



My Heart Shook Like a Drum

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled “All Psyched Up” for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of “Life is An Adventure...every step of the way” and “Open for Business Success” is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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Most people do not fully understand the trauma and pain that resulted for thousands of children who were taken from their parents and placed in mission residential schools by the Canadian Government in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are over 80,000 Aboriginal people who lived in these institutions and are still alive today.

Alice Blondin-Perrin, the author of "My Heart Shook Like a Drum" was only four years old when she was separated from most of her family members and put into the St. Joseph's Mission School at Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories. Her book outlines the experiences and abuse that she encountered during the years that she was forced under Canadian legislation to live in four different residential schools and the negative affects that have plagued her as a result.

Ms. Blondin was born into a Dene family who lived at Cameron Bay in the Northwest Territories. Her parents, who had several children, were well-respected individuals who worked hard and practiced the native traditional ways of hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering and living off the land. They were hardy people who were used to living in sub-zero temperatures. But their daughter never had an opportunity to learn all of these skills from them as she grew up.

The Canadian Government had a perspective that it was best for native children to live in residential schools run by Christian organizations in order to receive an education. The native perspective, however, was that children and families were horribly disadvantaged as they lost their time together as well as the things such as language, culture, and practises of their heritage that was their identity.

Besides the devastating situation of being away from family and community, the children suffered from very abusive Grey Nun supervisors who were in charge of the schools.

Ms. Blondin was frequently in trouble because she did not understand the languages spoken by the Nuns. She was punished when she spoke her native language or did not respond to the English or French that was spoken to her.

Besides physical and mental abuse, the children in these boarding schools were often the victims of sexual abuse.

Many of the children became stuck in dysfunctional patterns that affected the rest of their lives. Some committed suicide. Others suffered from mental illnesses or addictions.

Besides living at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Mission School in Fort Resolution, Ms. Blondin was also a resident at Federal Hostels in Breynat Hall at Fort Smith, Lapointe Hall in Fort Simpson and Akaitcho Hall in Yellowknife. Her story therefore offers a perspective of those children who lived in different environments but under the same mandate.

It is now several decades since Ms. Blondin was discharged and returned to her family. She has invested in herself since then in her attempts to recapture her spirituality and ethnic customs. She not only has struggled to forgive the Canadian Government and Catholic Church, but also to help others with their healing journeys.

Residential schools began operating in 1840 and shut down in the 1970s and 1980s but the negative effects on the children who lived there have consequences for generations to come. There needs to be understanding, therefore, not only of the problems and how they occurred, but also of the most effective ways to resolve issues and create positive change.

"My Heart Shook Like a Drum" is a very sad tale that offers both personal and historic insight into a phenomena that is now recognized as a travesty. In fact, the Prime Minister, Governor General and Pope have all offered formal apologies for the horrible practices that led so many to feel ashamed of their culture and language. But apologies are not enough to bring healing and organizations have therefore been formed to ensure that resources are in place to help with the healing.

I recommend this book as it is a must-read for all who want to learn from history as they attempt to build a healthy future for themselves and others.