Spoken Word Poetry:

Perspectives on Historical and Contemporary Indigenous Experiences

The following Grade 8 students from Glashan Public School in Ottawa, Ontario were involved in an inquiry unit about our Indigenous Citizens in their English (to French immersion) class with teacher Barbara Brockmann during the 2013-2014 school year. Students began by looking at what they thought they knew about the historical and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal Canadians, and then asked questions to find out more. What a journey they went on!

In this particular assignment, students were asked to write spoken word poems that addressed any perspective of what they had uncovered. These poems were performed at a variety of venues: in the classroom, at the 100 Watt Stage at the Ottawa International Children's Theatre Festival in May 2014, and at an educational session for pediatricians in training at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) on Child Rights and other determinants of First Nation's child and youth health.

Here are their perspectives.

Struggle to Thrive

By: Rebecca Sutherland, Hannah Brown, Samantha Maingot

Life's complicated.
Being an Aboriginal.
Living in the big cities,
surrounded by those,
who threw thousands of us in abusive schools.
Who tore us apart from,
our families, our culture and our land.
Just pursuing the Rules.
Their morbid systems,
thinking they could kill the Indian in the child,
but all they did,
was kill the child in the Indian,
their purity, their innocence.
Look at us now,
48% children in foster care are our own Aboriginal children,
A few even in homes with atrocious living conditions.
But somehow we thrive,
hand in hand.

Past all the genocidal stereotypes,
we know that we were viewed as savages,
we know that we were unwanted.
But we thrive.

The judgemental eyes that stare,
and question,
because the totem poles aren't there.
The shock and awe of others,
as we walk into a store,
expecting a thief upon their door.
Despite it all we thrive.

Although, did it ever occur,
that our mothers, sisters, daughters,
are 7 times more likely,
in a violent murder than you?

Yet the government seems to be doing nothing.

We struggle to accept that this is how we live.

Accepting the perspective,
or even the negligence of others,
when they don't take the time of day,
to learn about us,
or to accept us.

Being viewed as different,
because of the pigment of our skin,
or the cultural differences that bounds us apart.

But we know better than any,
that it is not the tint of the surface,
that makes the person.

It's what comes from within.

And for us,
it comes from our culture,
our family, and our language.
We know what really matters.

So we will survive,
We will rise,
We will thrive

Differences

By: Maddy Fairweather

Whatever your colour,
black, white, red, yellow.
we're all the same inside.

No matter the religion you practice,
no matter the ways you live.

last I checked,
we all have bones and skin.

There can be a certain beauty in our divergence,
and its time we accept those differences.

Maybe I like ice cream and you don't,
nobody discriminates the non ice cream lovers.

So why don't we act the same when religion is the difference?
Why is it different when compared to how we live?
Why don't we accept our differences?

You can't just place someone in a category,
we're all so complex and different,
some of us still don't even know who we are!
People fear who they are and hide it,
nobody should have to hide themselves,
so why, why don't we just accept
that everyone's different?
It's been years and years now?
Now it's time we accept our differences.

The Bells

By: Erin Vandenberg

Every day I walked past it.

Those tall, strong stone walls of the school that stared down on me with
a blank hollow stare.
The lawn in front of the school lay unkempt and was slowly turning as grey as the stones in the
walls.
Crumbling.
Desolate.
Dead.

Every day I walked past it, the bells would ring.

They would scream.
Like nails on a chalkboard, like a mother who lost her child.
It sent my bones chattering and my skin crawling across the pavement.

Every morning the chilly air would be pierced with the shrill, echoing sound of the bells that
rung from the tallest tower and sent chills down my spine.

I couldn't help but think that something horrible was happening within those
tall, strong, walls of the school.
What it was, I didn't know.

But those bells...
Oh the bells would ring, ring, ring,
And I knew that horrible things were happening.

Everyday I would wait.
Check my watch, and wait for the bells.
I hated them, but they woke me up.
I couldn't start my day without the horrible sound of them chiming through the desolate
landscape.

I would wait.

Just stand there.
Waiting for the shrill, echoing sound of the bells that rung from
the tallest tower and sent chills down my spine.

I would look up the walls of the school that held so much mystery and think to myself,
*Why can't I shake this feeling, this feeling that within those tall, strong walls of the school hold
something horrible.*

Something that the school wants to hide from the rest of the world.

What is it, I don't exactly know.

But it will consume me.

I will become obsessed with hearing those shrill, echoing bells every single morning.

Then the bells would scream their shrill, echoing scream and knock me out of my morning
daydream.
My bones would chatter and my skin would crawl and I wanted to run but stay right where I was
at the same time.

That bell was so disturbingly loyal. I would walk by, stop, check my watch, and wait. And sure
enough, the bells would ring.

Right on time.

Every day.

Except one.

I walked by, stopped, checked my watch, and waited.

Silence.

Dead silence. Dead, dark and suffocating.

I checked my watch again. I waited.

The silence was worse than the bells.

It was menacing, threatening, and torturous.

I couldn't stand it.

