

## Keynote Address

# Our Dreams Matter Too: Equity for First Nations Children

Cindy Blackstock

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Twelve-year-old Elliot<sup>1</sup> says, "The crazy thing about a great historical moment is that you almost never know you're in it." This is the historical moment of our ancestors' dreams. This is the moment that all of the children who went to residential school dreamed of: a time when First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children do not have to grow up to recover from their childhoods, and non-Aboriginal children do not have to grow up to say, "I'm sorry."

The challenge of reconciliation is embracing what hurts. It means that we must, as a people, take on the challenges—in our own families, in our own personal lives, in our own nation—that stop us from moving forward. It also requires a new generation of non-Aboriginal political leaders who don't hide from Canada's discriminatory relationship with Aboriginal peoples, who welcome these truths as an opportunity to build a country worthy of every child's dreams. I think that's what my mentor and hero, Justice Sinclair, talks about when he talks about reconciliation. He said, "The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off."

This is the time of our ancestors' dream, but it's not just the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ancestors who dreamed of this time. There have been other people in our history who have also dreamed it. Robert F. Kennedy, when he was United States Attorney General, made this comment in a speech in 1963, a year before I was born:

[The Indian] may be technically free, but he is the victim of social and economic oppressions that hold him in bondage. He is all too likely to become the victim of his own proud anger, his own frustrations, and—the most humiliating of all—the victim of racial discrimination in his own land.

And what about the future?

Will the injustice go on?

The answer to that question is within each of us. The answer depends on whether or not we have the courage to acknowledge that racial discrimi-

nation exists and to do something about it. We must no longer tolerate racial discrimination or any level of inequity for First Nations children. The time when the Canadian government has used inequality for First Nations children as a fiscal restraint measure needs to be over; it diminishes the national conscience and places thousands of children at needless risk. It costs us generations of children's hopes and dreams. It costs the government of Canada way too much money, as many disadvantaged children grow up to be disadvantaged adults. And it costs us the potential of a loving and caring country that we've all dreamed of.

Canada's birth certificate, which embedded racial discrimination against First Nations children into the fabric of the nation and was also the birth certificate of the child welfare system, is a letter from Duncan Campbell Scott, dated 1895, asking the Department of Justice to develop a warrant for the removal of Indian children and their placement in residential schools for the purposes of "education," which we all now understand to be far from that (Blackstock, 2016). It also allowed for the removal of Indian children who were deemed "not properly cared for," which closely maps onto contemporary definitions of child neglect (Blackstock, 2016). This is the earliest form of child welfare in the country. While the conversation about residential schools and the destructive role they played for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures is now finally being told due to the courage of the survivors and others, many people do not understand that residential schools were equally child welfare placements. By the 1960s, 80 percent of the children in residential schools in Saskatchewan were placed there for child welfare reasons.

So, as our dear friend and esteemed First Nations lawyer David Nahwegahbow says, the Canadian government has a long history of placing itself between First Nations children and their families. Historian John Milloy says that this is about "cutting the artery of culture" (1999, p. 42). To heal the artery, to have the pulse of life reinvigorated in our children, requires that we do things differently. It requires that we ask ourselves to be more courageous than we ever thought we could be.

The inequalities in federal programs for First Nations children on reserve are undeniable. The Auditor General, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, numerous reports by First Nations, and, most importantly, the experiences of children themselves, say that across almost every area of experience, First Nations children receive less money from the federal government for public government services than all other children in the country. Sadly, because so many caring non-Aboriginal people in Canada do not understand that the federal government funds those services on reserve, those children receive less and get judged as if they get more.

Children may not be experts in education. And they may not have all the degrees behind their names. But children are experts in love and fairness. They know love like none of us will ever realize in the rest of our lives. They remind us of it when we become parents ourselves. That love you have for a child is one of the most sacred gifts to the human spirit. A young nine-year-old expert in love and fairness said, "You know, Cindy, what discrimination really means? It's when the government doesn't think you're worth the money."

So, what does it feel like to be one of those children the government thinks is not worth the money? Who, despite really pulling themselves up by the bootstraps, don't get that same opportunity as other children? Who, as historian John Milloy (1999) notes, get their names represented in some statistic at the top of a list you don't want to be on, or at the bottom of a list you want to be at the top of? And what does that do for the country as a whole? What are these inequalities? Are they things that just First Nations should be concerned about? Or are they things that everyone should be concerned with? Many of our great leaders have talked about this as a perilous inequality, a dagger into the heart of Canada's consciousness—because inequality is bad for everyone.

