

Geraldine (Maness) Robertson:

Her Life Story and Her Achievements

As told to Mary Alderson

March 17, 2017

In 1942, a white-skinned teacher in the one-room schoolhouse on Sarnia Reserve told little Geraldine Maness, a Chippewa girl just starting school, that she was too stupid to learn anything. But little Geraldine, even with only limited English, understood what that meant.

Born in 1935 on the Sarnia Reserve, now called Aamjiwnaang First Nation, Geraldine remembers a happy home in those first few years. But when Geraldine told her father that the teacher said that she was too stupid to learn, he became angry and went to the Chief and Band Council. They responded that a new school was being built where there would be more classrooms, but it wasn't available yet.

So Geraldine's father, himself a product of the residential school system, drove her to the Mount Elgin Residential School on the Muncey Reserve, west of London. Her father knew that education was important, so he resorted to this difficult decision, viewing it as a temporary measure while the new school was under construction. Geraldine says she did fine there, completing two grades in one year, catching up to her cohorts.

"We had a lovely, kind teacher and I responded well to her kindness," Geraldine says. Her younger sister also went to that residential school. Another younger sister was still at home with her mother.

Geraldine and her sister came home after a year. The new four room school was completed, and Geraldine had a wonderful teacher. Again, she excelled, completing two years in one. "It confirmed I wasn't stupid," smiles Geraldine.

But then tragedy struck. Her father died, and her mother was hospitalized with tuberculosis. There was no one to stay with. Her aunts and uncles were struggling and now she realizes that most of the problems were caused by the chaos that had happened to them when they themselves had attended residential schools. An Indian Agent shipped all three little girls to Brantford to the Mohawk Institute.

That experience in the residential school was quite horrific. Only 11 years old when she arrived, Geraldine stayed in the school three years until her elementary education was completed.

Geraldine describes it as very regimented with no kindness. It was an extremely harsh environment for a child, especially one who had experienced major losses: Father's death and mother's illness. She saw her sisters on occasion, but there was no time to play with them. But girls with brothers didn't get to see them, as the girls and boys were never allowed to mix. Geraldine remembers always being hungry at the school; there was never enough to eat. Any food was given to them in very small servings. The principal and supervisors were cruel, always demeaning and treating the students like nuisances. This in turn, led to bullying among the students. The children were just acting out what they saw. Geraldine recalls being beaten frequently by two older girls who were sisters.

She remembers being sent many times to the principal's office. He was a minister in the church, yet seemed to enjoy strapping the young indigenous children. At that time, principals were told by the Minister of Indian Affairs that they could only give children four lashes, two on each hand – but Geraldine would regularly receive 10 to 15 on each hand. She would feel faint, and her veins would be pulsing with pain. Most of the time, Geraldine had no idea what she was supposed to have done wrong. Sometimes she was strapped for trying to defend herself against the bullies. In retrospect, she believes the principal/minister was just trying to break her spirit. Outside of the classroom, there was very little supervision, and the bullying went on constantly. The boys even had it worse, she believes.

No one was allowed to speak his or her native language. Ironically, the young students were from all over the province and many did not even speak the same language. There were Mohawk and Ojibway, some from the far north of Ontario. They were all from different situations and backgrounds. To speak your own language, you had to find someone you could talk to, and then you had to be “really sneaky” Geraldine explains. “You had to watch out for school staff members who would harshly punish you, and you had to watch out for classmates who would tell on you,” she says.

There were also whispers about sexual abuse, more often on the boys’ side of the school. No one would talk about it.

At the residential school they were forced to attend church services. The minister would rant and rave about how evil all the “Indians” were. They were told they were good for nothing, and that they would burn in hell for eternity. Geraldine knew this wrong but she couldn’t do anything about it. She, her sisters and her classmates simply had to endure the racism, hate, and cruelty they faced.

Not surprisingly, Geraldine found that she came out of that school full of anger and hatred. “I didn’t know how to process all that had gone on. I was trying to make sense of it all,” she says. The problem was that she had moved back to Sarnia Reserve and was living with her mother and she took all her anger out on her.

She went to high school in the city of Sarnia, but had a difficult time. Because the lessons were only a half day at the Mohawk Institute (with the other half of the day set aside for chores: cleaning, kitchen work, yard work, gardening), she didn’t get the education she should have. In high school she felt like she was always trying to catch up. “There were so many things I didn’t know,” she adds.

She was still harbouring a lot of anger and resentment, and although she was just a young teenager, she realized that she had to work to find ways to rise above it. “I had to work hard, learn to be introspective and sort out my feelings, to get my life back in order,” she says. Two things helped her in that difficult time: reading and listening to music. In the residential school, there was no time to read for pleasure, nor was any music of any kind allowed. Describing it as a “real treat” she enjoyed listening to the radio. She grew to like any kind of music, but spiritual and classical music became favourites. In grade 11, she got part-time job in variety store, working evenings until 11:00 p.m. She got further behind, by her own admission, her grades were pathetic and she dropped out of school.

