

“These Paintings Have a Spirit”: Voices Found in Childhood Artwork from Indian Residential  
Schools

by

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## Introduction

*“Canadians do not like to hear that their country was founded through frauds, abuses, and violence perpetuated against the original peoples of this land”. – Alfred, IX, 2010*

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the positive interactions, conversations and future work that the repatriation and exhibition of childhood paintings from Indian Residential Schools have generated and continue to propagate. The paintings have given Survivors and their families means to explore and express themselves in a way they haven't before.

The IRS system has had profound negative and lasting impacts on the Indigenous peoples in the land now known as North America. Residential Schools were created to separate children from their families and assimilate these children to Euro-Christian ways (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada TRC, 2015). These schools, though they were described as education systems, were centers for cultural genocide. Cultural genocide is the purposeful destruction of out-culture groups to weaken them in the process of conquest or domination, so they are not able to continue as a group (Davidson, 2012 p.1). The schools taught the students that Indigenous peoples held “little knowledge, history or role in modern life” (McCallum & Perry, 2018 p. 110). The schools instilled the notions that the children’s elders, beliefs and teachings were worthless.

In 1867, churches started running “industrial” or “boarding” schools (Assembly of First Nations, 1994, p. 3) and by 1883, there were three large established Residential Schools for Indigenous children in Western Canada (TRC, 2015). These schools were running until the last school closure in 1996 (Woods, 2016 & TRC, 2015 & Regan, 2010). Families were torn apart so generations could not pass down cultural values and identity. The people who worked at these schools were often poorly trained and unsupervised. There have been many accounts of physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual abuse in and as a result of these schools (Regan, p. 5). The

children were prohibited from speaking their mother language, or practicing cultural traditions, and were punished if they did (Regan, p. 5).

The lasting impacts from these restrictions and punishments have instigated and caused suffering, neglect and abuse in subsequent generations. In her book “Unsettling the Settler Within” (2010) Dr. Paulette Regan states that there is an “an intergenerational history of dispossession, violence, abuse, and racism that is a fundamental denial of the human dignity and rights of Indigenous peoples” (Regan, p. 5). Intergenerational violence and suffering is a contributing factor in the breakdown of family and Indigenous communities (Assembly of First Nations). Many of the Survivors are silent about their experiences, they bear the pain of their past alone. Unknowingly, however, this has negative effects on their daily lives, the lives of their children and their grandchildren (Assembly of First Nations). This silence, for many, has brought on lateral violence in the communities. Lateral violence is defined as displaced violence directed against ones peers rather than their adversaries. Lateral violence is a result of the lingering effects of the IRS system and the learned abuse and victimization that came along with attending these schools. This lateral violence is now one of the most challenging topics Indigenous communities suffer (Fryer, 2014 p. 10).

The whole truth has not yet been told by the Survivors and Intergenerational Survivors. My goal in this paper is to uncover more of the truth by witnessing an intergenerational Survivor and a Survivor’s experiences. This truth will come from the realization by non-Indigenous peoples that relations between them and Indigenous peoples have never been predominantly peaceful (Regan p.5). In instituting these schools, the government intended to eradicate the Indigenous peoples’ culture, to fix what they referred to as the “Indian problem” (Alfred, 2010 p. IX). When children went to these schools, their material possessions, if brought, were quickly confiscated upon arrival. When the children who survived these institutions left, they left with

less. Less belongings, less soul and less spirit. Recently, there have been childhood artworks recovered from two Indian Residential Schools in Canada. To some, these paintings are the only physical piece of childhood the Survivors have from their time in the IRS system and have subsequently reflected positively on their lives.



Figure 1: Robert Aller. Photographs from early 1950- mid 1960s.

Robert Aller was a non-Indigenous artist that volunteered to teach art classes at two Indian Residential Schools. These schools were the Alberni Indian Residential School (AIRS) and the Mackay Indian Residential School (MIRS). Aller volunteered at the schools to teach painting and drawing as an extracurricular class in the 1960s and early 1970s (Clements, 2018 p. 6). He encouraged students to paint or draw whatever they wanted, however they wanted. Aller stored some of these paintings until his passing in 2008 (Madden, 2017). The paintings were bequeathed to the University of Victoria in 2008 and were analyzed shortly after. Dr. Andrea Walsh embraced the project with the help of a summer class of students, faculty, Elders, and community leaders to find the names of the people who created these paintings. This team collaborated to contact the artists or their nearest relatives, to determine what they wanted done with their paintings. Some of the paintings from former AIRS students were repatriated to their

rightful owners at a feast in the Port Alberni Athletic Hall in 2013 (Clements, p. 7). The Survivors reclaimed their artwork and decided what the next steps were for them and their artwork. Some kept it, some returned it to the University of Victoria for safekeeping. Others approached Dr. Walsh, requesting collaboration to display their art. These Survivors wanted the public to know about their experiences in the AIRS (Clements, p. 7). Some of these paintings have now been displayed in Victoria, Penticton, Port Alberni, and Vancouver. In these exhibitions, the Survivors told the curators what they want on their plaques, about themselves, their families or their experiences. A group of Survivors gathered and decided how they wanted their artworks to be displayed, and in what context. This essay will explore the views of a Survivor, Mark Atleo from the Ahousaht First Nation and an Intergenerational Survivor, Lorilee Wastasecoot from the Peguis First Nation. This research focusses on what the artwork and exhibition of the artwork means to them.

#### Situating Myself in This Research

*“My own deepest learning has always come when I was in unfamiliar territory culturally, intellectually, and emotionally. It seems to me that this space of not knowing has power that may hold a key to decolonization for settlers” – Regan, p. 18*

To situate myself in this research project, I am not Indigenous. My mother’s side of the family immigrated to Canada from Germany and Lithuania and my father's side from Norway and Sweden. I am a settler on this land. My passion for this project has been building since I started attending the University of Victoria. Growing up in a small town in Alberta, I was not exposed to Indigenous culture or peoples more than a handful of times in 17 years. I understand that the teachings of Indigenous cultures are not widespread, and people have become numb, apathetic and in some cases, hateful toward Indigenous peoples in some communities. The only memory I have from my childhood of anything remotely concerning Indigenous peoples is a card

game I played in grade four. It was similar to the board game “Settlers of Catan”, except we were trading firearms for fur pelts with “the Indians”. Although my parents were living when the Residential Schools were in practice, and I was born the year they had officially closed, a colonial view has been perpetuated from my grandparents and parents’ generations.