*The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) should be required reading in every faculty of education. It shows some of the best evidence in the world linking inequality within countries to poorer health, and to poorer social and economic outcomes for everyone. The less the inequality, the stronger economy you're going to have, and the lower youth suicide rates, lower level of substance misuse, fewer people incarcerated, higher levels of education, and higher levels of trust. All these result from reducing those inequalities. But sadly, in Canada, those inequalities are becoming bigger. And instead of tackling the root cause, which is inequality, we are building more prisons and we are building more mental health clinics.

Now, some people say we're doing everything we can as a country for kids. We are the 11th wealthiest economy in the world. I know that there's some belt-tightening here in Alberta at the moment but, let's face it, in the context of the world's population, we're a wealthy nation. And you might wonder how Canada's children are doing proportionate to Canada's wealth. Certainly that's what the KidsRights Foundation wanted to know. The KidsRights Foundation, by the way, is probably the most respected children's rights organization in the world. It works with the Nobel laureates to give out the International Children's Peace Prize. One of my heroes, Shannen Koostachin, who you're going to hear about in a moment, was nominated for the Children's Peace Prize. She was one of 45 kids in the

world to be nominated for that prize in 2008—our own superhero. Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan won it last year.

The KidsRights Foundation thought it would be interesting to rank countries in terms of how well they're doing for children, according to their reviews for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child proportionate to their wealth (<https://www.kidsrightsindex.org/>). Now, if Canada was doing as much as it could, we should be ranking 11th in the world or better. Don't you think? And, let's face it, regardless of your political preference, when I go out and talk to Canadians, they all love kids. Right? The reality is far different. We rank 60th in the world in terms of how well we're doing for kids. And when you look at the index on legislation and government budgets, which is exactly what parliaments and legislatures do, we rank 115th in the world, right next to the Russian Federation. We are missing a huge opportunity by not investing in children. Because the best investment any government can make is not in someone my age, or even someone the age of the students who presented yesterday. It's in that beautiful baby. Because for every dollar the government invests in a baby, it saves seven dollars down the line. And so children are the best economic return any government can make. And, let's face it, when it comes to social and moral investments, they really are the best place to put our resources.

Now, what does it feel like to be one of those kids the government thinks is not worth the money? Well, if you look at First Nations education on reserve, we see that gap in education. The federal government provides far less money for First Nations schools—far less money for First Nations teachers and learning institutions. This has gone on for decades. In fact, I have a report in my office on child care in Indian residential schools that was written by George Caldwell in 1967, when I was three years old, and we still haven't made real progress on equality in education.

That's the problem with this drop-in-a-bucket equality approach. Equality is not something you go for in a shuffle. It's something that you go for in a leap and a bound, especially when children are involved. Because, as Bethany, a 12-year-old girl from Ottawa, says, "Childhoods do not wait around for politicians." Children grow up in the meantime, and they actually want to grow up to be somebody. They want to grow up to be someone their family is proud of. And they're working really hard. Children want to come to a place like the University of Alberta but they don't have the equal opportunity to do it. And that's where universities need to be far more courageous. We cannot just content ourselves with opening Native units and programs. We cannot just allow ourselves to focus on recruiting Indigenous faculty and students without addressing the

inequality that is at the headwaters of the lack of representation of Indigenous thought, knowledge, and peoples in these institutions. It's discrimination that stops children from coming here. It is not a lack of will or desire on the part of the children.

I am so blessed in my work to work with kids. One of the greatest honours I have ever had in my life was meeting Shannen Koostachin. She was from the Attawapiskat First Nation. Shannen was a girl who loved school. You know kids who even before they go to school are looking at the school. They're imagining themselves in the school. When they get their Kindergarten supplies, they sharpen those pencil crayons about 10 times before they can get there. She was that kind of kid. She could not wait. But the day the school was supposed to open in her community, it closed. Because, you see, the school sat on top of a toxic waste dump, contaminated by 30,000 gallons of diesel fuel, and for the previous 20 years it had been making the children sick. It was only closed after an independent environmental health assessment found it so contaminated that it was a Class 1 toxic waste dump. So, the Government of Canada brought up portable trailers and put them on the playground of that contaminated school.

