

## Unbelievable journey just beginning for Heather Sararas



Heather Sararas, local crisis counsellor at Maggie's, has found her birth mother 47 years after she was removed from her home at the age of four during the 'Sixties Scoop' of aboriginal children in Canada. Here she visits with her mother, who is now living in Kingston.

**By Jim Eadie**

(This story seems incredible ? but it's true; such practices were routine only a short time ago.)

Heather Sararas is one of the crisis counsellors at Maggie's Resource Centre of North Hastings, and for many years has been working to help women and children in North Hastings change their lives for the better. She is a mother, wife, and now grandmother; a hard worker devoted to her family and herself, and her community.

Her first childhood memory is being brought to a house in Bancroft at the age of four and a half, and shown a nice room that was to be hers. She doesn't remember anything about where she came from. It was never a secret for her, and over the years her adoptive parents talked openly about her adoption, and how much she meant to them.

'My parents were told that I was an only child, who was being raised by a grandmother who was now sick and dying. They were told that my mother decided to give me up,' said Sararas. Angry that her mother didn't want her, Sararas had no interest in learning about her past, and put it from her mind. 'My adoptive parents and I figured that I was probably aboriginal because of my complexion.'

In 1990, curiosity got the best of her, and she filed for adoption records to see if she had any siblings. 'I was shocked, to say the least,' she said. Sararas was informed that she was born to a Mohawk woman, and that she had in fact three siblings. She subsequently discovered that a sister had been adopted by another North Hastings family, and at one point had gone to the same

school that she had.

'My adoptive father wept when I told him,' she said. 'Dad said that they had been lied to. They would have tried to adopt the other kids too, to keep the family together. We all felt like we had been betrayed.' Sararas was angry and confused, but still felt that she did not want to meet someone who had given up on her.

In 2006, after working in business administration positions, she volunteered at Maggie's to get an idea if this could be something she should be doing. By the following year, her skills and devotion had been noted, and she was hired as a front line crisis worker, but was expected to complete formal training. 'I was working and going to school full time. I worked my butt off, writing papers, weekends, nights. I never took holidays. But I did it!' she said proudly. In 2010, she graduated with her Social Service Worker diploma.

Not resting, Sararas was accepted into the Ryerson University social work degree program for indigenous students. After discussing some of her life story with her English professor Janice Brant, the professor suggested that Sararas could be one of the victims of the 'Sixties Scoop.' Sararas had never heard that term before, and Brant challenged her to go and find out, and write about her experiences. 'I searched ' I read a lot of articles ' and I realized that this fit with my story,' said Sararas.

The 'Sixties Scoop' was a term that arose from the 1984 report by Justice Kimelman in Manitoba, which among other things looked into every single Indian and Metis adoption and placement in the Province of Manitoba. The inquiry found that following the closure of most residential schools, as many as 20,000 aboriginal children in Canada were removed from their families between 1960 and 1980, and fostered or adopted both nationally and internationally. The conclusion read in part: 'we can now state unequivocally that cultural genocide has been taking place in a systematic and routine manner.'

Then Sararas hit the tightest left turn in her life.

On her very last week of school for her bachelor's degree, she attended a sweat lodge at Tyendinaga, and then walked over with other students to the Tyendinaga Wellness Centre for a reception.

'One of the workers kept looking at me. Eventually she said hi, and I told her what we were doing that day. She kept staring at me, and she asked me if I was from Tyendinaga,' said Sararas. 'I told her I was adopted, and I lived in Bancroft area.'

'Oh my God!' she cried. 'Little Heather Elaine ' I need to give you a hug. I haven't see you since you were a little girl. I am your cousin Wendy Maracle; I know where your mother is.'

'It was so surreal; how does that ever happen?' mused Sararas. Maracle agreed to arrange contact, but Sararas needed to speak to her family first.

'I went home to speak to my husband and kids, who are loyal to their adoptive grandma. I told them I would like to meet my mother. They could decide for themselves if they want this to be part of their lives,' she said. Everyone embraced the long lost grandma.

Next was the telephone call: 'Hi Mom, it's Heather.'

'She asked me why I wanted to connect with her,' said Sararas, 'I told her that my education had taught me I needed to communicate with her.'

And then, the trip to Mom's in Kingston. 'As the GPS called out, I knew we were getting closer and closer. What do I get her for a gift? When we were only three kilometres from her house, I said 'I don't want to do this.' My husband said, 'Yes you do ' we are here!'

What do you say to your mom in such a moment? 'Thank you very much, Mom, thank you for giving me life!'

Later Sararas reflected on the new relationship. 'I felt like I had come full circle, and I felt complete. We just seemed to pick up and move on. Now I call her pretty much every day.'

Every day Mom had thought about the last day she had seen her 'little Heather' 47 years ago.

'I remember we were sitting together colouring,' she said. 'There was a knock at the door. It was Children's Aid; they said they were here to take Heather. I had no idea that the Children's Aid Society were coming to take her. Taking her away was like tearing my heart out - she was my girl.'

Mom had an Uncle Doug who was prepared to take the children in, but they were told he had too many of his own children.

'Did any agency ever come to your house and offer you any support or assistance?' I asked. 'No,' was the answer.

'Did anyone ever check back to see if you were OK, or needed anything?' Again: 'No.'

Every year on Heather's birthday, Uncle Doug would call Mom, and they would wonder together how her girl was, who she had become, whether she was still alive, and did she have family.

'The day she walked in my door, it was a happy day,' said Mom. 'I couldn't speak; I just grabbed her, and hugged her, and cried. Oh my God ' it is really her?'

Mom was able to attend her daughter's university graduation in June 2015 where the special guest of honour was Justice Murray Sinclair, chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Canada). This was a moment of great meaning and peace for her mother, to meet Sinclair, and receive his encouragement and affirmation.

“Heather has really overcome a lot of stuff,” said Banakonda Kennedy Kish Bell, one of her university professors, and currently her aboriginal elder. “She has persevered, and continues to persevere. Her journey is just beginning, and we haven't seen it all yet. This was an amazing journey that she took and there is more to come!”