As a child, we learn what we are conditioned to learn, and in mine and my parents’ cases, it was a colonial conditioning. This conditioning blinded me to the fact that there was another culture and way of thinking in such close proximity to me. This concealed culture has different teachings, medicines and knowledge than mine does, but I had no desire to learn their ways, until I came to the University of Victoria. UVic is where I was first exposed to Indigenous art and culture in a less colonial way. I made friends who were interested in Indigenous studies, who taught me so much, even when I didn’t want to hear it. Now, however, I am open and excited to learn these different kinds of teachings and culture.

By the time I moved to Victoria, my mom lived in Comox, BC. She was the first to spark my interest in working with Indigenous communities. One day, driving in the car past a reserve in Comox, she said that people go overseas to help others that are suffering and oppressed when we have people that need help so close to our home communities. She said that we need to help people “in our backyard”<sup>1</sup> if we want our world to be a better place. I know these words are not politically correct in this context, as it is not “our backyard” that Indigenous communities are living in, but the other way around; however, it made my mother’s point so much more powerful. It solidified the proximity of the communities she was speaking about. This comment perturbed me, as I had known that people in our communities and on the reserves around us were suffering, but not once did I stop to think that I should or could even try to lend a hand. This was the first empathetic encounter my brain had toward Indigenous peoples, at 17. With this thought of

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Bagdan, personal communications, 2014.

“helping” Indigenous communities near me in mind, I again turn to the works of Paulette Regan. Regan identifies as a settler of Canada. Her goal in her book (2010) is to determine what people, who carry the identity of settler or colonizer and have benefitted off of colonialism, have to do in order to help us recover from colonialism’s negative legacy (Regan, p. 2). To look and reflect upon ourselves and ask what is wrong with us, not what is wrong with Indigenous peoples. Regan seeks to explain that any Canadian who is non-Indigenous, is responsible for the past and present actions of the government. She believes that the initial apology by Stephen Harper in 2008 is not the closing of a door in the past, but an opening of a door to rethinking the past and changing the present with actions, not just words. (Regan, p. 178).

Reflecting upon my mother’s comment and referring to Regan’s book, I asked and continue to ask these questions: How can I, a non-Indigenous, white female, aid these communities? What is my role or responsibility in this journey of theirs to recover from the Residential Schools and colonialisms horrific actions? How would I ever be able to service these communities in a way that wouldn't be condescending or patronizing? How will I be able to speak the truth, repair trust and start decolonizing my train of thought to allow for more peaceful relations with Indigenous peoples? I didn't know where to start, I struggled with these questions for years and continue to struggle with them.

More of my interest was sparked when I was enrolled in Dr. Walsh’s Anthropology of the Arts class at the University of Victoria (UVic.ca). I was enthralled by her lectures about the creation and exhibition of Canadian Indigenous artwork. I soon asked Dr. Walsh to be my honours second mentor, and she accepted. After a lengthy ethics review process, Dr. Walsh initiated meetings with Mark and Lorilee. Soon after, a whirlwind of active listening, learning and witnessing of their experiences ensued. My goal with this presentation and paper is for people to be gifted a new knowledge of Residential Schools and to witness these two Survivor’s

experiences and how the repatriation of their childhood artwork has had a positive influence on their lives. My goal is not just to remember the past, but to actively use the knowledge these Survivors gifted me to question myself, reflect on my beliefs, and, every day, work to decolonize my thoughts. I hope to spark this interest in others. I choose not to selectively forget parts of Canadian History.

### Methodology

*“How do we learn to listen differently, taking on our responsibility to decolonize ourselves, making space for Indigenous history and experience?” – Regan, p. 190*

This project was conducted with original research I collected when interviewing a Survivor and an Intergenerational Survivor in Victoria, BC. As mentioned previously, Dr. Walsh was the first to contact these two Survivors. I met with Mark for the first time at UVic and, using Nuu-chah-nulth teachings of asking someone permission for their time, I offered him a loaf of sourdough bread (a handmade gift) for his time to consider my request for him to participate. He accepted my loaf of bread and also accepted my proposal to work with and listen to him for this project. After I received ethical clearance from UVic, I received an email from Dr. Walsh, providing me with Mark’s phone number and e-mail address. I called Mark and we met that day. I used a semi-structured interview approach, which quickly turned into an unstructured approach. The unstructured approach is what I believe to have the most benefit. I have struggled on what to call these interviews, because to me, they didn’t feel like interviews. I chose to use the words “visits,” “teachings” and “meetings” instead of “interviews”. After the initial teaching with Mark, Dr. Walsh was in contact with Lorilee, and we set up a meeting over email within a couple of days to speak about her father’s artwork from MIRS. This approach of asking permission for the telling of their own experiences produces an emic perspective of the Interlocutors. This

highlights the process of the project I am most concerned with, the Survivors telling their own stories of their lives and families in the past, present and future.

I believe that it was important to meet when and where the Interlocutors felt most comfortable. When I spoke with Mark for the first time over the phone, we decided to meet at a coffee shop in Cook St. Village, near the water. We purchased our warm beverages and headed down to the ocean on Dallas road. As we were driving there, Mark told me that the ocean made him feel home; he was most comfortable by the water. Conversely, when I asked Lorilee where and when she would like to meet, she chose to meet on a weekday at her place of work in downtown Victoria. Upon meeting both of them I presented them with ethics forms to sign, stating that I would be using this interview for my research in my honours class at the University of Victoria.

In these visits with Mark and Lorilee, I used Regan's notion of witnessing the stories and accepting them as gifts to me, so that I would not just listen but act upon them. These stories and experiences I witnessed, are gifts to me that I, in accepting them will do something with. I intend to share their stories and histories in a way that the Survivors are proud of.

### Ethical Journey

*“All stories invite an ethical response from listeners and readers”. - Regan, p. 173-174*

The ethical process surrounding this project was lengthy and complicated. Considering this project is on a potentially traumatizing subject and the fact I wrote this with the help of a Survivor and Intergenerational Survivor, the ethical process and consent needed to be in place. I applied for ethics approval from the UVic Anthropology Department and was denied twice. I submitted my altered proposal the third time and it was accepted. I was now able to conduct an hour-long interview with each Survivor at a place and time of their choosing. This official ethics process is not the only ethical struggle I endured with this project.

