[We Were So Far Away](http://weweresofaraway.ca/) > Marius Tungilik

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Marius attended the Chesterfield Inlet Residential School in Nunavut, then called Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School, from 1963 until 1969. He was only five years old when he was sent to live at the school.

“It was very strange because all throughout the year we were told that our way of life back home represented something completely different than what was actually taking place in our home town. So when you’re told over and over again that Inuktitut is a dead language, it’s a forbidden language, that our way of life is primitive, you begin to think and see your own people in a different light. You see them eating with their hands. You think, okay, primitive. And that’s brainwashing.”

# BIO

The title of this exhibition, “We were so far away…”, was a quote from our interview with Marius Tungilik, a Survivor of Chesterfield Inlet’s Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School, which he attended between 1963 and 1969. Today, Marius is a father, a grandfather, a public speaker, and an active participant in contemporary Inuit politics. He has also spent many years working tirelessly towards healing the legacy of residential schools for Inuit Survivors. While he notes in his story that this healing process must take place on a number of levels, he firmly believes that for Survivors, “one of the hardest parts is just to get started.” He shares his story in part to inspire others to embark upon their own path towards healing and reconciliation. In 1993, he was the principal organizer of the Chesterfield Inlet Residential School reunion called “In the Spirit of Healing: A Special Reunion.” He is currently organizing another reunion for the summer of 2009.

# TESTIMONY

I went to the Chesterfield Inlet Residential School. It was called the Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School when we were there. I was five years old. I have some very fond memories of my childhood. Before I went to school I was very carefree as far as I remember. People used to talk to me in terms of endearment all the time; cutie, or – I don’t think they ever called me by my real name: Marius. But then it was always “my wonderful son” or anikuluk. It was always something to do with something wonderful. We spoke Inuktitut of course all the time and there were times when they let me roam around freely. There wasn’t anything to be afraid of so I would take a walk out on the tundra once in a while and I would be by myself. That is where I would let my mind wander. I have very clear memories of those days, but I don’t remember ever being told that we were going to school. I just knew that we were going to meet the plane. It was always a big event when an airplane came in. So the next thing I knew I was in this plane and I had no idea why.

The first plane ride was terrifying from Repulse Bay. I just remember crying and crying and holding onto my cousin. I really had no clue as to what was going on.

I guess there were no indications that I would not be able to see my parents for such a long time. I had been with my parents all this time and I was still bottle­feeding when they sent me off to school. I don’t know what they did with my baby bottle. They gave us a hair cut, bath and new clothes, well, uniforms actually, with moccasins. I remember they were asking each one of us who we were and I couldn’t remember my name. I had to think about it because I couldn’t understand at first what they were asking “what is your name”, and I had to check with the others to see what it is they were asking. The person right in front of me was named Andre so I almost said “Andre”. I knew my name wasn’t Andre. I have some memories of that.

They would wake us up. I don’t know how we slept the first few nights because we were crying all the time. We had chores to do. Well, my chores were to sweep the stairs and do the dishes. I don’t know whether we went to Church first and did our chores first or not. Breakfast was porridge almost every day except Sundays.

We had lots of crackers in milk. Then we went to school. We would line up in the hallway and we would all sing “God Save The Queen” and “O Canada”.

The first year wasn’t too bad after a while. We settled into a routine. Sister Rocan was our kindergarten teacher. She was a nice woman. But it was difficult. I didn’t know how long we were going to stay there and it was difficult going back to our home town because things change over a period of nine months when you’re only five. You don’t know how to act towards your parents or your younger brothers and sisters.

In May, around the 19th or 20th of May we went home. Just once a year. I don’t know what that was like for my parents. I never really asked them. I know they were so happy to see us come back every time. They would shower us with love and all that. I’m sure it was hard for them. They told us to listen to our supervisors, whoever was taking care of us, because first of all they were non­Inuit. In that time we felt basically inferior to White society and secondly my parents were very religious so we took it for granted that we had to listen to the Clergy. There was no choice in the matter. So with those instructions we were sent off.

