Educating Priscilla

My earliest memory is of sitting in the backseat of a car. It is nightime and we are following another car ahead of us. My cat, Butchie, is in the back window of the first car and I can see his eyes glowing in the glare of our headlights. We are on our way to the Reserve. My grandparents, my uncle, my mom, my four brothers, my younger sister and I have decided to leave the City of Sarnia because we hope that life will be better on the reserve. My dad has died and we are having trouble making it without him. We're happy and we do our best. As had always been our way, our extended family shares what little we've got. But money is short and there are many mouths to feed, so the entire family unit uproots itself and away we go to what we hope are greener pastures. The feeling is happiness because we are pulling together.

But happiness is short-lived and my next major memory is of residential school. We are sent to the Brantford Mohawk Institute. It seems that the house allotted to us on the reserve is too small, so the Indian Agent, in his wisdom, decides to send those in our family who are of school age to residential school. I am only five years old. That doesn't matter. The Indian Agent represents Indian Affairs and they make our decisions for us. Life is different at the Mush Hole, as we call it. We don't sit around the

BY PRISCILLA HEWITT

kitchen table anymore watching Grandma make meals (I'm too young to help, but I watch because later on, I'll know what to do.) Instead, we line up whenever the bell goes and we file into a big room with tables and chairs and eat what is given to us. It's porridge most mornings, thus, the name Mush Hole. I don't hear my family laughing and joking in Ojibway all the time. Now the only time I see my family is when I spot my brothers in the large dining room at mealtime. My mom wants to visit us, but the Mush Hole is a long way from the Reserve and she has no way to get back and forth. We all have to speak English here because it would interfere with our education if we spoke Ojibway. Sure is tough trying to learn a new language without anyone really teaching us how. Now we don't sit around the woodstove in the evenings listening to Grandpa tell tales of long ago. Instead, we line up at a certain time to use the washroom, then we have to go to bed. An older woman teacher we refer to as Cow Legs stands at the end of the hall to make sure we do this as quickly and quietly as possible. After lights out, we have to go to sleep, because if there's any noise, Cow Legs opens the door, turns on the lights and if we're caught out of bed, we get the strap. My friend, Barbara, cries herself to sleep almost every night. I want to comfort her, but I don't want to get caught out of bed. The feeling is fear because there are so many rules.

The next phase of my education finds me back on the reserve. We go to a two-room school. Grades 1-4 are downstairs and Grades 5-8 are upstairs. Our teachers are a married couple who live with their son and daughter in the nicest house on the reserve, the teacherage. Each grade sits in a different row. Before we go out to recess, we have to have a tablespoon of cod liver oil. Sure tastes awful! School is serious business. We must not talk because the School Inspector might stop by and we will be in trouble if we're caught misbehaving. We write a lot in scribblers and it has to be neat, again because the School Inspector expects that. We have to memorize verses and recite them to the class. Roy has trouble remembering his lines — he speaks Ojibway at home and has trouble with English at school. The teacher makes him stand at the front of the class until he can remember his lines. I wonder why the teacher doesn't let us help Roy. Strange, but I don't remember Roy coming back after that. I read about how we (Indians) lost so may wars and took part in so many massacres. I wonder why I was born an Indian. The feeling is shame because my people are savages.

Several years later I make it to high school. It's in a little town seven miles away from the reserve, so we have to go by bus. I'm happy at first because I'm with a lot of my friends. Eventually they leave. Someone laughs at Brenda because she gives the wrong answer in class. She's too embarrassed to come back. My brother is big for his age and he knows how to track a deer for miles, set snares for rabbits and catch a lot of trout. My family is proud of him because he provides food for most of our meals. But, he can't understand algebra or science and, consequently, has the lowest average in the class. When the first term reports come out with everyone's marks in descending order on them his name is at the bottom. He decides to quit. Someone calls my other brother "a pesky redskin" constantly. He, too, leaves. Sharon's mom dies and Sharon takes on responsibility for her younger sister. Another one goes. Eventually, I'm the only Indian in a school of 400 students. I try to make friends with the white students, but they live in homes like the ones I only see on T.V. — hydro, indoor plumbing, central heating. They all have nicer clothes than I do. Most of my wardrobe comes from a rummage sale and I am afraid that somebody will recognize their cast-offs. I spend my summers working in the tobacco fields to pay my way. They take vacations that I can only take in my head. My mom tells me to quit, too, because I'm a girl and I don't really need an education. The feeling is confusion because I want what they have.

Eventually I move to Toronto. I'm told life might be better in the big city because there are no jobs on the Reserve. I am determined to make something of myself. I see other Indians, but they walk with their heads down and that makes me angry. I decide I'm not going to be like that. I'm going to prove that I can live just like white folk. I turn my back on my people. I marry a white man. My mom is happy because she says that no, she will not have to worry about me. We have, first a girl, then a boy. But happiness eludes me. The kids and I are alone a lot. I start to drink out of loneliness and frustration. Down and down I go. I don't fit into the white man's world and I can't go back home. Too much pride. I have to quit drinking, but it's so hard. I go in and out of the hospital — taken there by an ambulance eight times one summer. Children's Aid commmits me to the psychiatric ward for a "cure" or I will lose my kids. They do go to a foster home for a while. I make up my mind that I want them back, so, I start the longest uphill climb of my lie. I do it alone because my white husband just doesn't understand. We go our separate ways, but I take the kids. I have no self-confidence. I have to support myself and these kids, but I can only get a job pounding a typewriter. I decide to go back to night school so I can get a better job. The feeling is desperation because I have so much reponsibility and I don't know if I can make it alone.

