

The discovery of hundreds of Indigenous children’s remains in the spring was particularly hard for me—because I knew I could have been one of them.

How I made it through Canada’s residential school system

# SURVIVOR

BY  
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HILL

GROWING UP on the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve in the early 1950s, I shared a two-room house with my parents and six brothers and sisters. My dad worked for Massey-Harris, a farm equipment manufacturer, while my mom took care of the kids. We didn’t have running water, so we used an outhouse. For fun, my six siblings and I explored the bush around our home, played in the swamp and listened to records on our parents’ phonograph. Every once in a while, we borrowed a car from a friend and drove into Brantford to get groceries and household supplies. It was just a small town then, but to us, it felt like a big city. We were happy.

Then, in 1954, when I was four, my father died of pneumonia. Without him, my mom unravelled. Suddenly, she was a single mother responsible for seven kids. She became depressed and paranoid, and two years after my dad’s death, she was committed to a psychiatric hospital, where she stayed for about 20 years. At six years old, I was effectively an orphan.



PORTRAIT BY STAN WILLIAMS



For Six Nations kids without parents, there was only one place to go: the Mohawk Institute, a residential school in Brantford. Many of my relatives had spent time there. It had a reputation for strictness and austerity, but parents sent their children there because it promised food, a clean bed and a good education. Other families were forced to send their kids to the school, as dictated in the Indian Act, and children were often taken there without their parents even knowing.

So, on a frigid day in February 1957, a relative scrubbed us down, dressed us in fresh clothes and packed us into a car. She drove us to Brantford, turning onto a long, tree-lined driveway leading up to an imposing brick building with a columned façade and a white cupola. There was a farm attached to the school, with cows, chickens and vegetable gardens. We'd only been in the car for 15 minutes, but I'd never felt farther from home.

When we walked through the front door, there was a flurry of new faces. We all had colds, so the nurse ushered us down the hall into an infirmary, where we stayed until we were healthy enough to join the other kids. At first, it seemed almost luxurious. At home, seven of us shared a single bunk bed—typical living conditions on the reserve in those times. In the infirmary, we each had our own bed with clean sheets, and the nurse checked on us regularly. But when our brief convalescence concluded, our lives changed.

First, the staff separated us. A family friend decided to foster my three younger siblings. My older brother was sent to the boys' end of the building (and, later, to a foster home), while I went to the girls' side with my two older sisters. School staff handed us each a uniform—a green dress, which we would wear for a week at a time—and gave us bowl haircuts.

Then they assigned us numbers. I was 34. Our numbers were on everything: our clothes, beds and cubbies. They dictated where we ate in the dining hall (a room in the basement with long communal tables) and where we slept in our dorm (a large chamber with 30 bunk beds). Our teachers and supervisors called us by our numbers. As far as I could tell, not a single adult at the Mohawk Institute ever learned my name.

One of the first nights we spent in the girls' dorm, my sister Dawn and I crawled into the same bunk. Cold and afraid, I held her tight and longed for the comfort of home. A supervisor spotted us and ordered us to our feet. We weren't allowed to sleep in the same bunk, she said. Then she told us to hold our arms out. Quickly and brutally, she strapped our forearms, from palm to elbow, three times. The blows left a stinging pain—the first sign of what was to come. Over the next four years, I'd endure horrors far worse than a mere strap on the arm.

**B**Y THE TIME I ARRIVED at the Mohawk Institute, it was more than 120 years old. After the American Revolution, the Brits promised Mohawk leader Joseph Brant land in exchange for his help fighting the rebels. In 1827, a Protestant missionary society sent an Anglican minister named Robert Luggier to establish a day school, later known as the Mohawk Institute, where Indigenous children could learn trades: tailoring, farming, carpentry, mechanics. Six years later, he turned the Mohawk Institute into a boarding school, taking in 10 boys and four girls from nearby Six Nations communities.