That was further reinforced by the shroud of secrecy in the Residential School. We were told not to say anything. We were threatened not to say anything. It was a Roman Catholic­run school. There were Oblate Priests there, Brothers, and Nuns. The Grey Nuns. They treated us very differently from back home. There were no signs of affection or love. It was very sterile in that environment. Everything was regimented. We had to follow the rules. We had to speak English. We had to learn, speak, write and read in English. We had to follow the clock. Time was the all­important thing it seemed, whereas back home it wasn’t a big factor at all.

There were mealtimes. Back home we would eat whenever we were hungry. In Chesterfield Inlet in school we had to eat only at a certain time and we would all eat together. And we had to report our behaviour every day. Basically they would get out this Report Card and they would call out our names and we would have to say “good” or “not so good” for the way we behaved that day. And if we were “extra good” they would give us a star for good deeds, they would say. If you earned enough stars you would be able to go to a movie that weekend. That was a big deal, going to the movies. So they were strong motivators. Everybody knew the rules, basically.

In school we didn’t interact. We didn’t have any interaction with young babies or with the Elders for nine months of the year. So how did they expect us to become parents and learn parenting skills when you’re living in a complete bubble isolated from what is going on in the community? I guess my saving grace was that I knew by example what it was like to a cherished member of the family. Before I went to school that’s all I knew. I was given unconditional love. I tried to follow that.

If we hadn’t been at school, depending on our age, we would be given a lot of freedom at first and then we would be taken out on trips to learn by observing our parents or our Elders how to hunt, how to be patient, how to build igloos, everything from skinning wild game to preparing the skins for clothing or other uses. We would have learned how to make kayaks, harpoons, and kakivaks for fishing. We would have been taught by example. This is how we make these things. These are the reasons why we make them the way we do. We would have been taught the oral tradition of history. Nothing would have needed to be written down or read. We would have learned the songs, the legends – we missed out on so much of that. Over the years I have regained it to a certain extent. I still don’t know how to do many of the things and that’s something that was taken away from me. The legends – I related to them more as fairy tales or like something completely distorted from the original concept of Inuit legends. I used to fall asleep every time they were being told because it was more like a bedtime story when we went to school, or that’s the way we learned.

So in that sense our spirituality was taken away from us. Our sense of identity with babies, Elders, we had no contact with people in Chesterfield Inlet. We were not allowed to have any contact outside of the school with the residents of Chesterfield Inlet. We missed out completely on a valuable resource of knowledge and expertise that was available right in Chesterfield Inlet because they were afraid that the residents would abuse us. That is sick logic. That is the sickness behind their – they wanted to control every aspect of our lives, the Church, the school system wants to.

We were told that we were Eskimos. We did not amount to anything. The only way we could succeed was to learn the English way of life. So in that sense it was psychologically degrading as well. We were made to hate our own people, basically, our own kind. We looked down on them because they did not know how to count in English, speak English or read or any of those things that we were now able to do. That’s sick.

It was very strange because all throughout the year we were told that our way of life back home represented something completely different than what was actually taking place in our home town. So when you’re told over and over again that Inuktitut is a dead language, it’s a forbidden language, that our way of life is primitive, you begin to think and see your own people in a different light. You see them eating with their hands. You think, okay, primitive. And that’s brainwashing.

Being made to feel inferior or superior with your own kind is psychological abuse in a very bad way. None of us spoke about it. We kept it all inside. No one dared to talk. It was something we just never talked about. So for many, many years, for years, it was probably the best­kept secret of what actually happened in school, what actually happened in the hostels, you know. None of that ever came out.

You could see the manifestations of dysfunction everywhere. There were people who tried to escape reality by drinking or doing drugs, through violence, misplaced anger, confusion, crime — The signs were everywhere. But no one talked about it.

I knew there was something wrong with the way I was feeling inside and the way I saw things and the way my parents and everybody else was seeing things. They were seeing things through different eyes. We were told we’re not White and we’re no longer true Inuit. We don’t know the traditional ways so we were caught somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

We have a lot of good skills. We’re good interpreters. We are good accountants and bookkeepers. We’re good administrators. We were able to earn money in the wage economy. But that’s all on the outside. We were hurting inside and we didn’t know how to express our anger or our confusion.