These portable trailers were supposed to be temporary but Shannen grew up while they were still there. And when she was in Grade 8, these portable trailers were in such horrible condition, so cold, that the children often would have to wear their parkas inside the classroom. Their hands would freeze up so much that they couldn't wrap their fingers around a pencil. And when their teachers spoke, the children could see their breath come out of their mouth. And there were rodents in the building. When I went there and visited one of these classrooms, I left my backpack at the door. And one Kindergartener said, "You better take that with you to your desk, because if you don't take it to your desk, then the mice will eat your snacks."

This is in the 11th wealthiest country in the world. Shannen couldn't believe that the people in Ottawa were mean and that they just didn't care. She actually believed in the goodness of people. She was raised by a very traditional Cree family. She thought that, if the politicians knew, they would do something about it. So, she and the other children wrote letters to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, pleading for a new school ([https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/Shannens-letter\\_0.pdf](https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/Shannens-letter_0.pdf)). But nothing happened. There were three promises for a new school but nothing changed for the children. And that's when Shannen decided that she could do something different. She would make a video and she would show all of the problems with the school. She would show how much the children really wanted to learn. And then she would put it on YouTube, and she would ask non-Aboriginal children if they

would write to the government, too, and maybe if the non-Aboriginal children wrote, maybe, just maybe, the government would listen. So, she loaded up that video and she wondered if anyone, anywhere, will ever write a letter.

Twelve hundred kilometers to the south, a little girl turns on her computer and she sees Shannen's video. She can't believe it, she says in her letter to the Prime Minister. She says, "These are all the things I did in school today, and I don't have to wear my coat in the classroom. I don't understand why First Nations children like Shannen don't get the same things I do. Can you please explain it and write back." She wonders if the Prime Minister is going to respond. And he does. She gets a letter, she opens it up, and inside is a four-inch by six-inch autographed photo of the Prime Minister, along with a letter saying how much he likes to hear from young people. Well, she takes that letter and the photo to her classmates of non-Aboriginal children and they decide that there's really only one thing to do: they will take their collective picture, they'll all sign it, and they'll send it to the Prime Minister and have him respond to the child's question. It's because children understand justice. They know that sometimes adults need a little bit of a nudge to do the right thing. You know, don't we teach them so much about fairness? And yet, isn't it wrong if we're not modeling it ourselves?

And, so, I was blessed to meet Shannen when she went down to Ottawa to raise awareness with other non-Aboriginal children. When she was 13, she went to Ottawa and she drove by Carleton University on the way from the airport. And she dreamed of one day going there. She said, "I'm going to be a lawyer, and I'm going to stand up for the rights of all children in this country." Well, in order to be that lawyer, she knew that she couldn't go to the school in Attawapiskat, the secondary school, because it was so underfunded that even if she graduated she'd be two years behind other kids in law school. Not because she didn't try, but just because the resources weren't there in the same way. So, her parents made a difficult decision to send her and her sister hundreds of kilometres to the south to go to school in New Liskeard. And there it was: for the first time in her life she stood in a hallway of a proper school. She found herself wandering into a classroom and picking up all the things that they had for learning and tears came down her face. And when she was asked what's wrong, she said, "I wish I had my life to live over again, so I could go to a school as nice as this."

Shannen passed away in 2010 in a tragic car accident hundreds of kilometres away from her family. And within hours of her passing, the children she inspired created a Facebook page called Shannen's Dream. It



was to honour their friend who had been nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize and who showed other children that you can stand up for something you believe in. But it was also something more. These children were going to continue to write letters to the Government of Canada until Shannen's Dream, of safe and comfy schools, and equitable education, was made real in the lives of children. It went beyond words and promises. They wanted a Canada where every child could go to a school, where every child could speak their language, be proud of who they are, and become the lawyer of their dreams. One of the things I want you to do is to sign up for Shannen's Dream. You can see bookmarks on your table so that you're reminded of the website (<https://fncaringociety.com/shannens-dream>). And you can watch Alanis Obomsawin's National Film Board of Canada (NFB) documentary about Shannen Koostachin: *Hi-Ho Mistahey!* But don't just sit at the sidelines.

