

LEGACY OF HOPE FOUNDATION  
**DAY OF COMMEMORATION**  
Shaw Centre, Edmonton, Alberta  
July 8, 2004

**IRSRC ADDRESS**

Mr. Chairman, Grand Chief, honoured elders, residential school survivors, families, Aboriginal leaders, and distinguished guests; I would like to acknowledge the people of Papaschase for welcoming us into their territories. It is a true honour to be here.

I would like to thank the Foundation for having made the arrangements so that such a large gathering of former students are here today in Edmonton. This is obviously a historical event.

I feel very privileged to have been chosen to speak at this podium. In April of this year, the Prime Minister promised that a principle of collaboration would be the cornerstone of our new partnership.

Healing is the theme that comes back this morning, and the need for greater investment and involvement into healing. The government will have to work with Aboriginal peoples in determining how to address this continuous need.

My first message to residential school survivors, their families, their friends and community members, is that we hope you will find it in your hearts to forgive us for the ill-conceived policies and practices of the past.

Thank you for your generous spirit in opening this welcome home ceremony to us. Even if historically Government representatives were the ones who took you or your children away from you to these schools, you are demonstrating once again your extraordinary generosity in allowing us to be present as family and community members are welcomed home. This reflects your kindness and belief that we can work together towards a brighter future.

We are deeply sorry for the residential school experiences that have caused such deep pain and hurt. We regret not only the physical and sexual abuse so many of you have had to endure, but also your separation from family and community at such a young age. As the Honourable Jane Stewart said in the 1998 Statement of Reconciliation:

*“Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to the suppression of Aboriginal culture and values and the weakening of the identity of Aboriginal peoples. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed.”*

The Government of Canada acknowledges its role in the administration of the schools and accepts responsibility for the impact of the Indian residential school system. Our actions to date have not been perfect. We have come to some resolution with 2,000 former students. We still have over 10,000 additional claims to deal with in as humane and respectful way as possible.

The second message I'd like to leave with you is about Commemoration. The daughter of a survivor expressed her thoughts on commemoration as follows:

*"I think of my parents and their legacy of strength, courage and resilience against incredible odds; they survived and this is a lasting legacy of characteristics that do not die, that are passed on to the next generation. We need to leave our children the strength of our parents, to commemorate the very spirit of what they endured and came out alive. They were strong warriors, keeping our cultures alive and traditions strong."*

Nous avons l'honneur d'être ici pour commémorer cet héritage de force, de courage et de résistance contre vents et marées. Nous avons l'honneur d'être témoins du « retour au bercail » de vos valeureux guerriers.

I'm very pleased to be here with members of my team to participate in this very important event.

I have not endured what you have endured, and I cannot say that I understand what you have gone through. We must be conscious, however, of your pain and anger. All the efforts so many of you are making and have made to feel better are truly admirable.

We are paying tribute to this extraordinary resilience. Our commitment, my commitment, the Department's commitment to healing and reconciliation is true. You have my word that I will work very hard with Churches, Aboriginal leaders, and other partners in doing our best to ensure the good work of the AHF does not come to an end.

One of the things that was said in the Exploratory Dialogues and since then, survivors have made it clear to the Government that compensation is important, but it is not the most important thing. Bringing communities back together is of even greater importance to you. We are working together in trying to find significant ways to support this getting together so that one day in the various communities where those schools did the damage, there will be events to adequately bring back together survivors and their communities. We are working towards a new partnership to a better future, one in which I am convinced Aboriginal people will be proud to once again to speak their own languages or dance to the beat of the drums, and to sit on Mother Earth to pray to the Creator.

We have heard you say that your stories need to be told, so arrangements were made to give an opportunity to those survivors who wish to do so to tell their story in a way that will be preserved and will be available for future generations. Canadians do not yet have a good understanding of the long-term impacts the schools have had on you and the importance of encouraging a sense of identity, a sense of community, and cultural pride.

We are also responding by conducting commemoration workshops across Canada with two of your great Elders and pioneers, Ron Ignace and Ruth Norton, who are here with us today.

They have been particularly active and influential in trying to keep your cultures alive and your traditions strong, both being on the Chiefs' Languages Committee of the Assembly of First Nations, and now being members of the Languages and Cultures Task Force, which Mr. Ignace chairs.

We are humbled that they are on the commemoration workshop team that has been visiting your communities so that, together, we can share ideas on other ways to honour and pay tribute to former students and survivors. In two months from now, when the workshops have been completed, we will make sure you are informed how this survivor-driven program will work, so that there are adequate means made available for communities to honour the memory of former students – those who are still with us, and those who have gone on to the Spirit World.

My Department and I will work hard with survivor representatives, the National Chief and other Aboriginal leaders as well as the Churches to make sure you continue to receive significant assistance in healing the scars of residential schools. We are committed to dealing with you humanely and with the greatest respect.

I wish you a rich gathering and once again, thank you for inviting us.

Meegwetch.