I tried talking to psychologists as far back as the seventies about the problem, into the eighties. No one took it seriously. No one knew what I was talking about. They said, “Pray”. Pray. What does prayer have to do with anything? “Ask for forgiveness”, they said. Forgiveness for what? The way I am? For what was done to me?

It became clear to me that no one in the professional field knew what it was like to be in an institutionalized situation and to have dealt with physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse of that magnitude. It became very clear that there was a great gap between knowledge and what was actually taking place; the trauma. No one had the language. Healing was not part of our vocabulary until all this came out.

In many ways many things have changed since then. I remember the first time I spoke about Residential Schools in a public forum. I was one of the first so it was very, very hard for me. I was really undecided as to whether I should openly speak about it because it was not done. I was tormented inside because I knew it was the right thing to do and I felt I did not have the courage or the strength. I felt I was going to die if I said anything publicly. But luckily I was able to spend some time out on the land, not by choice. I got lost out on the land for three days just by myself. I was okay. It was in the late fall, November. But those three days alone gave me enough time to make up my mind. Yes, I’m going to do this no matter what.

A week after I was found I made my submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Rankin Inlet. We organized the Reunion in Chesterfield in 1993. I had to field questions from everyone. No one actually believed that this could actually happen. I was getting calls from people all over the North who did understand and who knew exactly what I was talking about and they supported me. We worked together on many different issues.

Now when you go to conferences you can listen to people talking about their experiences more openly. They are talking about the need to heal, the need to move forward and the benefits of not keeping things bottled up inside. So many things have changed.

But at the same time it has been a rough adjustment. I’ve always known that healing consisted of many different components. One was an apology, a validation of what actually took place, and criminal justice. People have to be held accountable for their actions by spending time in jail, paying fines, and so on. There’s compensation for damages. There’s treatment and counseling. So there are many components to moving forward in the process of healing oneself. And it takes the whole community to do that. We can’t do it alone. You can but it would be much more difficult.

The hardest thing I believe is to acknowledge and to admit that, yes, it did happen to me. This is what happened to me. This is how it affected me. And when we started all this we couldn’t tell our story without crying, without bursting into tears at some point. It was that difficult. So that’s one of the hardest parts is just to get started and to acknowledge that there is something definitely very wrong in our lives that is making us the way we are. And we need to find a way to get past that and to move forward.

It can be very confusing because you get the sense that once you get it out everything is going to be okay now. But it doesn’t work that way. Everything is not okay. But you’ve taken the first step. And you have to be willing to work with others to get to where you want to be.

Reclaiming the past, what we have lost, is going to take a long time. The isolation from our community extended for many years so you can’t expect to resolve all of the complex issues, all of the complexities of being sent away to school in a time frame. We can’t say by 2010 “Thy shall be healed”, you know. It doesn’t work that way. It takes a lot longer than that. It takes a lot of energy. It takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of resources. And some people are more ready than others so you have to make sure no one is left behind. If we leave some people out, the cycle is going to continue for as long as we allow it to.

I’m hoping we will all be able to stand up and say “I am worthy”. “I deserve the best of what life has to offer.” “Life doesn’t owe me a living.” I think we ought to be thinking that way but at the same time we will have better tools to cope with whatever comes our way and not be stuck in thinking that we’re inferior in any way, that we ought to be asking for permission in any way. Am I permitted to be happy, you know, that seems to be our mindset. Am I allowed to be happy? So if we can accomplish that and get people involved in determining their own futures I think we’ve done our job.

Equality is going to continue to be something that needs to be addressed; equality in terms of having access to resources, having access to services and programs that are available to the rest of Canada. We deserve that, too. We’re Canadians. We pay taxes. We went through the same experiences. We’ve been working on this for a long time, myself and so many others as well, my brothers and sisters, my cousins —

I filed a Notice of Objection. When the Common Experience Payment was being proposed we had no chance to object or to submit an Objection, but I did, on the basis that once again we were up north. We would not be getting our buying power from the compensation process simply because something down here that you can buy will cost twenty times more when you finally get it in the north. That was not taken into consideration.