Luggier was a member of the New England Company, a missionary society dedicated to spreading Christianity among,

in its words, “heathen natives.” As it grew, the Mohawk Institute started to enrol students from increasingly remote communities, removing them from their families, disconnecting them from their culture and barring them from speaking their native languages. Siblings were separated. Kids prayed daily and went to church every Sunday. Teachers taught classes in English. The goal was to assimilate Indigenous children into settler society.

By the middle of the 19th century, Mohawk was a prototype for the 140-odd residential schools that eventually opened across the country, a project spearheaded by John A. Macdonald and

Egerton Ryerson. All told, roughly 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools. Approximately one in 10 of them went to the Mohawk Institute, which operated longer than any other.

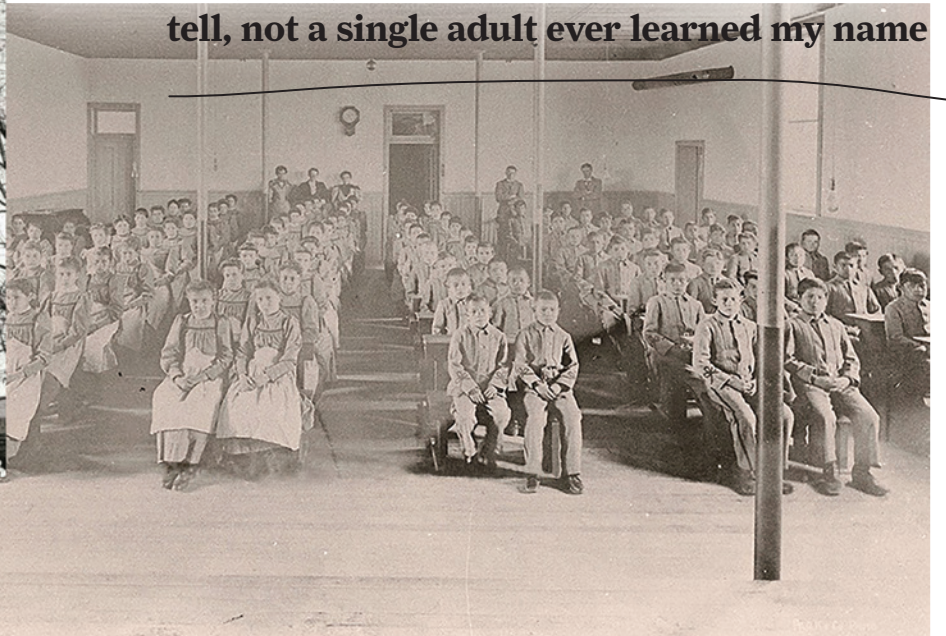
After Luggier, a succession of headmasters, all Anglican ministers, presided over the school with varying degrees of cruelty. One ran the school like a military boot camp, dressing the children in fatigues and training them with drill rifles. Another put students to work on his farm before he was fired for drunkenness. One principal installed prison cells the size

of small closets, isolating defiant children for days without food. Rebellious students burned down the building; the one where I lived was the third structure built. Students also regularly ran away. The accomplished distance runner Tom Longboat fled the school in 1900 and, it seems, never stopped running. He represented Canada at the Olympics eight years later.

When I arrived at the Mohawk Institute, its headmaster was William John Zimmerman, a stocky priest in his 50s who tramped around the campus in a black shirt, white collar and thick square glasses. Though he spent his first few years in the job trying to



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*The Mohawk Institute in Brantford, founded by an Anglican minister, was a model for the residential school system. Over the next century and a half, thousands of Indigenous children were separated from their communities and sent there. Students were often strapped for speaking their native languages, and held in isolation cells for days at a time without food*





improve conditions at the school, he too became a puritanical tyrant, notorious for his use of force. One former student recalls Zimmerman whipping two boys who had tried to run away; male supervisors pinned them down to a picnic table while he lashed them with a belt studded with bits of metal.

Six Nations gave Zimmerman an honorary Mohawk name meaning the Enlightener, but the kids called him Skin. He liked to watch girls bathe and took pleasure in stripping children naked and spanking them. When he asked one of my sisters, who was four years older than me, to pull her pants down for a beating, she refused and kicked him. He called the police, and she ended up in juvenile detention. I missed her terribly. Our siblings were my only link back to Six Nations, to the memory of our parents. As they disappeared, one by one, I lost my connection to my old life.

