



Statement from PCMCH in Recognition of Orange Shirt Day

September 30, 2021

In May 2013, Phyllis Webstad shared her story at the St. Joseph Mission Residential School Commemoration Project about her first day at residential school when her shiny new orange shirt, a gift from her grandmother, was taken from her when she arrived at the school; she was six at the time. For Phyllis, “the color orange has always reminded me of that [being stripped and having all her clothes taken when she arrived at the school] and how my feelings didn’t matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing.”ⁱ

This event was the beginning of Orange Shirt Day, which, starting this year, is also the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. Every year on September 30, Orange Shirt Day acknowledges the immense and unfathomable suffering experienced by First Nations, Inuit and Métis children who were taken from their families and forced to go to residential schools, the thousands who did not survive, the families who were torn apart and the communities who were impacted, all never the same again. It is estimated that over 150,000 children between the ages of 4 and 16 attended residential schools across Canada, and that between 4,000 and 6,000 children died while there from physical abuse, malnutrition, disease, neglect, suicide or by trying to escape. No one should ever experience such atrocities because of their race or culture, or for any reason.

This year, Orange Shirt Day is even more significant and meaningful because of the hundreds of unmarked graves that have been discovered on the grounds of several residential schools, with more to be found.

This day gives us an opportunity to honour and remember all who are affected, to keep the stories and the accompanied grief and healing alive in such a way so that others become aware of the horrors and the profound impact the schools had on so many, and to better understand the reality of intergenerational trauma. In addition, we hope that listening to these stories – in a way in which they are really heard – reaffirms to the survivors that they do matter and that they are important.

The intention behind Orange Shirt Day, and the efforts to support the healing of those affected by residential schools, very much resonate with the PCMCH team. We did not walk in these shoes ourselves and therefore can only imagine just how terrifying and damaging all that happened was, and the long-standing harm that has occurred. We acknowledge this harm, and the mistakes that have been made, and continue to be made, all based on deeply embedded colonial thinking that exists in societal structures, including those associated with healthcare and our own organization. PCMCH is committed to continuing meaningful discussions about what we need to do differently to ensure the health needs of First Nation, Inuit and Métis pregnant individuals, newborns, children, youth and their families are met.

ⁱ Phyllis’ story, along with further information about Orange Shirt Day, can be found at <https://www.orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story.html>