

Witness Blanket: Weaving pieces of history



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To speak of things that happened in residential schools only brings them back into focus and many who were sent to these places rarely talk about their experiences. Hearing his father's stories for the first time affected Carey Newman in a very different way. His father Victor had always protected his children from the reality that was residential school and only told the funny stories. But when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada held a community event in Victoria, Victor finally opened the door into his past.

"One of the things that seemed to touch him was when he started to talk about when he was first taken and they shaved off his hair," said Carey. It was, in many ways, "taking the Indian out of the child."

The emerging stories deeply affected the younger Newman and led to the idea of a project where reconciliation was the theme. Both Newmans are well-known Kwagwiltz artists and master carvers with a wide body of private and public work.

"I thought of a blanket and I realized it should include the idea of reconciliation, parts of buildings, parts of churches, government buildings and other related structures," said Newman. The project is called "Witness Blanket." The sole purpose is to stand in eternal witness to the effect of the Indian residential school era. As the children sent to these schools were "broken" so are the places they were sent to. The crumbling buildings of authority mirror the loss of language, pride and family for those sent to the residential schools.

A blanket is a universal symbol of protection and for First Nations people it identifies who they are and where they are from. They wear them for ceremony and give them as gifts.

"Blankets protect our young and comfort our elders," states the project's website.

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Newman wants to weave a blanket from those stories and pieces of residential school history. He sees a large scale art installation that will stand as a national monument to recognize the atrocities of the residential school era while honouring the children and symbolize ongoing reconciliation.

From the 19th century until the last school closed in 1996, 150,000 Aboriginal, Inuit and Metis children attended these schools across Canada.

The goal of the project is to collect 2,500 pieces of history for the Witness Blanket. Those pieces can be shingles, bricks, mortar, wood, photos, writings or any fragment that speaks of the time and place of residential schools. A team of six, including Newman, will travel on gathering trips to different parts of Canada.

"We would certainly like to see widespread participation and have the public engage all across the country, all ages and backgrounds," said Newman. "It is open to anybody who has connection or want to participate in any way."

Newman said people can contribute items that may have kept from those days and this can include stories of what happened.

They are building a virtual version of the blanket, an exact replica. People will be able to click on an image and interact in a different way that with the physical blanket.

"With the blanket I can hopefully make a powerful legacy but I can't put all (the stories) into it. This will be another dimension crossing the boundaries between art and digital media," said Newman. "It means anyone can visit the blanket."

The stories, which won't be part of the Witness Blanket itself, will be there for posterity. Stories like the ones Carey got to hear from his father. Victor got kicked out of residential school in Mission when the guys got together to get into the wine cellar. The smallest of the group was sent in through a window and pulled out some holy wine. They went into a field and under an apple tree they polished off the wine. When they were found out, he's not sure how many others were kicked out of residential school. That's one of humorous stories Carey's father tells.

"That's a lighthearted impression of dad at residential school," said Newman. "He had his own rebellious way of dealing with it."

The others weren't so funny. Newman said Victor spent a long time protecting his children from it.

"He recorded his story for me, some of them for the first time. I heard things I never got to hear or feel — all the negative and bad things I knew were out there." He said he did a research paper in college on residential schools and his father never wanted to talk about it and he never did until recently.

Carey wants to find that apple tree and find a piece of it to put into the blanket.

The story of having his dad's hair shaved off has touched the Newman clan and both of Carey's sisters, Ellen and Marion, agreed to grow their hair for a year and the braids will be on the last part of the blanket.

The Witness Blanket project is funded through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada. Part of the funding was set aside by a court ruling to do with reconciliation, said Newman.

For people interested in being a part of the Witness Blanket, they can log onto the website at: www.witnessblanket.ca, on Facebook or email: info@witnessblanket.ca.

The team will travel to every province and territory at least once.

"This is truly a national project in scope," said Newman.

With a strong belief in the importance of tradition, Carey is active within his culture, a role for which he has been given the traditional name Ha-yalth-kingeme. Under the influence and support of his father and mother, Carey developed his artistic ability and cultural knowledge from an early age. His father Victor, his great, great grandfather Charlie James, and his great aunt Ellen Neel, all renowned wood carvers, each contribute to the artistry in his blood.

In 2008 both Newmans travelled with the Spirit Pole all across British Columbia. People in communities all across the province were invited to carve on the pole, which now resides in Duncan, B.C. Carey created four large panels for the 2010 Olympic games.

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