

Legacy of denial

GLIMPSE INTO RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM, APATHY TO INTERVENE HAUNTED CHILD PSYCHIATRIST. HE WAS NOT ALONE IN SOUNDING THE ALARM

By: Melissa Martin

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Mark Taylor / THE CANADIAN PRESS

A vigil takes place recently on the grounds of the former Marieval Indian Residential School on the Cowessess First Nation. It's been a long-perpetrated myth the horrors of the system were kept hidden.

OPINION

Philip Katz was not an emotional man, his daughter Jennifer Katz says. Through her life, she saw him weep only once, which was when his mother died. But there was another time where he came close, where his eyes teared up and his voice welled with emotion, and that was when he spoke about his visit to a residential school.

Some of the details of the story have been lost to time. Katz, a prominent Winnipeg child psychiatrist who died in 2017 at age 86, is no longer here to tell them. But what he witnessed at the school in 1969 shook him for the rest of his life, and even changed the course of his professional practice.

"It haunted him," says Jennifer, now an associate professor of education at the University of British Columbia. "He used that word: 'it haunted me.'"

His story, passed down from father to daughter, also casts a damning light on the apathy that allowed residential schools to persist, even as countless people, from Indigenous parents and leaders to visiting doctors, rang alarm bells about the trauma and mistreatment children were suffering in the system.

Katz was one of the non-Indigenous people best-positioned to recognize that trauma. By the late 1960s, he was renowned in Winnipeg for his work with children. He made frequent appearances in local newspapers, where he vociferously advocated for better support for youth mental health and improvements to education.

So the invitation from the church to tour the residential school, Katz later surmised, was an attempt to polish the school's public image. Perhaps, he told his daughter later, they wanted him and another psychiatrist who visited to say the children were thriving, and that everything at the school was fine.

In fact, what they found horrified them. At the time, Katz did not know about the sexual abuse that was rampant across the residential school system. But he noted with alarm the thinness of the children, the inferior conditions in which they lived, and the terrified look in their eyes.

~~His firm conclusion: the children were traumatized, and needed to be returned to their parents.~~

Back in Winnipeg, Katz and some of his colleagues tried to bring this to official attention. They wrote a letter to the federal government detailing their concerns. When that went nowhere, Katz approached a local reporter at the *Winnipeg Tribune* to get the story told, but that didn't pan out as he hoped either.

"He was expecting it would be a big front page kind of thing," Jennifer says, recalling her father's description. "When the paper came out and it was a small story on the back

page, is when he realized that nobody cares. Nobody cares about these kids. Nothing came of it being in the paper."

The experience left such a bitter impression on Katz that from that point on he devoted the majority of his work to Indigenous youth, knowing that entire generations of kids were emerging from the schools with deep, lasting trauma. For the rest of his life he was deeply skeptical of the government, and any official system.

What Katz perhaps did not know then, is that his complaint was not the first warning about residential schools to come from inside or outside the system. It was, in fact, just another in a long line of such complaints, dating back to the schools' beginning in the late 19th century, most of them adding up to nothing.

The strongest opposition to the schools, of course, came from Indigenous parents, leaders and survivors, who fought for over a century to make the truth known and to gain control of their children's education. Their voices were silenced, and as First Nations were for years prohibited from hiring lawyers, they had little recourse.

But even floods of complaints from those working within the residential school system had little effect.

Earlier this week, in a thread posted to Twitter, University of Winnipeg historian Erin Millions documented many of these complaints. They include multiple reports made by civil servants about inadequate nutrition, dilapidated buildings, unqualified staff, inferior medical treatment and the sexual abuse of children.

These complaints were not rare. They were "persistent and consistent," Millions says, which is to say they began when residential schools did, and continued until their end. ~~They document suffering and they document the mass death of children. Above all, they document how little was done to stop it.~~

The point is not that non-Indigenous people agreed the schools were bad: the sheer mountain of testimony from survivors, gathered and preserved by the exhaustive research of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has already documented the truth of them with detail and depth that no civil servant's report ever could.

"Survivors started this, survivors continued to do this work, and the rest of us follow along," Millions says.

But the archival records of complaints from within the system, and stories of experiences like Katz's, do clearly show the lie in the persistent myth that these harms and abuses were somehow hidden, and that the full extent of them is only now being discovered. It was always known, at every level, by all those in charge.

"The No. 1 thing to take away from the archival records is that they were just ignored," Millions says. "They always knew about this, they just ignored it. They were routinely being informed that the conditions in residential schools were killing children, and they just didn't care.

"They didn't care enough to want to spend the money to fix the conditions in the schools to make it at least healthy for the children."

So that is another element with which Canada has yet to fully reckon: the fact that complicity in residential schools was baked throughout the system, throughout the federal government, and across political parties. Those who held power changed, but for over a century, the trauma of the schools never did.

Now, while First Nations continue the grim work of locating the unmarked graves of their stolen children, these facts serve as a call to non-Indigenous Canadians to stand behind survivors in their calls for justice. There are still documents, for instance, that haven't been released by the Catholic church and government.

To put all the pieces of this history together, to understand the full scope of the schools and the closely-related tuberculosis sanatorium and hospital systems and how they persisted, then we need to have all the facts. And while most of them have long been out in the light, some are still waiting to be publicly counted.

"This knowledge has been there for years and years, especially after the TRC," Millions says. "It's frustrating that Canadians are just now learning it... but if it's going to bring more attention to the issues, to maybe pushing the calls to action forward, to having documents disclosed... hopefully that at least can be a benefit."

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Reading coverage of residential schools can be distressing for survivors and others impacted by the system. Those in need of support can contact the 24-hour Indian

Residential Schools Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419, or the Indian Residential School Survivors Society at 1-800-721-0066.

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