

CBC Radio | As It Happens – March 12, 2020

Banned together, sort of

Hosts: Carol Off and Chris Howden

HELEN MANN: Hello, I'm Helen Mann, sitting in for Carol Off.

CHRIS HOWDEN: Good evening, I'm Chris Howden. This is *As It Happens*.

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Old Residential School

Segment starts @ 0:49:49

Guest: Harlan Schilling

CHRIS HOWDEN (CH): The building is called the Old Residential School — because that's exactly what it is. It's located in Lower Post, a First Nation community in northern B.C. And since the residential school was shut down in the 70s, it's the only building that the community has for essential services — including the band office — which means former students are forced to walk through the front door all the time. For years, the community has been asking the federal government to have it torn down. And now Harlan Schilling has joined that fight. He is a councillor for the Daylu Dena Council, and his mother attended the school. We reached Harlan Schilling at the Old Residential School.

HELEN MANN (HM): Counsellor Schilling, what kind of services are found now in the Old Residential School?

HARLAN SCHILLING (HS): Essentially, everything that runs our community. We have our social programs, our justice programs, our education department. On paper, this building is currently our community hall — which is held in the basement — which is in very bad shape. We actually don't even allow anybody to go into the basement for health concerns.

HM: So why is this building your only option?

HS: So once the residential school was shut down. From my understanding, I'm a fairly younger counsellor for our First Nation, they needed a building for us to be able to work out to be a self-governing First Nation. But you know, of course, once the school shut down, the First Nation, we essentially had nothing. So, they retrofitted the school to be our place of administration.

HM: Now, we've reached you there today. What is it like for you to go to work in this old residential school?

HS: For me, I know the history. And I know and I work with many people in our community that attended this school. So, it's almost personal to me that they've asked to continue on with the works to getting it torn down. And I really don't like having to ask. And we hold meetings here to ask the people of the community to come back into a building where you know there's such bad history and bad memories.

HM: Um-hm. Your mother, as I understand it actually attended the former school. Is she comfortable going inside?

HS: No. Along with my mother, like you know I believe the school sat down in 1975. So, there's still a lot of members in the community, and not just family members of mine, but family members from all community members that attended this school. And you know our post office is here. You know, a community building is supposed to be the heart of the community. And it's just not a good place. You know, when you have a building that no one is comfortable of coming into, it's really hard to make your community grow.

HM: What effect does it have on them going in there?

HS: Well, you know being gone and being able to kind of look into the box from the outside is the social issues — the different forms of abuse that happened here. It definitely has a psychological effect on them. Even so, we have our court system held in the building every three months. So even when they get into trouble with the legal system, they are forced back into this building to have to deal with it.

HM: And just to be clear, we're referring to it as the Old Residential School, but that that's actually the name on the building, right?

HS: Yes, that's what we've changed it to be called. Because you know that's what it is.

HM: And you changed it, why?

HS: I think it was just because that's how the community referred to it. And working with the different government organizations, they would refer to it as your administration building, or you know your band office. But over the years, it's just been Band-Aid over Band Aid trying to cover up what it truly is. It is it really is an old school, and it's just office spaces that have been put into it.

HM: Right, so you're trying to send a message by labeling it what it was?

HS: Exactly.

HM: Now, you have raised this issue before. Why do you believe the government has been taking so long on doing something about it?

HS: Well, I think part of it is just the different levels of government that we've been able to reach out to. And then there's also the transitioning with election to election. You know, not every same government gets back in. But I'm really hoping that with the NDP and the premier's office of B.C., they actually came to our community in October. And I think it really emotionally struck them having to come here, and having interviewed some of the students — you know which are now in their 60s — on what this building means to them and what it means that they have to drive by it or even come into it.

HM: On the federal level, Justin Trudeau and his government talk a lot about reconciliation. Does that give you any hope that you will see a change this time?

HS: Everybody can be hopeful. I've got a lot of the elders in the community. When I talk to them about you know the small successes we're having on reaching the government levels, to them, they're not hopeful at all. You know, we've got some elders that if they you know they've been around — and they're in their 80s — and they say they've been promising this for 30 years, right? So, they're not extremely hopeful. But I'm hoping with the Liberal government in, and Canada's talks of reconciliation, this would be an extremely good start. Considering that it's not only the Kaska people that attended this school. This was one of the largest schools in Western Canada. So, they're students as far south as Vancouver and as far north as Yellowknife that I've met that said they've attended the school when it was open.

HM: How much help do you need, either from the province, the feds, or both?

HS: It would be both. We are the farthest northern community in British Columbia. And then I have to give thanks to the province of B.C. for them pushing this and kind of putting the spotlight that we are up here. You know, we are a community. We have children. We have hopes of growing. So, with the help of the province, it really would benefit the Liberals to jump in and help.

HM: Well, Mr. Schilling, I appreciate you taking us through all of this. Thank you very much.

HS: No, thank you.

HM: All right. Good to talk to you. Bye-bye.

HS: Bye-bye.

CH: Harlan Schilling is a councillor for the Daylu Dena Council, and his mother attended the Old Residential School, in Lower Post, B.C.