Now, you might wonder if the federal government is unaware of these inequalities. We've recently heard the federal government make statements that there is no inequality in First Nations' education. But that's certainly not what their documents show (see First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, 2015). A document that we received through legal action, authored by the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada department in 2013, shows that, for that year, the department had to transfer 98 million dollars out of the infrastructure fund (over half a billion over six years)—money for schools, water, and housing—to cover the shortfalls in education, health, and child welfare. It shows us they're taking money out of infrastructure and putting it elsewhere to cover the shortfalls in education, health, and child welfare. But even that is not enough to cover up their shortfalls. And what's the problem with taking money from infrastructure? Well, the problem with taking money from infrastructure funding is that infrastructure funding is not sufficient to begin with. And that's what the department also acknowledges in this document. One of the biggest drivers, actually, of First Nations children going into child welfare is inadequate housing. When you take money from infrastructure, you deepen the housing crisis and you actually make the situation worse for children. There's another problem. Fire protection is in that infrastructure budget. And we just heard of the very tragic loss of children from the Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation in Saskatchewan who died in a house fire because their community did not have fire services.

This gives us an opportunity to have, perhaps, another courageous conversation. And that is: How has this discrimination gone on so very long? How has it happened in a country that fundamentally says it's about fairness? How has this been allowed to happen? And I think one of the big

stereotypes is that First Nations people are not good with their money. And although there are some First Nations people who are not good with their money, based on the experiences of the municipalities of Montreal, Toronto, and London, Ontario, I'm sure you can think of a few examples in Alberta; we are not alone in that. In fact, the Auditor General has found that financial mismanagement is not pervasive in First Nations communities. And, yet, that stereotype is out there, so loaded, that First Nations people are getting more than everybody else and they're not grateful for it. This idea persists, even though they're actually getting less. The second part of that stereotype is that, even if you give them the money, they don't manage it well. I was so sad to see that come off in the press coverage about this tragedy in the Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation. The press coverage stated the reason the volunteer fire department did not respond to the call to help these children was because the First Nations had not paid a \$3,400 bill. I don't know about how it works in the City of Edmonton, but I live in Ottawa, and when I called 911 for my neighbour, they said, "911, what is your emergency?" They did not say, "911, did he pay his taxes?" We need to challenge these discriminatory stereotypes so that we can talk about them and change them. Because it's that kind of White noise that has stopped us from moving forward.

What about child welfare? What about the TRC and the Sixties Scoop? One of the things that worry me is that we talk about them as if they're over. My friend, John Milloy, is a historian who wrote *A National Crime*, which tells the story of residential schools from the perspective of the Government of Canada's own documents—he suggests, really, that we didn't learn very much at all from the Sixties Scoop or residential schools other than to become more efficient at the removal of First Nations children. That birth certificate of child welfare—that warrant—tells the reasons why children were removed (Scott, 1895): poverty, poor housing, and trauma due to colonization. Today, these are the same reasons that children are removed and overrepresented in child welfare care: poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse related to trauma. And what are we doing about those issues? Almost nothing. Right? We are codifying structural problems as personal deficits, just like we're doing in education. We're wondering how we can make universities more welcoming but doing nothing about the fact that First Nations children are being disadvantaged from the start. They don't even get the same opportunity to graduate from high school in order to come through doors like this.

There are lots of ways to think about overrepresentation. Actually, I hate that word, because it makes it sound too nice. I can tell you all the statistics from my own work and the work of other scholars, about it being



12 times more likely to be in child welfare care if you are First Nations child, or that close to 70 percent of all the kids in Alberta in child welfare care are Aboriginal (see, for example, Blackstock, 2007; Trocmé et al, 2006). But I think the more realistic way of looking at it is thinking about the way children themselves talk about it, which is: "How many nights until I see my dad?" A Department of Indigenous Affairs spreadsheet shows the number of nights First Nations children on reserve and in the Yukon Territory spent in foster care between 1989 and 2012. It excludes data from 2011 in Ontario. So, if anything, it's a tragic underestimate. If you add up all those nights of care those kids have spent, it equals 66 million nights of childhood in foster care or over 187,000 years of childhood (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2017). So, when does it become a moral emergency for adults in our community? When is it of such an urgent nature that we can no longer tolerate the situation and we mobilize as a people to be an army of heroes for our children? We know what to do about poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse. We could do something about those issues. But we're not doing it.

One of the reasons for the alarmingly high rates of First Nations children in the child welfare system is inequality in child welfare funding for First Nations agencies on reserve. In a report that we at the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society did in 2000, the *Joint National Policy Review*, the funding for child welfare on reserve was 22 percent lower than funding for children welfare services off reserve. The report was done with the federal government. We did another in 2005, titled the *Wen:de* report, and found the shortfall to be around 34 percent. The federal government's most recent calculation puts the shortfall at 34.8 percent. You receive less funding on reserve, even though the needs are higher due to the intergenerational impacts of residential schools.