In writing this paper, I had my own ethical struggle, outside of the university institution. I have had to choose which experiences to write about in this essay as, though there are many, I could only choose a select few. I have written the stories in a way that does justice to what the Survivors have experienced and taught me. I have an ethical obligation to honour and respect these Survivors and the giving and receiving of their experiences as a witness. This act of witnessing draws upon the Coast Salish tradition to witness ceremonies. It is not just to be present but also to “pay attention to all of the details” (Regan p. 190). This understanding of witnessing is still central in Coast Salish traditional ceremonies.

I would like to explain my own ethics learning curve using Regan’s theory of decolonizing ethics. She believes that the listener is faced with a moral and ethical dilemma of how to react when witnessing a Survivor’s story. In witnessing these stories, we should attempt to start the decolonizing process of our thoughts to not react with a sense of colonial empathy but rather create a compassionate response. While empathy is more of a pitying of the misfortunes of others, compassion refers to putting yourself in the shoes of others. Ultimately, compassion creates a deeper understanding of their experiences. I believe that through listening to these stories, I developed a more compassionate response to the Survivors’ experiences, I would like to share that experience with you.

### The Schools

*“The schools, some of which are still standing, remain comfortably invisible to Canadians, as do the former inhabitants themselves” – Regan, p. 6.*

The Alberni Indian Residential School (AIRS) opened in 1920, three years after a fire destroyed its predecessor. This building burned down in 1937 and subsequently was rebuilt in 1941 (United Church of Canada Archives). This is the school that Mark attended, starting at age

seven, for “nine long years”<sup>2</sup>. As with most of the other Indian Residential Schools, the AIRS had staff working that were poorly trained; Mark said that the “principal”<sup>3</sup> of the school was always “under the influence”<sup>4</sup>. He told me that when the principal would walk by, you would have to step back and cover your nose as he passed.

The Mackay Indian Residential School (MIRS) in Dauphin, Manitoba is the Residential School that Lorilee’s mother and father attended. This is where they met and fell in love. It was opened in the spring of 1954. This school had been administered by the Anglican Church of Canada’s diocese of Brandon from 1957 to 1969 (United Church of Canada Archives). MIRS was a school for students of elementary school age to grade eight. Most students came from the Hudson Bay line down to the Pas.

#### Lorilee Wastasecoot

*“It’s kind of like dialysis, like we have to flush this out of us, this sickness and the stuff we carry from the schools, we have to get it out of our systems” – Lorilee Wastasecoot, 2019.*

I am honoured that I had the opportunity to learn from Lorilee Wastasecoot, an Intergenerational Survivor. Lorilee introduces herself as a fourth generation Intergenerational School Survivor. This means that her great grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother all attended Residential School. These strong intergenerational ties are also experienced on her father’s side. Lorilee is Cree from Peguis First Nation. Her family has roots from York factory, Hudson Bay area. She is the fourth generation, so she did not have to go to Residential School, but she states that she “come[s] from a long line of Intergenerational Residential School Survivors”<sup>5</sup>. Residential Schools run deep in her family, on her dad’s side as well. Her dad’s art

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Atleo, personal communications, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Atleo, personal communications, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Lorilee Wastasecoot, personal communication, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

and his reclamation of it, is what I spoke with her about. His art is currently being displayed at the Museum of Vancouver.

Lorilee moved to Victoria in 2010, after receiving a CRA refund. At this time, Lorilee was in an abusive relationship and had not yet completed her high school education. She said that this CRA refund was “a sign to leave”<sup>6</sup>. Lorilee told me that this was the best thing she could have done for herself and her daughter. She started to upgrade her English and Math 10 and 11 classes and eventually started at Camosun. She received a Business Administration degree from Camosun, then she started at UVic and earned a Political Science degree. Prior to Lorilee’s involvement with this project, she and her daughter stumbled across the collection of paintings at the Victoria Conference center. Noticing a crowd of Indigenous peoples gathered, Lorilee and her daughter found themselves surprised and excited because they were new to the city. When they went to see what the crowd was doing, they saw that they were viewing the childhood paintings from the IRS. While looking at the paintings herself, Lorilee said that the first person she thought about was her father. Lorilee was sad and emotional; her heart was broken that day. She thought, “These are just kids. They are kids in these schools that never should have existed in the first place”<sup>7</sup>.

Many children at these Residential Schools were not allowed to go home during the summer, because they lived too far away. Lorilee explained that, though that was a major issue, her father wasn’t sure if staying home would have been better for him or not. By the time there had been a train built and kids could take the train back to York Factory, the Residential Schools had already stripped two generations of Survivors of their identities. The adults in the communities had survived the horrific acts of these schools, and now, they had no choice but to let their kids be taken to the same fate; history repeating itself. Lorilee said that the community

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<sup>6</sup> Wastasecoot, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

would be “Crazy, drinking all the time . . . What do you do when someone steals your kids?”<sup>8</sup>. Lorilee recounts that sometimes her dad wonders if he really would have been better off staying at home. This is devastating, to hear that someone’s family and community are so fragmented and broken that a child might have been better off being shipped off to these rigid, lonely institutions.

As stated previously, Lorilee’s family on both sides is strongly intergenerational and influenced by the IRS system. She told me the story of her grandfather on her dad’s side being taken from his home at the age of four to go to a Residential School. Her grandfather, Walter, got to the school and when the staff asked him what his name was, he told them it was “baby”<sup>9</sup>. He was so young when he went to the school, he didn’t know what his name was. His sister had to come in and tell them that his name was Walter. Walter stayed at the school, never returning home, until the age of 18. Walter came back without a high school education, but had become a good worker. Lorilee said “They just used those kids for labor”<sup>10</sup>, adding that he worked hard all of his life before passing away at the age of 65. Lorilee said that he was full of rage, often taking it out on her grandmother, which was uninhibited by alcohol<sup>11</sup>. His parents, Lorilee believes, were also Survivors.