Geraldine was fortunate enough to get a job through an employment agency. They sent her to a medical clinic, assisting a group of doctors she described as good and kind people. She continued to work for various doctors for 34 years. After all the cruelty and backbiting in residential school she could not have survived if her work hadn’t been in such a compassionate atmosphere. She lived in the city of Sarnia, married, raised a family of six children (two were adopted), and was active in the Presbyterian Church.

In 1995, she moved back to her Reserve. But she noticed dysfunction in the community. Coming out of the residential school system, all they knew was harshness and cruelty, Geraldine explains. There were no family role models. Geraldine knew it would take a long time to break down that cycle. Doing research and making observations, she realized the extent of the harm and damage done to children in residential schools was now being repeated through generations. She feared that this cycle would continue.

Geraldine took it upon herself to go to the Chief and Band Council to talk about the residual effects of the horrors of residential school. She talked about the harsh treatment, the demeaning words, the hunger, the sexual molestation and the cruel bullies.

No one else wanted to talk about it. It brought back too many bad memories. Violence and alcohol seemed to be the only way to deal with the past. Geraldine pointed out the need for help with all the negative effects of residential schools. While she knew that you can't force people into programs, she hoped that by starting the discussion, they would also be able to talk about the horrors they had endured.

Living back on the Reserve, she became active in the United Church. She had been baptized as a baby there, so she wanted to support her home church. She took her concerns about the long-lasting effects of residential schools to the United Church. She made it her personal goal to bring out the truth of what went on in the schools. She wanted the native population to start talking about what was haunting them, and she also wanted to educate Canada's non-native population about the horrors.

Geraldine's achievements include:

- She opened many peoples' eyes, including social workers and those from social service agencies and drew their attention to conditions that existed in residential schools.
- She joined a committee with United Church of Canada National Office and travelled from British Columbia to Ontario, assisting with workshops and/or talking circles to encourage indigenous people to open up, and also become aware of how residential schools had impacted their lives. She held talking circles in places such as Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, and at Five Oaks in Ontario, speaking about the residual effects of residential schools. The ultimate goal was to help people get rid of feelings of shame, of being unworthy, and of being hurt. The group convinced participants that they while they should acknowledge the hurt and pain, they don't have to hold on to it. She is credited with making great strides to helping participants build self-esteem.
- At the same time as she was travelling the country with the United Church, she was working towards educating people who didn't know about residential schools.
- Back in Southwestern Ontario, she began going to schools across Lambton and Kent Counties to talk to students in elementary and high schools, to educate them about history of residential schools. She spoke to students, both native and non-native. The Aboriginal Liaison Person at the Lambton-Kent District School Board set up the visits and Geraldine kept it up for about five years, travelling around the district. Talking to students in schools was very emotionally draining, but fortunately she found them quite attentive. Occasionally some were hesitant to talk about it, but with her supportive approach, she helped the youth become comfortable with the discussions.
- Along with Rev. Matthew Stevens, Geraldine has been invited to different churches, to talk about residential schools
- She has worked with groups to present the KAIROS Blanket Exercise. KAIROS is an ecumenical social justice organization that promotes a participatory Blanket Exercise so that those unfamiliar with indigenous history in Canada can take part in an event to better understand it. Geraldine is still active in taking part in the KAIROS Blanket Exercise to help others learn the history.
- Most recently, Geraldine appeared in a documentary film, entitled *We Are Still Here*, where she talks about her experiences, along with two women from the Walpole Island Reserve. The film was made by the Living through Right Relations group at the London

Conference of the United Church of Canada, and funded through the church's Truth and Reconciliation Fund. The 45 minute film is intended to be used as a teaching tool. Geraldine worked with Rev. Carolyn Wilson-Wynn and a Sarnia filmmaker, Dwayne Cloes, to bring the documentary to fruition. While Dwayne wasn't familiar with residential schools, he did his own research, and Geraldine was pleased with the results. The documentary premiered in Sarnia on February 21, 2017 to a full house of 368 at the Sarnia Library Theatre. Geraldine was pleased with the questions that were asked by the audience after the viewing.

- In February 2018, Geraldine was awarded the Order of Ontario, in recognition of the awareness she has brought to Residential Schools.

Geraldine, now in her 83rd year, continues in her work seeking acknowledgement of the atrocities endured at residential schools. She points out that it was 'legal abduction'; government authorities were allowed to take the children from their communities. Parents lost the right and privilege to be a part of their children's lives. Grandparents lost their right to teach their grandchildren their history and heritage.

It has taken great courage, strength and resiliency for Geraldine to share her experiences and work towards enlightenment for the past 22 years. She has done it on her own, with an open heart and has spoken from her heart. She saw a deep need for this information to come out and she felt the burden of sharing the truth, when the churches and government accused the survivors of lying about the situations in residential schools. She points out that it was unfair and unfortunate that Canada's indigenous people had to file a lawsuit against government and churches, through to the Supreme Court, to make their voices heard when they told the truth about the residential schools.