Daily life inside the Mohawk Institute was strictly regimented. Staff routinely derided us as “dirty Indians” and “savages.” When our supervisors were present, we travelled in formation according to our numbers, never speaking unless spoken to. Boys and girls weren’t allowed to socialize. But when our supervisors left us alone, we let our inner kids out. We swung from the pipes in the ceiling of our dorm. In the front yard of the school, we collected chestnuts and tried to turn them into beads.

We called the school the Mush Hole because the food was so repulsive. For breakfast, we ate pasty porridge and dry toast. Lunch and dinner were a rotation of slimy spinach, slithery fish and mystery meats. We drank only powdered milk, despite the fact that the boys milked cows daily—the real stuff was sold off. If you refused to eat breakfast, they’d keep you at the table until you finished your meal. There was an apple orchard on the front lawn of the school, but we weren’t allowed to set foot in it or eat a single piece of fruit, even if it had fallen to the ground. Once, I crawled through the grass to eat a fallen apple. When the supervisors found out, they gave me a strapping. It was worth it.

Between meals, we spent most of our time working. The boys tended to the farm, planting crops, gathering eggs and ploughing fields. The girls did domestic chores: cleaning, cooking, setting tables, stripping and making beds, and doing laundry not only for fellow students but for neighbouring farms, for whom we served as unpaid labourers.

Since we spent so much time working, the education we received was substandard, limited to mornings spent in the classroom. We were taught the basics—reading, writing, arithmetic—as well as rudimentary geography, history and, if we were lucky, art. I adored my Grade 1 teacher, a gentle woman who treated us with kindness, but dreaded moving up because the Grade 2 teacher regularly strapped disobedient kids in front of us first-graders. I quickly learned that if I wanted to avoid punishment, I needed to shut up and do what I was told.

The strap was the preferred mode of discipline at the Mush Hole. Supervisors patrolled the building, leathery straps in hand, whipping at will. Most of the time, we had no idea why we were being punished. Kids from northern communities who spoke no English were strapped for speaking their native tongues. Others were strapped for hiding their food to fool the supervisors into thinking they’d eaten it. Once, one of the girls made some

transgression—to this day I don’t know what it was—so a supervisor lined us all up and started striking our hands. The older girls pushed me behind them, hoping to shield me from another blow. “Be tough,” they whispered. “You have to tough it.”

Those older girls both protected and tormented us. When school staff left us unsupervised in the “play area”—a crumbling rat- and cockroach-infested room in the basement with cement floors, brick walls and no toys—the older girls would form a circle around two newcomers and force them to fight. I later realized why they were so hard on us. They were trying to toughen us up for the years ahead.

**I** LOST TRACK OF TIME at the Mush Hole. Every day seemed the same: we rose at 6 a.m., worked, studied, prayed, ate and went to bed at 7 p.m. I forgot what life was like outside the school’s walls. I was trapped there because I was Indigenous, yet I felt utterly detached from my Six Nations roots. I didn’t even know what month or year it was. But at some point in the middle of my time there, my mother visited.

She was still living at the hospital, but she was well enough to travel to the Mohawk Institute. Zimmerman welcomed her

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*The author, far left, is shown here with classmates from the Mohawk Institute, which she attended between 1957 and 1960*

at the front door, transforming from a Machiavellian monster into a genial host, the miracle worker responsible for moulding neglected children into polite young adults who opened their mouths only to say “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am.” The charade worked. No one doubted or questioned him. As an Anglican priest, he lived on a pedestal, one step closer to God.

Zimmerman showed my mother to a room opposite his office, where I sat on her lap and cried for an hour straight. When the visit ended, Zimmerman warmly bade my mom farewell and then, as soon as she was out of earshot, he took me by the hand and brought me into his office, a barren room with a desk, a chair and sickly green walls. He closed the door and got uncomfortably close. Then he reached his hand up my dress and placed it inside my underwear. I couldn’t breathe. I felt frozen in place. I was only seven or eight years old, and I didn’t understand what was happening, but I knew something wasn’t right. I don’t remember how I got out of his office, just that I never wanted to go back in.

