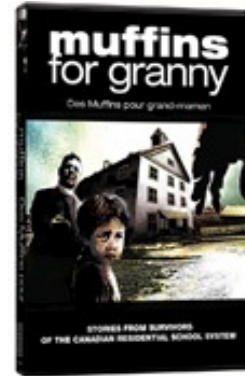


To understand the impact of residential schools the Mission and Social Justice Committee at St. Basil's arranged for a presentation by Jackie Miller, public relations officer of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. This is what the 40 attendees saw and heard on February 13, 2010.



Jackie Miller began her session with a broad sweep of Canadian history, talking about life here before contact, life here during the early contact period, followed by the complications that followed the Indian Act with its various treaties.

Muffins for Granny – the documentary



(Margaret Bott, chair of the Mission Committee, with Jackie Miller of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, right.)

This was a broad-stroke overview to prepare us for the second part of her presentation, a documentary directed by Nadia McLaren, a young aboriginal filmmaker. This award-winning documentary is the director's journey of discovery about her grandmother and what it was that made her life on a north-western Ontario reserve so painful, so difficult and destructive. Though deeply troubled, her grandmother was creative and nurturing in her own way. Why? The film pieces elements of her story together.

Muffins for Granny opens with flickering images from a home movie of the director's grandmother dancing in her underwear, surrounded by playful children in happier times. The woman is described as playful and yet troubled in this film which is the director's journey of discovery, a determination to find and honour the details of her grandmother's story. It's clear that Residential Schools and their impact on those who attended them is the subject of this film.

In order to try and understand her grandmother's difficult life story, the director, Nadia McLaren, sat down to talk with six individuals who in today's terminology would be described as survivors. Some would be her grandmother's age, if she were still alive today, while others would be about the same ages as the director's parents. In this deeply emotional film, all six are fascinating and memorable characters. Despite the terrible details that

they speak about so openly, they radiate a deep wisdom and a gentle humanity that is truly inspiring.

Eulalia Michana, one of the oldest, recounts her time in prison because of her inability to contain the violence of her reaction to being taken away from her family at the age of six. She describes herself as being too old to change, yet most of what she talks about is the human capacity to change. The emotionally intense Delaney Sharpe speaks about being haunted by terrifying images and stories of violence in the schools. Her memories are littered with bones and bodies. She cannot turn away, despite the pain.

The visual artist, Roy Thomas, sits in his wheelchair, and describes himself as leading a kind of fantasy life. Articulate, commercially successful, he pretended that everything was fine as long as he drank and took drugs. Eventually an elder intervened, telling him, "You are in trouble and you don't even know it." He eventually started listening, gave up the drugs and the alcohol, and began to examine his experiences as child in a residential school. And continued as an artist.

Garnet Angeconeb quietly lists the extent of the damage caused by the residential schools, the way they remove a generation of children from every community, generation by generation. He talks about their impact on culture and family life. Yet, as devastating as the details are, he radiates a quiet resolve, a sense that

work of recovery is both hard and possible. He is currently a board member of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Ralph Johnson smiles in every sequence. Wearing a traditional beadwork collar, he radiates a sincere, genuinely heart-warming smile that communicates a deep sense of personal integration and reassuring calmness. This is in sharp contrast with the story he tells of the misery that led to a botched suicide attempt with a shotgun when he was much younger.

But it's Alice "Mrs" Littledeer that the director keeps returning to get to the heart of her grandmother's story. They had grown up together and it is from her that the filmmaker learns that to understand her grandmother's story she must learn about her experiences in residential school. As this key interview unfolds we discover more of the daily details of life in residential school and their impact on the children decades later. Abuse takes many forms: physical, emotional, psychological, and cultural.

What makes Alice Littledeer's witness so disturbing to Catholic ears is the visible discomfort she has when talking about the actions of the priests and nuns. To say something critical about them is to somehow be critical of the faith they represented. It's this sense of innocence of abused in so many ways that gives the film such impact.

We eventually learn why the film is entitled *Muffins for Granny*. At a school

attended by locals as well as native residential students, whenever muffins were baked for the non-aboriginal children, the “Indian kids” were left with the crumbs in the discarded muffin papers. Scenes of the filmmaker making muffins with a group of native women intersperse the interviews. Another element in this film is the way the director uses darkly dramatic illustrations, like the pages from a graphic novel, to depict the intensity of the abuse.



Like pages from a graphic novel

The film has no happy ending with an easy resolution. It is a film about a journey into a troubled past. It shows what the director has learned about the experiences of her grandmother and how these echo the experiences of generations of Canada's first nations. She learns the importance of listening. She concludes that no matter how damaging these experiences have been for many, the human spirit prevails. All the people in her film have

something inspiring, something essential, to share with those who are willing to listen to them.



Questions just tumbled out

Not surprisingly, at the conclusion of the film, the questions just tumbled out of the audience. The questions were as emotion filled as they were complicated. But they were all important questions. The final question, without doubt, was the most significant. Someone asked, “So what do we do we now with all of this information?”

So what do we do now?

What Jackie Miller said in conclusion was this: to encounter the information about residential schools and what they did, in spite of the good intentions of many, is to enter a paradigm shift. Government policies and church participation in enacting that policy is the history we have inherited. It is also our legacy today, as Catholics and as Canadians. Our understanding of the past will help us

on a journey toward a shared future. When residential school survivors tell their story they are bearing witness to their experience. Just as we bear witness to each other at a baptism, marriage, funeral, or Eucharist. We are moving into the next phase of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation process, with hearings across Canada. We are called to listen to and to honour with open hearts, those who continue to bear witness to their experiences of residential schools.



Some of the resources and “thank you” gifts provided by Jackie Miller and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation

For more information on the Aboriginal Healing Foundation see: www.ahf.ca

For more information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada see: www.trc-cvr.ca



This information session was first proposed by Marianne McLean, member of the St Basil's Mission Committee, and who also works with Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Kevin Burns
February 15, 2010