The school was able to take Walter at such a young age because Walter’s mother had just passed away. The Indian agents and police officers justified taking the five children because his dad “can’t take care of these kids”<sup>12</sup> as a result of him being a single parent. As a Mom, Lorilee can’t fathom her baby being taken from her at the age of four, or any age. The agents and officers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were cruel when taking kids away from their families and placing

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

them into often abusive situations; however, this forced removal is still continuing today. First there were the schools, then the 60s scoop, and now the child welfare system. As Lorilee stated, “Colonialism is not a thing of the past. We live... and work in a very colonial world”<sup>13</sup>.

### Mark Atleo

*“Tomorrow is another day, it will be better, we will fix it and get it done”. – Mark Atleo, 2019*

I also had the honour of learning from Mark Atleo, or Kiikitakashuaa. He is a Survivor of the Alberni Indian Residential School. Kiikitakashuaa is his given name by his grandparents. This is his spiritual name, meaning “a killer whale, coming out of the water on the rocks changing into a wolf”<sup>14</sup>. Mark went to the AIRS when he was seven and stayed there for nine years, “nine long years”<sup>15</sup>. His painting from the Residential School is currently being displayed at the Museum of Vancouver in the “There is Truth Here” exhibition<sup>16</sup>.

Mark Atleo grew up on Flores Island, where he was raised by his grandparents, as he told me is customary. His grandparents taught him many things in the time before he was taken away. The teachings his grandparents gifted him were not only of spiritual nature, but also teachings of patience, respect and humility. Mark spoke about his grandparents’ teachings in several different conversations.

Mark told me that he always knew he was going to be a fisherman. When he was young, however, his dad told him that he was only allowed to come on the boat to fish if he learnt how to tie all the knots. Sure enough, Mark asked his grandfather to help him. His grandfather showed him the ropes, so to speak, then Mark showed his dad. His grandfather was proud of him and told Mark’s dad “you gotta take him out now!”<sup>17</sup>. His Grandfather told him if he looked

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Atleo. March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> <https://museumofvancouver.ca/there-is-truth-here>

<sup>17</sup> Atleo, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019.

after his boat, the boat would look after him too. The boat did always look after him, as he was able to support himself and help his family whenever they needed help after he returned from the AIRS.

Another conversation I had with Mark was about the spiritual teachings he had learnt from his grandparents. He told me that they taught him about his gift of vision. This was all lost, however, while he attended the AIRS. He said that even though he lost his ‘vision’ for a while, he still believed in the spiritual teachings his grandparents gifted to him; especially during fishing season. Mark shared the story during which he and his dad had a particularly good fishing season. Mark asked his dad if he could miss one day of the spiritual teachings, and his dad said “go ahead”<sup>18</sup>. That was the one day in the entire season that Mark didn’t fill his boat. His dad asked him at the end of the season what he learnt. Mark told him that he missed that one day and his dad just said “yup, never take shortcuts”<sup>19</sup>. Mark has applied this lesson to his healing progress as well, to never take shortcuts, and always “finish what you’re doing”<sup>20</sup>.

Mark and the other children from the Ahousaht First Nation arrived at AIRS under the pretense of going on a fieldtrip. Initially, they were happy to get on the bus; upon arrival, however, Mark remembers feeling shocked, stating that, “wow, it was devastating”<sup>21</sup>. Mark was taken along with his younger brother, and at the time Mark knew he needed to be there for his younger brother when he needed it. He remembers he and his brother feeling homesick and not being allowed to practice what their grandparents had taught them. Mark told me that when someone would do something wrong, and the staff didn’t know who did it, the kids would have to line up in the basement and stand, for hours, until someone owned up to it. “It was

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

terrifying”<sup>22</sup> explained Mark. He said that some kids would tell the staff that they had done it, even if they hadn’t, so the others wouldn’t suffer.

Mark and his brother escaped the confines of the schoolgrounds every now and then through sports games and tournaments. Mark loved playing sports and always dragged his brother along to play. After a while, his brother started to like sports as well. Mark explained how proud he was of his brother succeeding in basketball, soccer and softball. Mark himself was a natural athlete. He told me he went to nationals for wrestling and, after the match, people began booing the result. He thought he had won, his coach thought he had won. Then the score was tallied up and he lost to his non-Indigenous competitor by a single point. This, Mark explains, is one of the most disappointing events of his life. He felt that the result had been skewed in favour of his competitor. As a result of this match, he “went on a spiral”<sup>23</sup> and started drinking. Mark was able to right himself once again after reaching out for help to his mother-in-law. When he did, he “sobered up”<sup>24</sup> and changed his ways. He told me he “feel[s] a lot better”<sup>25</sup> as a result of this.

Mark told me that the hardest part of being in the AIRS was when his maternal grandmother passed away. His dad called to tell him the news, as his mom couldn’t speak. Mark’s grandmother was like his mom, because she took care of him and his siblings, and she had spoken and taught Mark and his siblings their language. The AIRS staff would not let Mark go home for his grandmother’s funeral. A few years later, his maternal grandfather also passed away. Again, he was not allowed to go home to attend the funeral. This time, however, he ran

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

away. He wasn't going to miss saying goodbye to another one of his grandparents. For this, he was punished, "Strapped, pretty hard. For disobeying, disobeying something in life"<sup>26</sup>.

Mark's final teaching he told me was from his grandfather on the circle of life. Mark told me that:

Everything depends on each other, we live on all types of plants and trees. All varieties of plants . . . We have to respect [the animals] before we take them. We don't just go out and take them. We have to ask permission from the creator to take them. [This is] the same kind of respect we have for each other. To this day I believe in what my grandfather said, he said you look after nature and nature will look after you.<sup>27</sup>

These teachings that his grandparents used to give him were really about respecting himself, the communities, the land, animals and the creator. They are the pure teachings, there are no hidden meanings behind them. These teachings were very close to being robbed from his peoples in the Residential Schools.