I spent the rest of the week dreading Sunday, when the entire school would file into the Mohawk Chapel for services with Zimmerman. To my relief, I had a nosebleed that morning, so I didn’t have to go to church. The following Sunday, I punched



*Roberta Hill, right, and a fellow student appeared in a newspaper with Brantford Rotary Club president Gerry McDonald, left, who was giving the kids a record player, and William Zimmerman, the Mohawk Institute’s headmaster. Zimmerman would go on to sexually abuse Roberta on multiple occasions*

myself in the nose, trying to draw blood and skip service again, but it didn’t work. I lined up with the rest of the girls and marched to the chapel. I sunk into the pew, trying to avoid his gaze. In a haze of incense, I dozed off. When I awoke in a start, Zimmerman’s eyes were fixed directly on me. My heart started pounding. I knew I was in trouble.

After the other girls left church, Zimmerman kept me behind. He took me to a separate room and closed the door. This time, there was no surprise. I knew what he was going to do. I don’t remember if he ordered me to take off my clothes or if he took them off himself. I just know that I was naked and terrified. Then he molested me again, more roughly this time. Just like before, I was paralyzed, helpless against his hulking body and violating hands.

I considered telling a female supervisor what Zimmerman had done to me, but I knew no one would believe me. What was the word of a “dirty Indian” child against that of a respected principal and priest? So I bit my tongue. There was nothing else I could do.

**M**Y FONDEST MEMORIES of the Mush Hole are leaving it. Occasionally, the supervisors took us on outings: hikes, a visit to the Welland Canal, trips to the cinema where we watched Elvis Presley movies. At the end of the school year, when most kids went home, my siblings and I went to summer camp on Christian Island, a reserve near Midland where we swam, camped and foraged for berries. It was the only time I felt like a regular kid. The joy of those summer months only made it more devastating when I had to return to the Mush Hole in September.

I dreamed about running away, but I had nowhere to go. And I didn’t want to end up like the others who’d been caught, locked in a dark half-room under the stairwell without food—or worse, sent to Zimmerman’s office. One day, my sister Dawn decided to risk it. Without telling me, she and two other girls from Six Nations snuck out and trekked three hours back to our hometown. Terrified of being left entirely on my own, I tried to follow Dawn but couldn’t find her. I went to a payphone at a gas station and turned myself in. Later that day, they found Dawn near our childhood home and brought her back too. She got a strapping in Zimmerman’s office.

In 1960, after nearly four years at the Mush Hole, we finally got out. That December, the school sent Dawn and me to Christmas dinner with an Anglican family in Durham County. When two government officials picked us up from the school, we didn’t know where we were going or whether we’d come back. They drove us three hours to a country house, where the mother cooked for us and three other kids from the Mush Hole. I don’t remember what they made, but I know it was the best meal I’d eaten in four years. So, when the couple asked if we’d like to live with them for a while, we agreed.

We spent about four years in that foster home, followed by a year in another, before we finally ended up with a divorced mother in Pickering. Kind and compassionate, she spoke to us as equals, not subhumans. She was the first adult I’d met who seemed to understand how to treat children. I turned 18 in her home and, thanks to her, graduated from high school. I wrote her a thank-you note, took a train to Toronto and boarded a bus to Brantford. I was finally free.



**W**HEN I RETURNED TO SIX NATIONS, it no longer felt like home. I worked odd jobs and moved in with the family friend who'd fostered my youngest siblings, but I didn't even recognize them. The last time I saw my youngest sister, she was three; when we reunited, she was a teenager. I was a stranger in my own community. I felt worthless: I was the "dirty Indian" that Mush Hole staff said I was, yet somehow not Indian enough to fit in with my own clan. It took me many years to understand our ceremonies and customs because I'd never learned anything about them at the Mush Hole.

