

Acknowledging truth



By Nate Smelle

THE WORDS "TRUTH AND reconciliation seem to be appearing in the mainstream media more and more these days without much explanation behind their sudden importance. Partially responsible for the newfound popularity of these eight syllables in the daily newsfeed is that on June 2 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada released its findings after listening to the firsthand experiences of more than 6,750 survivors of the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) from across the country. In compiling these horrific accounts of physical, mental and sexual abuse over the last six years, the commission has come up with an action plan defining "94 Calls to Action" that will help begin the healing that comes with reconciliation.

Kudos to the staff and students at York River Public School (YRPS) for doing their part in helping to expose the terrible truths the TRC have unearthed in this report as part of the school's first ever Think Indigenous Day on Friday, June 12. Sitting in on one of Tanya King-Maracle's workshops on IRS that day, I like the other students in the room had many questions about the IRS system that needed to be answered. In spite of my mounting curiosity I decided to save my questions for after class so that I could fully appreciate the information being shared. By the end of the 45-minute workshop I felt as if my eyes had been opened a little wider; giving me a clearer view of this dark period in Canadian history.

One of the most haunting moments during the workshop came when King-Maracle described her mother's experience of riding on the infamous "Red Bug" a small vessel that delivered the Indigenous children and their parents to the IRS in Spanish Ontario. Coming around the last point before reaching their destination her mother said the boat would fall ominously silent as the families noticed a large statue of Jesus welcoming the new arrivals. Seeing the statue with its arms outstretched as they rounded the last

corner to enter the bay where the school was located was anything but welcoming, her mother told her. It was at this moment when they saw the statue each year that they realized their families and community would soon be broken up for the next 10 months. The children were left behind at the school without any opportunity to contact or connect with their community. Not allowed to wear their traditional clothing or speak their own language they were punished severely for simply saying a word in the language they had been taught since birth. According to King-Maracle's mother, the nuns at the school would give children 10 lashings with a metre stick for every syllable they spoke in their own language. This would most often amount to a brutal beating considering for instance that the Algonquin word for owl is ?kokokoho.? In this case it would have meant 40 lashes with a wooden stick for simply pointing out a bird in the schoolyard. Imagine the senseless pain and suffering caused to these children simply for speaking a single word, let alone a sentence, or creator-forbid a story in their own language.

As participants in the digital age we can appreciate the all-important role of language in terms of our own ability to communicate with one another. Our languages?the words we use and how we use them are what hold together all cultures around the world. Forcing a people to get rid of their language not only strips away the integrity of the individual it also disintegrates the rich cultural diversity that has flourished on Turtle Island since long before the first influences of colonialization.