### The Repatriation of the Paintings

*"Some of the things that have happened around this project, it's like these paintings have a spirit". – Lorilee Wastasecoot, 2019*

*"Lots of times they are just happy tears. Like now I am just happy sharing with you, it makes my day". – Mark Atleo, 2019*

Lorilee initially got involved in the project when her uncle Walter phoned Dr. Walsh after seeing that she had some paintings from the Mackay Indian Residential School. He asked if Dr. Walsh had any of his paintings, and when she said no, he asked if she had any of his siblings' paintings. Dr. Walsh looked and said "yes, James, James Brightnose"<sup>28</sup> (Brightnose is the English translation of Wastsasecoot). James Wastsasecoot is Lorilee's father. After Walter contacted Dr. Walsh, James also called to inquire about his own painting. James decided to meet

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Wastasecoot, March 13<sup>th</sup> 2019.

with Dr. Walsh at UVic while visiting his daughter, Lorilee, who was taking courses there. At this time, Lorilee was in the midst of looking for someone to work with for her LE, NONET internship. LE, NONET, literally translated, means “paddling a canoe in a storm and making it through the other side,”<sup>29</sup> which can be taken to mean “success after enduring many hardships.”<sup>30</sup> This is an internship program for Indigenous students to work with someone on a project of their choice. She stated she felt a little lost in school, that she didn’t have a sense of direction, but she had always felt a responsibility to help her family. Lorilee stated that these paintings presenting themselves at the time they did in her life was “just so coincidental. It was just fate”<sup>31</sup>.

When Lorilee went to view the paintings, it was the first time she met Dr. Walsh. She met Dr. Walsh at the door of the building, as her parents were already upstairs. Lorilee was confused about who Dr. Walsh was, and what the paintings were. She said that she was sick to her stomach, worried, nervous and a little scared. She had so many questions including “who are you [Dr. Walsh] and what are these paintings? . . . what were we going to see, what he [James] painted . . . who was this man [Aller] who kept them?”<sup>32</sup>. Dr. Walsh had asked another Survivor to be present when she showed James his painting. This Survivor’s name is Wally Samuel Sr. Lorilee said that she was grateful another Survivor was there, and that it was respectful and considerate of Dr. Walsh to invite him to be present.

After Lorilee, her parents, Wally and Dr. Walsh were settled into the room in Cornett, Dr. Walsh explained who Robert Aller was, and told them about how she had come to take care of the paintings at that time. After this, they opened the box of paintings. Lorilee said when they opened the box, it was like a powerful wind had entered the room. They started to flip through the paintings, until they found James’. When they found it, the whole family took a deep breath

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<sup>29</sup> UVic.ca

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Wastasecoot, 2019

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

in, James let out his deep breath and walked up to view the painting. He laughed. Then Lorilee and her mom let out their breath, looked at the painting, and the three of them cried. James was just a ten-year-old boy when he painted this.



Figure 2: “Self Portrait With Family” By:  
James Wastasecoot

James’ painting is titled “Self Portrait With Family”<sup>33</sup>. It is himself, his parents, and a small person in the corner. Lorilee believes that this small person is her Aunty Brenda. Brenda was the youngest and the only one of her fathers’ 17 siblings who did not go to a Residential School. Lorilee stated that her father was always very guilty about this, because as I stated before, he wasn’t sure if he would have been better off going to the Residential Schools or staying at home in the community. Though Lorilee’s Aunt did not go to a Residential School, Lorilee considers her a Survivor. The community her Aunt was trying to mask the internal and external wounds that were inflicted upon them during their time in the IRS system, as their

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

parents' generation did. This is why Lorilee calls her Aunty Brenda a Survivor, because she "Stayed home, witnessed and lived through all of that crap . . . She survived that shit"<sup>34</sup>.

Though Lorilee's father has no recollection of actually painting this artwork, after reflecting on it, he was able to remember Robert Aller as a volunteer at the school. He remembers Aller standing in front of the class demonstrating how to make the water around a ship at sea look like it was moving. That is the only thing Lorilee's father remembers about Aller and his art class. This painting, however, brings powerful experiences to light that may not have happened had it not been found.

These paintings gave Lorilee a direction in school and in life. She said that after viewing the paintings, it made sense for her to complete her LE, NONET internship with Dr. Walsh and these paintings. She is currently working with Dr. Walsh, exhibiting and talking about the paintings at museums, as well as working on co-curating an exhibit at the Legacy Art Gallery in Victoria named "Women Artists Changing Collections: Recent Acquisitions"<sup>35</sup>.

Before James' painting was discovered, James didn't like talking about the Residential Schools and could only do so with the use of humor. Now, however, he does talk about it. Him and Lorilee have been more connected as a result of his painting and his sharing of his experiences. Lorilee's father has since connected with some of his Residential School "buddies"<sup>36</sup> and is working on interviewing them and writing a book about his experiences at these schools. Lorilee says that she knows this has "made him happy in some way"<sup>37</sup>. She says that this is an amazing research project for institutions to learn from, but it is more meaningful to her as a means to connect and reconcile with her family. She says that this painting has done great things for her and her family. Her family has been "really fragmented from Residential

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Uvac.uvic.ca

<sup>36</sup> Wastasecoot, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Schools”<sup>38</sup> so having the art is something that brings them together to listen, share and experience her parents’ stories of MIRS.

The title of my essay comes from my conversation with Lorilee. “These paintings have a spirit”, this means that the paintings tell stories, they bring people together to connect, reconnect and bond with one another. For most Survivors this is the only item they have from their childhoods. For family of the Survivors, this may be something that they can remember their lost loved one with. Lorilee recounts how her father and another Survivor said that their painting “serves as a reminder that our experiences at these schools are real. That we were there at that time, we did this. We created these things”<sup>39</sup>. It is something physical to prove that these Survivors endured these schools; that they are resilient and courageous.

A positive outcome of Aller keeping the paintings is the fact that they have brought together families, friends and different First Nations. An incidence of a family reconnecting comes from my teaching with Lorilee. She stated that at the last gathering they had with the Survivors and their paintings, there were three sisters that had not talked in years. They had come together around their brother John’s painting, saying “That was so powerful”<sup>40</sup>. Lorilee told me that these paintings are like a “ray of sunshine”<sup>41</sup> in many Survivor’s lives because it is something good that has finally made its way into their lives.