Now, I worked for over 10 years, along with other First Nations, experts, economists, and the best scholars across the country, to not only document the inequality, but also, more importantly, to develop an evidenced-based solution as to how we could tackle these inequities in a way that made sense, and that was centred on the culture and the context of the families themselves. The findings and recommendations were published in a report, *Wen:de: We are Coming to the Light of Day* (Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley, & Wien, 2005), and the federal government walked away from it, even though they were running billions of dollars of surplus budget. This brings me to the question: How courageous are we?

We created the Caring Society, which is a small little nonprofit I work for. There is one full-time employee and two part-time employees at the Caring Society. When we were creating it, an Elder gave me a wonderful

piece of advice that I pass along to all the young people that I've had the privilege to meet. He said to us, when we were establishing the Caring Society in the early 2000s: "Never fall in love with the Caring Society. And never fall in love with your business model. Only fall in love with the children. Because there may come a time when you have to sacrifice both those things for them." That time came for us in 2007 when we filed a human rights complaint against the federal government, alleging that they were racially discriminating against the 163,000 children and their families served by the on-reserve child welfare program. We lost all of our federal government core funding in 30 days.

I remember at that time: We made this decision. We had \$50,000 in the bank from all my keynote speaking monies (which I donate back to the kids; I don't take any of the money personally). We had filed a case against the federal government and knew that they likely would pull all of our funding. I wondered: How we were going to hang in there for the children? How were we going to meet the federal government, lawyer for lawyer and dollar for dollar, to make sure the children's story was told?

When I was younger, I came across a poem by Patrick Miles Overton (1975) called "Faith":

When you walk to the edge of all the light you have  
and take that first step into the darkness of the unknown,  
you must believe that one of two things will happen:

There will be something solid for you to stand upon,  
or, you will be taught how to fly.

Well, that something solid to stand on came in the form of a little piece of mail I got one day. It was written in pencil crayon on the outside. Don't you think the best letters come in pencil crayon? And it shook as I walked to my office. Inside there was a letter and it said: "Dear Cindy, here's some money for the kids." Inside there was \$1.67 from that child's piggy bank. Even up until today, piggy banks help fund the Caring Society. It's because kids know about justice and fairness, and they want to grow up in a Canada that honours that too.

After that, we created something called the "I am a Witness Program." And it's a campaign you can sign up for (<https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>). It has all of the Government of Canada's documents there and all of our documents for the kids. We don't want you to take a side, at least not the Government of Canada's side or the Caring Society's side. We want you to look at all that material, be a good witness, and take the kids' side. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal case we filed is the most watched human rights case in Canadian history. For the first six years, the

federal government fought it in on legal technicalities, trying to get it derailed before the facts could ever be heard. But because of those piggy banks, that case was finally opened on its merits in February 2013. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal heard over 72 days of testimony and over 500 documents were filed during the case.<sup>2</sup> I'm going to discuss a couple of those documents that we filed.

I think I can say with fairness that the federal government's case was fairly weak. In these proceedings, you're able to call an expert witness. We called four on our side. The federal government was going to call one: it was KPMG, the accounting firm. The federal government had hired them to discredit our earlier calculations of the shortfall. KPMG came within 0.012 percent of our calculations, so we filed the federal government's expert report on our side of the case and KPMG never appeared. The Tribunal is expected to release its decision this year<sup>2</sup>. The Tribunal has the authority to not only make a legally binding determination as to whether the Government of Canada discriminates against these children but, more importantly, it can also order a remedy that's binding on the federal government. And, so, this case signals an opportunity to also address inequalities in education, health, water, and child welfare.

One of the documents we filed was actually the federal government's own webpage. I took a screen shot of the page and printed it off. We filed it in evidence. It's no longer on the federal government's website. On the webpage, the federal government said "The current federal funding approach to Child Family Services does not let First Nations Child and Family Services agencies keep pace with provincial and territorial policy changes." That means that they are unable to deliver a full continuum of services, which links to children going into child welfare. That funding formula continues to apply unchanged in British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and the Yukon territory. The federal government did implement a new funding formula here in Alberta. It's called the Enhanced Formula. But the Auditor General has reviewed it twice, and both times found it to be flawed and inequitable. It falls far short of equality.