My experience at the Mohawk Institute coloured the rest of my life. When I was 23, I got involved with a domineering man. I followed his rules, just like I'd learned to do at the Mush Hole. We had three children together before I left him for good. I spent years wandering because I had no roots. I bounced between Brantford and Toronto, Buffalo and Rochester, working as a secretary and, later, a registered nurse. When I was 35, I finally decided to settle in Six Nations. I didn't feel tied to the place, but I wanted my children to have what I didn't: safety, stability, a place to call home.

For decades, I tried to forget about the Mush Hole. I saw no use in revisiting the trauma of my time there. But in the late 1990s, a lawyer visited Six Nations looking for former Mush Hole students to join a class-action lawsuit against the federal government, the New England Company and the local Anglican diocese. I signed up and met more than a dozen survivors who'd attended the school in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. I was horrified to hear their experiences. Boys were molested in the boiler room, where the din of machinery masked their screams. Zimmerman had sexually abused other girls. I later learned of a woman who said she once saw Zimmerman molesting a girl in a room in the chapel. That could have been me, or any number of girls like me. No one knows how many children he abused. When he died in 1982, he took many of the Mush Hole's secrets to the grave with him.

The \$2-billion Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was signed in 2006. Some survivors got only \$10,000. There is no way to assign a dollar figure to unwarranted strappings, beatings, serial rapes, the loss of childhood innocence and the theft of language and culture. By any calculation, that payout pales in comparison to what we endured. When I asked my lawyer why the sum was so small, he replied, "Because there are so many of you."

**A**FTER YEARS OF PRESSURE to phase out residential schools, the Mush Hole closed in 1970. Two years later, the government handed the building over to the Six Nations community. Rather than raze it, we reclaimed it. It now houses the Woodland Cultural Centre, a non-profit organization run by Six Nations of the Grand River, Wahta Mohawks and Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, designed to preserve and promote Indigenous heritage and culture. It's home to an extensive Indigenous library and archives, and survivors like me tell our stories to visitors there.

In 2013, we learned that the building needed extensive repairs, and our community voted almost unanimously to restore it. When the renovations are complete, people will be able to take guided tours through its halls, learning what I and other survivors endured, surveying the artifacts we left behind. However difficult it may be, we must remember what happened there to ensure it never happens again.

This past May, I returned to the Mush Hole. It was a few days after the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation uncovered the remains of 215 children at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, and the centre was holding a vigil. There were pairs of children's shoes lined up on the front steps, teddy bears to mark each life lost. Like the hundreds gathered there—and millions across the country—I was appalled, distraught and heartbroken. But I was

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not surprised. Nor was I surprised in the coming weeks, as hundreds more remains were discovered at other former residential school sites across the country.

The children who attended residential schools were abused, starved and raped. To my mind, it's not too far a leap to think that the perpetrators of those crimes could have also committed murder. Between 30 and 50 children are estimated to have died at the Mush Hole, but I suspect there are many more we don't know about. I've heard rumours about bodies buried under the apple orchard, under the school barn, under nearby farmers' fields. We may soon find out if they're right. In June, the provincial government promised to spend \$10 million searching the grounds of former residential schools in Ontario and commemorating the children who died.

I am hoping that some of that money goes toward the Mohawk Village Memorial Park, which comprises five acres dedicated to the memory of the children who passed through its doors. It sits on the Mush Hole grounds, including a patch of the front lawn where I used to play and watch the other girls walk a well-worn circuit, as if circling a prison yard. I'm part of a group of survivors who have been raising funds to complete it since 2016. It's not yet done, but I dream of ceremonies one day taking place around the fire pit, survivors telling their stories to groups gathered on the lawn, children laughing on the playground. I want nothing more than for that place—the source of pain for so many—to become a site of peace and joy.

I know some Canadians would prefer to tear down the Mush Hole and never speak about that dark chapter again. But I've seen what staying silent does. It festers, it broods, it keeps hurting. The Mush Hole taught me to shut up, and I kept quiet for decades—in school, in foster care, in relationships. It took years of counselling and hypnotherapy, but I finally started telling people what happened to me. It was only when I confronted my past that I began to heal. It's time for Canada to do the same. ■