residential school doc examines students' experiences

By Ian Kaufman

The documentary 'Sleeping Children Awake,' shown on campus last Tuesday, challenges us to engage personally, rather than politically, with the issue of residential schools. The film examines first and foremost the experience of First Nations students in residential schools, and that of the families and communities from which they were often torn. The wider conclusions to be drawn from such experiences are left largely to the audience. Conversely, this treatment illuminates all the more starkly the political and social implications of residential schools.

The film is built around Shirley Cheechoo's play 'Path with No Moccasins' about her experiences in the residential school system. The scenes taken from her play are harrowing in their unpolished recounting of her residential school experience, cut off from her family and her culture, and her subsequent struggle with addiction and identity. We also hear from residential school survivor Elijah Harper, the Manitoban MLA (the equivalent of an MPP) who famously stood in his province's legislative assembly to oppose the Meech Lake Accord in protest of the failure to work with First Nations in drawing it up. The film is often terribly uncomfortable to watch, as well it should be – any honest account of the experience of residential schools could hardly be otherwise.

By the 1940s, there were about 10 000 students in nearly a hundred residential schools across Canada. 'Sleeping Children Awake' details not only the abuse – beatings, malnutrition, rape – but also the widespread and long-lasting social and cultural effects upon First Nations communities. As tools to resolve the 'Indian problem,' the schools forbade students to use their language, learn about their culture, or have anything but minimal contact with their families. For students who had often been removed at the age of four, this effectively severed their ties with their community, their history and their sense of identity.

A recurring theme is students' frustration with what they were being taught in class. Christian book learning seemed incredibly impractical (as it did for many non-Native students). As the child of one student relates, "she knew that all this stuff she was learning would be of no use to her in the bush." When she returned to her community, "they had to re-teach her how to live in harmony with the earth."

Many of the students, like Cheechoo, never told their parents about what they encountered in the schools. "Would you want to tell someone you only saw a few days a year something like that?" she asks. The effects do not end with those who went through the residential schools, the film stresses. The child of a residential school survivor talks about the schools' continuing legacy for the next generation: "Children raised in these schools had never been parented themselves," he says. Often the traumatic experiences of survivors led to drug or alcohol addiction, as in Cheechoo's case.

All of us, I assume, have heard about residential schools. Their sordid history is at last being acknowledged in the classroom and the media. But have we adequately confronted their impact amongst First Nations people, or what this legacy has to tell us about Canadian society at large? After all, what good are apologies – even "official" ones – and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions if we don't learn anything? With only one generation separating us from the practice of residential schools, we should be careful about dismissing them as the relic of a distant past. Students can borrow 'Sleeping Children Awake' from the Aboriginal Awareness Centre down the hall from the LUSU office.