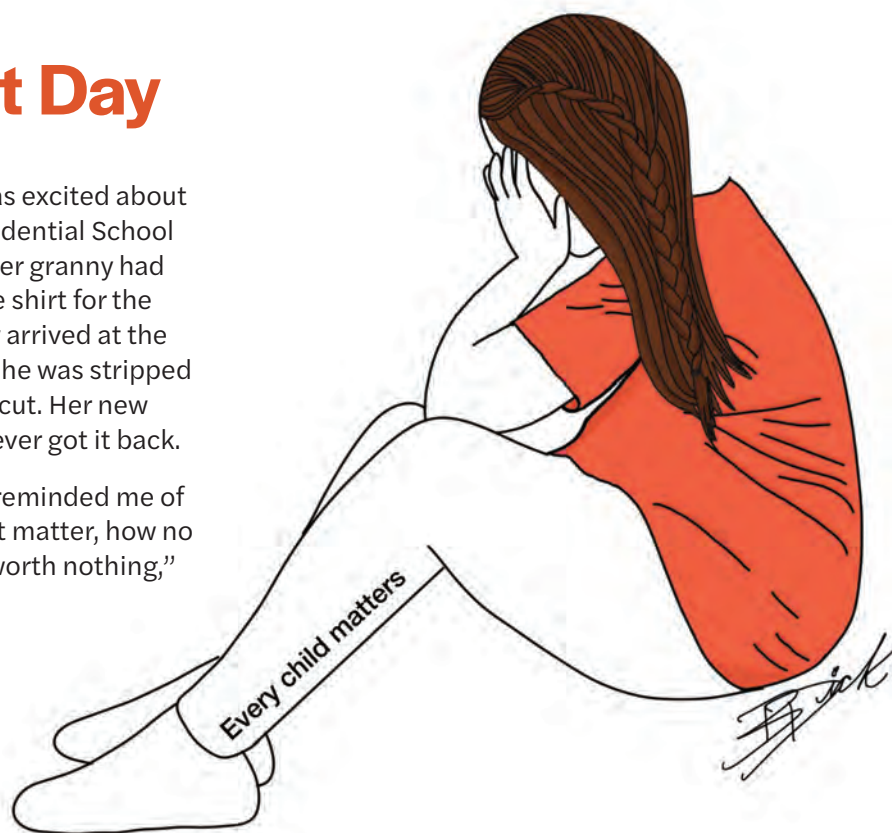


# Orange Shirt Day

Six-year-old Phyllis Webstad was excited about her first day at St. Joseph's Residential School in Williams Lake, B.C. in 1973. Her granny had bought her a new, bright orange shirt for the occasion. But when she proudly arrived at the church-run residential school, she was stripped of her clothes, and her hair was cut. Her new shirt was taken away and she never got it back.

"The colour orange has always reminded me of that, and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared, and how I felt I was worth nothing," said Phyllis, forty years later.



## Phyllis' story

*I went to the Mission for one school year in 1973/1974. I had just turned 6 years old. I lived with my grandmother on the Dog Creek reserve. We never had very much money, but somehow my granny managed to buy me a new outfit to go to the Mission school. I remember going to Robinson's store and picking out a shiny orange shirt. It had string laced up in front, and was so bright and exciting – just like I felt to be going to school!*

*When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn't understand why they wouldn't give it back to me, it was mine! The colour orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared.*

*I was 13.8 years old and in grade 8 when my son Jeremy was born. Because my grandmother and*

*mother both attended Residential School for 10 years each, I never knew what a parent was supposed to be like. With the help of my aunt, Agness Jack, I was able to raise my son and have him know me as his mother.*

*I went to a treatment centre for healing when I was 27 and have been on this healing journey since then. I finally get it, that the feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the Mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further from the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don't matter. Even with all the work I've done!*

*I am honoured to be able to tell my story so that others may benefit and understand, and maybe other Survivors will feel comfortable enough to share their stories.*

## One child's story

Between the late 1800s and 1996, the federal government forced many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children to leave the warmth of their families and attend cold, overcrowded Residential Schools where abuse was **rampant**. Children and parents often did not see each other for years. This went on for generations.

Many former Residential School students had experiences similar to Phyllis'. That's why her story, told at an event in 2013, became the inspiration for a day to

honour the tens of thousands of Residential School Survivors and acknowledge the painful **legacy** of the schools.

Observed on the last day of September – the time of year when Indigenous children were taken from their families – Orange Shirt Day provides an opportunity for meaningful discussion about the impact of Residential Schools. And a new orange shirt, taken from one child, has become a symbol of the many losses experienced by Indigenous students, families,

and communities because of residential schooling. Among them: the loss of family and parental care, the loss of self-worth and well-being, the loss of language and culture, and the loss of freedom.

From its beginnings in Williams Lake five years ago, the movement has spread, and Orange Shirt Day is now held nationwide. This year, on September 30th, people across the country will wear orange shirts or other orange pieces of clothing to affirm that “every child matters.”

## Shining a light on a dark chapter

For years, this story of the painful past of Residential Schools was ignored in Canada's history books. Only now is it becoming part of the school curriculum. Calgary middle school principal Lynn Leslie says she was honoured to bring the subject to her school.

“We weren't connected when we were younger and I am proud to be part of Canada. Now we can have these conversations and be honest about how things occurred.”

A statement from the federal government says, “On September 30 we urge everyone to not only wear orange but also to take this opportunity to learn more about the legacy of Indian Residential Schools, to read the **Truth and**

**Reconciliation Commission's** Final Report and Calls to Action.

“All Canadians have a role to play in **reconciliation**.”

Meanwhile, Phyllis Webstad, of the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation, is thrilled that the younger generation is learning about the past.

“That was my dream – for the conversation to happen annually about Residential Schools,” she said.

“I am blown away and I am humbled and honoured how it has taken off.”

---

### Definitions

**legacy:** something such as a tradition or problem that exists as a result of something that happened in the past

**rampant:** existing, happening, or spreading in an uncontrolled way

**reconciliation:** the reestablishment of a broken relationship

**Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC):** a three-person panel established by the federal government in 2008 to find out what happened at Indian Residential Schools and inform all Canadians