Another document we filed is a presentation to Aboriginal Affairs' Director General, dated 2012, which includes their internal calculations of the shortfall, saying it's around \$420 million during this time frame. So, you can see that the federal government even knows that it's shortchanging the kids. Here is how the federal government defended its actions in its final written submission to the Tribunal:

163. The Complainants (Assembly of First Nations, Caring Society and the Canadian Human Rights Commission) rely on an assortment of internal government documents, which they

assert are admissible for the truth of their contents, either as "public documents" or admissions against interest by the Respondents (AANDC). This assertion overshoots the mark. 164. The information in these documents are not admissions. *At best, they reflect personal views of employees of the department at particular points of time* [emphasis added]. While these documents have been admitted into evidence, the Tribunal should assess their weight contextually with reference to the Respondent's viva voce evidence regarding their proper interpretation. (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2015, pp. 5-6)

We argued that these *are* admissions by the federal government that it's not doing the right thing. Never once did they bring in any evidence that their documents contained personal views. And even if they were personal views, they never brought in any evidence that any of these documents were not truthful.

Those kids who write the letters of hope for First Nations children are still at it. Recently, I was walking with my dear friend Charlene Bearhead—who many of you know and who does a great job with Project of Heart (<http://projectofheart.ca>)—along with a group of kids who were going to go read their letters to the Government of Canada so First Nations kids can grow up safely in their families, get a good education, be healthy, and proud of who they are. As we're walking along towards the House of Commons, one little eight-year-old girl asks: "Can you see what they're doing there?" We say, "Yes, they're laying sod." She said, "No, that's not what they're trying to do. They're trying to make that house look beautiful. And what happens in that house is *not* beautiful for kids." The house she was talking about was the House of Commons. She knows about these inequalities, and she expects better from her government.

You can find out more about our work at the University of Alberta at a new research unit we have there: FNCARES (<https://fncaringso-society.com/fncares>).

I want to end with this: Children are going to inherit the world we will to them. Right now, that Canada looks like one where First Nations children are not worth the money. We turn our heads away from that discrimination and we make all kinds of excuses for it, but we all want something better from Canada. Surely, we can do better than racially discriminating against little kids.

And we also owe a debt to all those children in residential schools: To all of them, who preserved those one or two words in their language, just so those words might be spoken once more. To all of those children who dreamed of a moment when this might be a country where they could hold their heads up high instead of having their heads hang low. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission releases its report in June (you can read the final report at the link provided here: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>).

But that's just the beginning of the work for all of us.

One of the things that we're honoured to do in the Caring Society, along with our friends at Kairos and Project of Heart and at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, is to engage children to plant a heart garden honouring the children who went to residential schools and pledging to continue reconciliation. The garden will be planted by hundreds of children of diversity during the closing ceremonies of the TRC at Rideau Hall in Ottawa. We're going to have children from all over Canada make hearts. And we're going to attach them to stakes. And children will be out in front of Rideau Hall planting a heart garden in honour of all the children who attended residential schools. During that same week, we would love, very much, to see heart gardens planted all over this country. And at the other end of the stake, wouldn't it be a good idea to tie a few seeds of one of the sacred medicines? So, when that heart has seen its day, it will release a medicine of healing and hope for all of us. A medicine that will help us turn this long, dark history of Canada's relationship with First Nations children from one of oppression and sadness to one of hope and aspiration<sup>3</sup>.

And, if we all do that, if we're courageous enough to stand up, maybe, just maybe, I'll be walking along the streets of Ottawa with a beautiful little eight-year-old girl, and when we come upon the House of Commons, I will ask: "What are they doing there, laying sod?" And she'll say, "No, they're making that house look beautiful, because what happens in that house is beautiful for children."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The children quoted in this paper are identified by age and first names only in order to protect their privacy. Their quotations are taken directly from letters written by the children or based on paraphrases of their personal communications with the author.

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal released its decision on January 26, 2016, finding that the Canadian government is racially discriminating against 163,000 First Nations children. Find the ruling and the remedies ordered here: <https://fncaringssociety.com/tribunal-timeline-and-documents>. Published 21 December 2017 by First Nations Child and Family Caring Society ([www.fncaringssociety.com](http://www.fncaringssociety.com)).

<sup>3</sup> See YouTube video (26:16 minutes). *It takes all of us to enforce the law* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sZk5p4e6c>

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