The silence hung in the balance around the school and I wanted to

Scream.

Laugh.

Cry.

Anything to make the silence shatter and die away.

Then came the screaming.

No, not the screaming of the bells.

Real screaming.

Human screaming.

It was so much more terrible than the eerie silence.

It was much too real, and it was full of...

Despair.

Rage.

Insanity.

Hysteria.

The bells rang.

Their metallic screams drowning out the human ones.

But these screams were hollow, unfeeling and cold.

They were shrill and echoing, and my bones chattered and my skin crawled
and a chill ran down my spine.

But worst of all, they confirmed my fears.

My fears that within those tall, strong, stone walls held something horrible.

Something that the school wanted to hide from the rest of the world.

What it was, I don't exactly know.

But it consumed me.

I was obsessed with the sound of the shrill, echoing bells,
and whether they meant that a mother was without her child,
that a village was ripped apart, or that an entire culture was lost,

I would still be there.
Every morning.
And I would listen to the bells.

Untitled

By: Calan Gerrisen-Hill and Samuel Kuntz

Nothing you could do would change what's been done
the horrors endured by more than just one.

Schools built to kill a culture
molded many into a gruesome sculpture.

Taken from their home and their sweet mother's love
brought to a place where they received a violent shove.

To abandon what they knew and adopt a new life
instead they were abused by teachers as sharp as a knife.

Abused and absorbed into a new breed
pushed around and left in need.

For help they waited but it never came
and for years they've been waiting in vain.

Aboriginals: Slam Poetry

By: George Xiao and Matthew Babineau

The Aboriginals in the schools
had quite a rough time,
Oh wait, there were none.

The funding for First Nation education disappeared,
Oh wait, there was none in the first place.

The Residential Schools stopped
After 168 years of activities and fun
Oh wait, there was none, just abuse and torture.

The kids were happy and healthy,
Oh wait, 60% of kids died at the schools.

This shouldn't be happening,
But, it still does.
Why does it happen?
I don't know.

Schools were death houses
Children locked during fires
Children beaten for speaking
The only language they know
Children killed by diseases
Who infested the schools
Teachers whipping the kids

When they didn't follow the rules
The main purpose of these schools
Was to kill the Indian in the child
Seems like they were more stockyards
Then schools

The government was slow,
Very slow.
But we; the citizens,
are slower.
The report of death, came out in 1922,
It took us 74 years to close the schools.
Do you know how long that is?
It's 74 years too many.
Do you know what that makes us?
It makes us
Just a big bunch of fools

Through the Eyes of the Mountains

By: Tallulah Short and Georgia Condran

I go by the name
“That piece of land”
Every day I watch them traipse
Over good old hollow me
Empty with meaning
But they don’t know my history
To them it is an uncharted mystery

These children think they own me
Treat me like I’m there’s
To them I’m just a playground
Nothing but a barefaced piece of dirt

Run all over me
They don’t even care
Rip me to shreds
Tear my soul
That I don’t even know if I have anymore

I once belonged to a history of peace
Where the threes and the grass dominated
Where happiness and freedom joined hands
Only they would understand

Their history of creations remain empty
Stripped to bare bones
Yet the ones who take advantage of me
Don’t know my ancestors

This land once belonged to them
Many years ago
Now there’s trees being cut down
Our history falling with them
Our culture is falling to pieces
As we try and protect their rights
They just want to be treated equally
Is that really too much to ask?

I know someday they will come back
Their rights will be rejuvenated

One day they will own what is truthfully theirs

I can feel it

Within what's left of me

This poem is about a land that is now a park. The land knows its significance and meaning but the children that play there don't have a clue. They treat it like it's nothing and stomp on it like it's simply dirt. The message that we are trying to send with our poem is that everything has meaning and it is up to you to learn about it! There are a lot of things that we take for granted in this world and the land is certainly one of them. Everything has a history and it's important to know about it. Like we learned in the film "8th Fire" it is important to have a relationship with the land and this poem is a representation through the eyes of the territory which once belonged to the First Nations.

It's Complicated

By: Jillian Murray

It's complicated.

Some may say it's simple.

but it's much more.

It's complicated.

They're arrogant with their lucky lack of taxes and free education

and they ask for more.

You give them an inch and they take a mile,

but it's not that way.

And it never was that way.

Why do we pretend to see when our society turns a nascent blind eye?

Why do we listen to the name calling

spitting out of stereotyped mouths

engulfed in lies?

Most are oblivious

and oblivion is eating away at our deteriorated relationship

that never really had a stage before deteriorated.

We got off on the wrong foot

and never decided to switch feet.

Today we find ourselves with scarves of ignorance wrapped around our necks

so tight nobody will speak the truth,

Scarves that leave scars of guilt,

and there are layers of scares that build up like a number of patches on a roof to stop the leak

but the leak doesn't go away.

And it will keep flowing into the house and destroying the foundation until we rebuild the house.

You see, we need to rebuild the house

that towers over our dystopian relationship to make things better.

But it's not that simple

And some may say it's simple.

But it's not.

It's complicated.