Another story the paintings tell is the story of Aller, and how he was most likely accepted by the children. Some of the paintings that the children painted were just colours. A Survivor, Amelia Wavy Saunders, said that Aller told her to use as much colour as she wanted, “to go crazy”<sup>42</sup>. Another painting that was by Amelia Wavy Saunders was a portrait of a white man.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

This blonde-haired man had a beard and glasses, so one might assume it is of Aller. For Amelia to have painted Aller, it must mean that she perhaps liked him, or possibly accepted him. “By all accounts, [Aller] really understood that the children were probably traumatized and that he really wanted to just make sure that they were comfortable”<sup>43</sup>. Aller most likely wanted the children to have a space to paint and the think about nothing else except being creative. This specific painting, and the fact that Aller kept the paintings for so many years, most likely means he had positive connections with the children.

In addition to this, these paintings have brought together Alberni Survivors and the Mackay Survivors. It is important to see other perspectives on Aller and what the paintings mean to the different Survivors. Lorilee believes it is important to learn different ways of healing from other Survivors; how to heal together as communities and learn from each other’s experiences. Lorilee, being of the Peguis First Nation, said that the AIRS Survivors “have so much they can teach us about their own experiences with this project, from their perspective of Nuu-chah-Nulth people”<sup>44</sup>. Continuing to meet and share makes these relationships stronger. The Mackay and Alberni Survivors are making connections and transferring knowledge to one another, which they wouldn’t have done had the paintings not resurfaced in the way they did. Lorilee states that sharing knowledge and experiences to institutions like UVic is great, but “it’s the people who matter the most”<sup>45</sup>. The people being Residential School survivors, their families and communities, this point of people mattering the most is evident through the reclamation and exhibition of their paintings.

When Mark heard about his painting from the AIRS, he was going to his hearing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in downtown Victoria. His friends repeatedly told

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

him that he had a painting at UVic from AIRS. He told them he didn't remember it, that he couldn't remember it. After the fourth time his friends told him about it, he called Dr. Walsh to ask about his painting. Dr. Walsh set a date for them to look at the painting together. Mark's community nurse joined for support. As soon as Mark saw the painting, he broke down. He stated he was "really crying inside"<sup>46</sup>. He was never allowed to show emotion in the Residential Schools, so Mark had grown up believing that it was wrong to show emotion. Now, when he does, he feels an immense relief. This painting allowed him to release his emotions in a safe place, with something he had created when he was a child.



Figure 3: Untitled. By: Mark Atleo, Ahousaht First Nation

Mark's painting is of a sockeye Salmon in a net. When I asked him the meaning behind it, he replied: "As a little boy I grew up, I enjoyed fishing. I was making my own money when I was only 6, 7 years old. I was selling perch to my Japanese friends, they loved the perch. I was getting 5 cents apiece for them. That was a lot of money then. Just a little six-year-old kid. I liked

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<sup>46</sup> Atleo, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019.

being on a boat”<sup>47</sup>. Mark spent his early years on and around the water. After he returned home from AIRS, he spent the next 36 years as a commercial fisherman.

Mark reclaimed his painting at a different time than Lorilee and her family. He went to the TRC conference in Vancouver, which prompted him to tell his story and speak of his experiences with others. He stated that speaking made him feel a lot better, and that he was more respectful of himself. When we were visiting, I asked him if his voice was strengthened through the reclamation of his artwork and he said “Oh yes. Very much so. I never thought I would talk in front of people and I have. I just took the teachings of my dad, what he used to do. He would talk in front of lots of people. I respect him for that. I will continue to do that if I am asked. So I am happy”<sup>48</sup>. Mark looked up to his dad and now, when he is going to deliver a speech, he prays and the words flow from him in a way that he is proud of. Mark told me that before he had reclaimed his painting, he would never have thought he would be speaking to people about his experiences. I asked him why he thought his, and he said “I guess it was a challenge to go wander into our world reality. But people are waking up now, so, I like to share. People put us down I used to just walk way, now I don’t have to walk away [any]more”<sup>49</sup>. This was powerful to hear. He remained silent about it, not because he was scared or did not want to speak of it, but because our society was ignorant of the Residential Schools and their continuing effects.

Mark is a very spiritual man. He describes visions of his ancestors, people he hasn’t met, as well as people he has. Mark said that this gift was taken away when he went to AIRS, but it came back to him when he started to learn from a Spiritual Man in his community. He says he has these visions to “help people on the other side, this side, the bad side, everything”<sup>50</sup>. He told me that when he first started relearning with this Spiritual Man, he was terrified. Mark told me

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

that he told the Spiritual Man he didn't want to see. Now, however, he says he is grateful for it because he is helping people. When I first met Mark, I shook his hand and introduced myself. He stared at me for a minute, and told me that he had seen me before. I was surprised and confused. Then, he told me that he saw the colour of my eyes in a vision and explained that he can see things other people can't. His visions came up several other times during our visits. He told me many people don't believe him when he talks about his visions, but he believes in his visions and his spirituality.

Mark wants people to know the truth about his life, the schools, and the way they damaged him. I will now share a personal and delicate experience of Mark's. He gifted me with this powerful information after he read over the transcription from our first visit. We met again so that he could tell me this experience in person. He had not always been as willing to share this experience with others; however, he does want it included in this recount. He explained that it is the truth and it is how he tells his story now:<sup>51</sup>

Mark spent nine years at AIRS. Two years before he left the school, Mark attempted suicide. He tried to hang himself in his dormitory, but his friend cut him down from the ceiling. Mark fell to the floor, cutting his head open badly enough to need stitches. This scar serves as a reminder of how far he has come from that point of time. It is also a reminder to help others who are in a similar place as he was. Mark said that he is and will be forever grateful to his friend who cut him down because he wouldn't be where he is at today without him, and he is happy where he is at now. Mark wants to make sure people do not feel alone throughout their struggles in life. He shares this not to help himself on his healing journey, but to help others start theirs.

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Atleo, personal communications, March 28<sup>rd</sup> 2019.



Figure 4&5: Mark's healing pot.

Another powerful experience he shared was of one of his healing sessions. When Mark and I met for our first teaching session, he picked up a shoebox in his car and opened it. He took out a small, broken but mended, ceramic pot. Mark was given this small pot at a healing session and was told that it was his life. He was then asked to drop it on the ground as he had been dropped off at Residential School. This pot was his soul, and his soul was taken from him and shattered when he went to AIRS. After he dropped the pot he was told that he would have to fix it, to glue it back together. This, I would imagine, was a long, tedious, time consuming process. He looked at the pot and told me in a soft voice “this is me, this is my life, it's not the best looking, but it is back together, it's me and being me is a work in progress. I am happy and always looking outside. Tomorrow is another day, it will be better, we will fix it and get it done”<sup>52</sup>. Of the experiences I have shared with Mark, never once did he say anything negative.

