

June ? a month of mourning following discoveries of unmarked graves

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It's been a month for mourning.

National Indigenous History Month, for more than a decade has been marked in the month of June as a time to learn about, appreciate, and recognize the contributions of Indigenous people in Canada.

But, the last month has also reiterated a long shameful history of cultural genocide of Indigenous people in Canada with the discoveries of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children.

‘The timing of the discoveries had changed the month of celebration to highlight the pain, and mourning that all Indigenous people are going through at this time,’ said Skye Vandenberg, a board member of the Dufferin County Cultural Resource Circle (DCCRC).

On May 27, it was announced that preliminary findings from a survey of the grounds at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia had uncovered the remains of 215 children. Last Thursday (June 24) the Cowessess First Nation announced preliminary findings of 751 unmarked graves discovered near the former Marieval Indian Residential School, in Saskatchewan.

‘The entire country has mourned those children, I think because it’s such an emotional thing that’s happened it wasn’t just confined to the Indigenous communities,’ said Vandenberg. ‘There’s a lot of reassessing what it means to be a Canadian, a treaty person, and re-evaluating the foundations that their country was built on. The history, it’s always been there, if you’re Indigenous it’s something that you always knew, but it’s a real eye opener for the non-Indigenous folks.’

From the late 1800s to 1996 upwards of 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children were forced to attend government-sponsored boarding schools, taken away from their families, with the goal of eliminating Indigenous culture. The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) recognizes 139 residential schools across Canada, but excludes schools without federal support such as those run by provincial governments.

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission approximately 4,100 to 6,000 children died while in the residential school system, but the number is likely to exceed this.

‘When the Truth and Reconciliation report came out a lot of folks said ‘well there’s a truth, we can move on’, but as we’ve been shown this month there’s more truth,’ said Vandenberg. ‘I personally never trusted the number that came out officially, because from what we know there’s a lot of secrets.’

‘Hopefully there’s a new opening of the general population not just trusting what they’re being told is the truth, and maybe there’s more support for what Indigenous people have been saying, asking for searches of the grounds, and the true releasing of documents by the Catholic Church. Because this was such an emotional discovery, hopefully there’s more support to find the real truth.’

Vandenberg also noted how the discoveries reinforce the need for organization such as the DCCRC and their mandate of creating a safe space for the restoration and revival of Indigenous culture.

Vandenberg, who grew up in Orangeville and is Anishinaabe, recalled there being no representation of Indigenous culture outside of her family’s home and in large city centres.

?For Indigenous people, it builds resilience to intergenerational trauma that has come about from these tragedies and help Indigenous kids growing up in the DCCRC to see part of their culture on a daily basis and help them connect with their identities.?

In commemoration of the children, a memorial has been set up at the Mino Kamik Medicine Wheel Garden by Alder Street Arena. Vandenberg encourages people to visit the medicine garden for a place of cultural reflection.

Immediate support is available for those affected by the residential school system, that National Residential School Crisis Line is available 24 hours a day at 1-866-925-4419.