Again, there were so many shortcomings all throughout the process. In the criminal justice system no one was charged. No one spent any time in jail. The criminal justice system thought that what happened to us was minor in nature, as the prosecutor argued. Every step along the way we have been knocked down. People still knock us down. People still think of us as second­class citizens. We’re still being treated in a way that makes us feel we deserve better. We don’t feel superior to them. We just want to feel equal and – we have so much to offer Canada if they would just let us in and let us be part of the family. We could make this into a much better country to live in.

We have a lot of challenges ahead of us. At least we’re not going backwards any more. We’re holding our ground, if anything, and in some cases we’re moving forward. Sometimes we go back a little bit, we transgress, but that’s human nature. I think we give a voice to the voiceless, people who cannot express themselves, you know, who have all these fears of what people will think of them if they say anything. I think it’s them we speak for when we talk, as well. It is not only our needs that we are fighting for, it’s the needs of others in our communities, in our families, in our circle of friends. We see what is going on. We know what is going on. We can see it every day, day after day.

Our people are so generous, so giving, so caring, so sharing and they are so trusting. They can’t help but try to help the situation. We can’t let them down: ever. Our children will have to carry on the work that we do in some way.

It’s very confusing at times, though. Many times you’re wondering, is this a result of what happened in Residential School or is this a result of something else? You can’t put everything into one basket and say everything that goes wrong is a result of our time in Residential School, or the system. There are so many other things that come into play and you have to be able to differentiate between what happened in Residential Schools and what was happening all around us, whether it was Inuit politics, our way of thinking about the spiritual world, our belief systems, our mind set about legends and the powers of nature, the supernatural, the taboos, the curses.

So we have to be able to separate the issues. What is it that we need to do to ensure that our children will be able to become good leaders, to lead the next generation into a healthier lifestyle, in all aspects of life; spiritually, physically and emotionally? They will have to take ownership of all that. We have a duty as parents to lay the groundwork, to do the best that we can to make sure that our children will be able to carry on the work.

Our hands were tied, basically, behind our backs for so long that we couldn’t do a very good job of laying down the groundwork with tied hands. A lot of us suffered from alcoholism, drug addiction, and addiction to gambling and a life of crime. That’s not really laying down a very good groundwork or blueprint for the future. Those are things we don’t want our children to go through. And yet that’s all we knew, basically.

I know we still have a lot of work to do. The journey hasn’t ended. It continues. I can’t see us abandoning the work in a year and a half or two years, after having done all of this without blueprints for the future. Like I said, we can’t say “They shall be healed in 2010”. It’s just not the way things work.

It’s not that I want people to continue to suffer. That’s not the point. What we’re saying is the need will continue to exist because some people will have just started their journey. They will need to go through for a long period of time and some people want to wait until they see how we turn out once we started the journey, and as leaders we play that role.

I’m back home now, after being away for so long I’m finally home, and I do not mean only geographically, I’m back to where I was born and raised after being away for about thirty years. I guess everywhere I went I felt at home in some way no matter where I was because I could live with myself to a certain extent. But back home I feel completely whole. There’s family; my brothers and sisters are there. My nieces and my friends are there, and people who understand me and people I understand are there.

We weren’t home in Residential School. We were far away from home, very far away, emotionally, geographically and spiritually. We were so far away. Sometimes we thought we were never going home again.

Also the inter­generational impact issue is going to have to be addressed in a very meaningful way. There needs to be involvement of our children and their children to make sure, number one, this type of thing never happens again. And I’m not just talking about Residential Schools because it’s something that’s probably never going to happen again. But the concept, the situation where we allow others to take control of our lives and where others force their belief systems on us and made us feel inferior and made us feel what we were not and try to change us into something we were not, that is what we mean by not allowing this type of thing to happen again.

Secondly, we need to ensure that they understand the full impact of what happened to us, the consequences of disclosure, the consequences of having to deal with all of this and the consequences of dealing with life’s difficulties in a very dysfunctional manner. They have to grasp all of those and move forward and be involved. Once that’s done then they can take over. They can do the work. We can help them along. We can guide them along. But that work has to be done. That’s all I can say.