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<sup>52</sup> Atleo, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

Mark is one of the most positive people I have ever met. Though he has endured experiences one should never have to suffer, the words he speaks and the experiences he gifts show that he is living true to these lessons and positive statements.

Although these experiences are the result of trauma, the reclamation of these paintings has had positive influences on Survivors and their families. Not only have these paintings sparked memories, but through these memories came healing. This is emphasized by Mark telling me several times that he is willing to share with anyone who wants to know his story because the act of sharing strengthens him.

One obstacle Mark continues to face in his life is racism. Recently, he was triggered by one of his BC Transit co-worker's racist comments and had to go home. Mark told me that his co-worker said things he "didn't want to hear,"<sup>53</sup> what he "used to hear"<sup>54</sup>. His co-worker went to the board of BC transit and complained about having to work with Mark. Eventually, the board told her that she would either have to resign or continue to work with him. She chose to resign. Mark explained to me that he had no hard feelings toward this woman. Instead, he chooses to "understand"<sup>55</sup> her thoughts and point of view and acknowledges that "we all have problems"<sup>56</sup>. Although Mark has told her he forgives her, she refuses to talk to him. This demonstrates the deeply rooted racism the IRS system enabled and endorsed. BC Transit has been extremely supportive of Mark and the reclamation of his painting. Mark was allowed time off to reclaim his painting. They asked him for pictures of him reclaiming his painting, so they could hang it in the break room. After Mark gave his speech, BC transit asked him if they would be able to put his story up with his picture. Mark stated that this made him proud of himself and where he works. People he didn't know started to approach him and ask

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

him questions. He said that people were nervous to talk to him at first, but once they saw others asking him questions and talking with him, they opened up. These pictures and his story have opened his co-workers eyes to Mark's past and present. Mark teaches his co-workers lessons now on patience and respect for others when they ask him questions about his work. They ask him how he has so much patience with passengers. Mark responds to them with a question, "How do you want to be treated?"<sup>57</sup>. His co-workers respond that they want to be "treated good"<sup>58</sup>. Mark says, well there's your answer, "treat everybody like [you] want to be treated"<sup>59</sup>. After his poster was displayed in the break room, Mark received all kinds of questions like this, and he always returned to his grandparent's teachings of patience and respect to answer them.

#### Raised Awareness and Agency

*"We can make up our own minds about our own things and what we want to do and how we want to do them". – Lorilee Wastasecoot, 2019*

The paintings have strengthened the voices of these Survivors, as they are able to tell their own story, not the "lies that people read"<sup>60</sup> that come from the mouths and writing of unaware non-Indigenous peoples. They are able to express and represent themselves on their own terms. For example, exhibition of the artwork is decided during gatherings of the Survivors. Additionally, Lorilee asks Survivors what they want to put on their labels because "some want their words there, others do not"<sup>61</sup>. Lorilee said that when she asked Henry David Neepin, an IRS Survivor, what he wanted to write on his label for the exhibition, he told her a story about his grandchildren. At the end of his story, he said that he didn't know what he wanted to put on his label. Lorilee just said "What about what you just said about how much you love your grandkids

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Wastasecoot March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

and how you want them to know you weren't always an old grandpa"<sup>62</sup>. David said that was a great idea, so that is what Lorilee put on the plaque for David's artwork. This plaque may be updated if he feels like he wants to change anything for the next exhibition. Through having the power to make changes like this, Survivors and Intergenerational Survivors are able to express agency over how they represent themselves how they want to be represented.

Before Mark reclaimed his painting, he never thought he would paint again. He said when he went to Ottawa for a trip regarding these paintings, and he had a vision of painting the group that went to Ottawa with him. He painted animals from the clans that everyone came from. These included an eagle, raven, killer whale and a wolf, each animal in a different corner of the painting. He painted a full moon in the middle, with a bear in it. This bear represents Dr. Walsh. He also painted a raven in the moon, because ravens, like Dr. Walsh, are knowledgeable. He finds pride in the painting and gifted it to Dr. Walsh because it was the first he had painted since attending AIRS, and he was taught to gift something that is created for the first time.

Mark has created another painting since the one he gifted to Dr. Walsh, it is a painting of his family in a canoe. He told me that his whole family used to be whalers. His grandfather was the last whaler and his harpoon is now in Ottawa. Mark told me he has many ideas about starting other paintings. He said he is going to paint one or two wolves, with killer whales circling around them. There will be an eagle flying over the wolves and killer whales "protecting them"<sup>63</sup>. He said that for now, he hasn't started on the paintings because there have been some losses in his community, and he is dealing with these losses and taking time for himself.

### Reflections

*"A history that was once invisible to me is now so apparent" -Regan, p. 3*

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Atleo, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019.