One day, I come to the realization that I have to start talking to people. It's scary

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at first and I listen to others so I will know how to interact. Heart in my throat, I do start to talk and people not only listen, but they encourage me. They tell me to hang in there. One day, a wonderful woman, Paula (one of my bosses), suggests to me that I should consider working with my own people. She says I should be proud of who I am, where I came from and what I did. That's easy for you to say, I think. She befriends me and treats me special. I like this. She has many tales of how wonderful Native culture is and how I should find out more about it. One summer day, I phone a Native organization and ask if they are looking for more staff. They are. They ask me for my résumé. I've never made one in my life! Paula gives me an outline and shows me hers. After two days of putting it off because I feel I can't do it, I sit down and manage to come up with one. Next step is the interview. I almost chicken out. I actually leave the place, then, trembling, I go back. Two people ask me some questions, then say they'll let me know in a couple of days. I'm on tenderhooks! They ask me to come back and right there they offer me the job. I'm at once exhilarated, and petrified! I accept and it turns out to be the best decision of my life. I meet so many others who have gone through the same thing I have. I tell them how it was for me, how I had to start talking to others, how I turned my fear into determination. I feel great because I finally fit in. Together my newfound friends and I learn about our culture. It starts to click in why we did things a certain way at home. Why wasn't somebody telling us about cultural difference? Instead, we felt like square pegs that somebody was trying to fit into a round hole. When it didn't work, we somehow thought we were in the wrong. The feeling is consternation, because it seems that those people making our decisions for us didn't really know what the long-term effects would be on how we felt about ourselves.

One day I get a phone call. Would I like to co-ordinate a literacy program for Native Women? I say that I will give it a try. I find out as much as I can about it. I learn phrases like "community-based" and "learner-centered." Apparently, there is no pre-set curriculum. It is geared to the learners' needs and interests. Not only that, there are specific Native programs. I meet other Native co-ordinators and we all want culturally-relevant curriculum. We are going to build learning partnerships where mutual respect is the foundation. In a learning partnership, both learner and tutor come with their respective strengths that they will share with each other. The learners that I see coming into the program wear the same "scared rabbit" look that I had when I decided to go back to night-school. I spend a lot of time talking to them. I ask them, "what kinds of things do you like to do?" and, "what would you like to learn?" I assure them, "You just didn't have a proper chance. Now is the time for you. You can do it. I felt like that, too, and this is how I handled it." Over and over again. I see that fear slowly dissipate. The tutors, learners and I all work closely together. We talk about things like the causes of illiteracy (it's not our fault), cultural awareness (we're not inferior, just different) and how we can help each other (one of my learners has invited me to Sweat Lodge Ceremonies, Healing Circles and has given me a traditional cure for my backaches. In return, I have shared the basics of sentences and paragraphs). The feeling is hope because we decide how we want our programs to be. It isn't someone else making decisions about our lives for us.

Now I work for the Ministry of Skills Development. My job is to offer consultative support to twenty-seven Native literacy programs. It's energizing because all the Native co-ordinators and I share our concerns and aspirations with each other. Over half of Native families are headed by single parents, usually the mother. We want to reach those parents and help them break the cycle of dependency often associated with illiteracy and social assistance. Some programs are attempting to work with both the parents and the children. After all, illiterate adults start out as illiterate children, and parents are often the role models for their offspring. I understand that programs involving families are referred to as intergenerational or family literacy. Several programs operate on reserves. In these cases, the co-ordinator is almost always required to be bilingual. Bilingual in the Native community refers to being fluent in the mother tongue (usually Ojibway or Cree in Ontario) and English as well. The reserve programs involve Elders. In Native Society, Elders are revered for their wisdom and experience. It is their role to pass on teachings to others. These women and men encourage us to incorporate wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth into whatever we do. Often they speak at a community gathering to share these teachings and/or lessons from the past. Lately, I've heard this type of thing called Oral History. Oral history written down becomes culturally relevant reading material.

Many urban programs also ask Elders to be a part of their literacy advisory committees. We feel this is so important as we want to reinforce our culture. Our tutor training sessions cover cross-cultural communication because it will not only teach those Natives who weren't told the differences and bought into the idea of feeling like misfits, but it will also sensitize the non-Natives who are involved in our programs. We get a lot of support from the Native and the non-Native community. So many have willingly shared their time and expertise. The feeling is happiness because we are all pulling together.

Voices
New Writers for New Readers

Dear Readers:

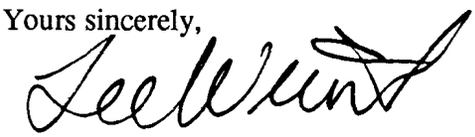
We've just published the first issue of ***Voices: New Writers for New Readers***. The goals of this magazine are to provide reading material for new adult readers and to provide assistance for tutors involved with reading and writing instruction. ***Voices*** would be especially useful in the literacy classroom, in teacher education programs and for researchers who are concerned with the reading and writing processes.

The magazine, produced in Surrey, British Columbia (Canada), contains stories and poems by literacy students at the Invergarry Learning Centre, commentary by students concerning how they perceive their development as writers, as well as articles written by instructors about the teaching methods used in the school. The material within these pages reflects our belief that curriculum and instructional approach should be learner-centred.

Voices will be published quarterly. Discount rates are available for subscription purchases exceeding 10 copies. Please use the Subscription Request Form printed below to place orders.

We would be happy to receive any of your comments or suggestions. In addition, we will consider submissions for the magazine from literacy teachers and from students enrolled in literacy programs. (For magazine submissions, please enclose a self-addressed envelope with Canadian postage or an International Reply Coupon.) Since ***Voices*** is aimed at new readers, we request that the submitted material be written in a style that is appropriate for this audience.

Yours sincerely,



Lee Weistein, Editor

Voices
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