The moment my world view changed completely was when I met Mark at a coffee shop in Cook street village. Mark and I were standing in a long line to get coffee and a lady cut in front of us without even looking back and starts to ask the barista questions about the menu. Normally, I wouldn't think much of this, but with Mark, I was suddenly hyper aware of my surroundings. I saw everyone in the coffee shop in a different light. These people, in their expensive clothes, cutting in front of us in line, speaking loudly at this coffee shop. I was livid with this lady, but also embarrassed. Embarrassed that earlier morning I would have been equally as unaware to the fact that there was a Survivor waiting in line at a coffee shop. That is the moment I realized my own ignorance. I stopped and thought “how can he stand here, waiting for a coffee with all of these people who are oblivious to the hardships and pain that settlers, some of their ancestors, did to him and his people?” I started to wonder “how can he not resent each and every single one of them, including me, for building lives on the backs of Indigenous peoples?” It truly takes an immense amount of forgiveness, reflection, patience and understanding not to be bitter towards settlers and to turn around and share these experiences with settlers. “How could a person who has had everything stripped from him at the hand of settlers be comfortable in a café like this? How can he not dislike everyone in the room?” He answered some of these thoughts when he said “it takes time, I have lots of patience. Treat everybody like I want to be treated. That what I always tell them”<sup>64</sup>. For this, I have gained a tremendous amount of respect for Mark, Lorilee and her family, and all Survivors and Intergenerational Survivors. As a white colonizer I have always thought myself lucky to have been born in Canada, a country where I can have rights and enjoy a great quality of life. I never thought about the people who have lived here for centuries, since time immemorial, who has a lower quality of life as a result of my ancestors.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Considering both of the Survivors shared with me stories of alcohol abuse and how it has affected themselves and their families, I thought I would write about my past point of view regarding Indigenous people and their relations with alcohol. I had my first interaction with an Indigenous man when I was around 16 years old. I was on the subway in Calgary with a friend and we were getting off at the next stop. There was an intoxicated Indigenous man with crutches sitting on the train. These crutches were jutting out slightly into the walkway of the train. Me, being unaware of my body and surroundings, accidentally hit his crutches with my foot as I passed. I turned and said sorry to the man, but I don't think he heard me. I looked at him, he was dirty, disheveled and smelt like alcohol. I can't remember exactly what I was thinking in that moment, but it was most likely a mix of empathy and disgust at this man passed out on the train. Around 20 seconds after I bumped his crutches, the doors were opening for us to get off the train. Midway into the doors opening, the man starts yelling at me. With his deep, loud, unsettling voice directed straight at me, I was terrified, I couldn't move. My friend got off the train and quickly pulled me out. The man was trying to stand, but the doors shut, and the train left with the man still yelling. At the time, I was scared beyond belief, but also angry. I was upset that he would get so mad at me for accidentally bumping his crutches.

Before this project I hadn't thought much of this interaction, except that he had been a grumpy, mean, drunk Indigenous man. Throughout my personal growth and the expansion of my knowledge that was gifted by these Survivors, however, my recollection of this interaction has changed drastically. I am almost certain that this man on the train had gone through the IRS system, and if he didn't, then his parents did. These schools have caused so much harm to these peoples and promoted racism against them. Thinking back, this man probably thought I meant to kick his crutches. He was most likely used to people abusing him and judging him on the

subway. He probably thought that I was another white, privileged, racist girl. He wouldn't have been wrong.

Growing up I heard people say that Indigenous peoples drank so much and were alcoholics because they were not used to having alcohol in their systems, as they did not consume it before settlers came. I believed this, this is what I told myself, because it was what was told to me. These are the kinds of things non-Indigenous people living in Canada tell themselves because of their ignorance of the IRS system and the underlying racism it propagated. I carried this ignorant point of view until becoming more educated on the topic while at the University of Victoria. I feel embarrassed that I justified these thoughts.

Over the course of five years I changed my point of view, but I still have more to learn. I now know that these people suffered horrendous acts and that there are many reasons behind the alcoholism in Indigenous communities. As stated above, Mark started drinking to forget his dream of being an Olympic wrestler getting suddenly crushed and other act of racism he endured. Lorilee's grandparents started drinking because they had their children stolen from them to be put through the same fate. The communities are still suffering with alcoholism and from their children being forcibly removed through the child welfare system. In some ways, this system continues the abusive cycle IRS started in Indigenous communities. In order to end this cycle, the role of the settler must be to shift from analyzing other people, to introspection. This introspection will lead to changing and decolonizing one's own ignorance, racism and entitlement. This will create space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to interact, share and witness thoughts, stories and experiences with one another. This, I believe will help with the healing of Indigenous communities.

In order to spark change in society we first need to acknowledge that a change needs to be made. As Bishop (2015) writes, ideological power makes other types of power possible.

Ideological power “allows an individual or group of individuals to influence others’ concepts of reality and their idea of what is possible and valuable” (Bishop, p. 39). If people are told and believe that a certain type of injustice or inequality is correct, or that they don’t believe it will ever change, they will do nothing about it. This silence blankets a society, making it look orderly and peaceful, when in reality there are strong forces of inequality and injustice lying beneath. By witnessing and acting on the Survivors’ experiences, my misperception of the pan-Indigenous figure I had experienced on the subway years ago was humanized. Mark is now not just an Indigenous man to me: Mark is a father, a son, my friend, my mentor. Lorilee is no longer just a woman I pass by on the street: She is a work colleague, a mother, a daughter, and my mentor. We became friends and developed relationships throughout this project; I believe that by changing myself and reflecting on my experiences with Mark and Lorilee I have uncovered more of this carefully fabricated order and peace.

### Conclusion

*“To those who say we cannot change the past, I say that we can learn from it” – Regan, p. 4*



Figure 6: Mark Alteo, walking on Dallas road.

The childhood paintings from AIRS and MIRS opened my eyes and mind to a different view of Canada. The purpose of this paper was to explore the influences these childhood artworks have had and continue to have on the Survivors lives and families. The paintings have created positive ways for Survivors and their families to heal, reconcile and reconnect with each other. The paintings have also created spaces for non-indigenous peoples, like me, to learn from and witness Survivors stories. This, in turn, helped me to decolonize my thoughts and behaviour. Their stories have encouraged me to continue building relationships with Indigenous communities, thus growing my passion as an anthropologist. I was unaware and ignorant to Indigenous communities, but now I have opened my eyes to understand their worldview.

Reflecting on a passage relevant to my research from the Assembly of First Nations, these experiences present themselves as a woven blanket because “the stories are made up of many threads, each thread belonging to the story and, at the same time, each thread affecting the way the story, and consequently the experience, hangs together as a whole” (Assembly of First Nations p. 21). When listening to and witnessing these stories as integral threads in a blanket it is possible to separate them while preserving the blanket’s integrity if one is respectful and compassionate.

Considering Regan’s notions of witnessing and stories as gifts, while reflecting on another quote by the Assembly of First Nations, I leave this with you: These stories are a gift. If these Survivors give you a gift and you accept it, by witnessing and listening, then don't go throw that gift in the wastebasket. You do “something”<sup>65</sup> with it. For me, this “something” was not just to remember the past, but to actively use this knowledge to question myself, reflect on my beliefs, and every day, work to decolonize my thoughts. Additionally, I must act on these thoughts and to share this knowledge that has been gifted to me. For others, this “something”

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<sup>65</sup> Assembly of First Nations, 1994.

may be to initiate the unpacking of colonial thoughts and self-reflect on the ever-present colonial belief system.

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