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'To this day, I dislike the word obedient,' residential school survivor Senator **Mary Jane McCallum** talks about reconciliation

The only residential school survivor in the Upper Chamber, Senator **Mary Jane McCallum** talks about attending residential school, sitting today in 'the most colonialist body in Canada,' but trying to make a positive impact in her daily life.

Ian Campbell

When Sen. **Mary Jane McCallum** (Manitoba) thinks about what shaped her as a Parliamentarian today, she says it was the earlier time of her life, before she was forced to attend a residential school.

Sen. McCallum, the only current member of the Senate who is a residential school survivor, attended Guy Hill Residential School in Manitoba from 1957 to 1968, from the ages of five to 16.

Sen. McCallum, who was appointed to the Senate in 2017 by Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau** (Papineau, Que.), says the years before she was taken from her home in the community of Brochet, Man., are the ones that have shaped the kind of person and Parliamentarian she is today. But the process of unpacking her time at the residential school is still ongoing.

"Those were such unhappy years. Very regimented and very punitive, because there were certain things we couldn't do, like whisper after 7:30 in the evening," said Sen. McCallum in an interview with The Hill Times. "You had to be silent. I was strapped almost nightly for being a child. For being a curious child, and one that was so full of energy."

"They tried to bring that in line and make us obedient, and to this day I dislike the word obedient."

Sen. McCallum, 69, says the news of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children discovered at several former residential schools across the country has brought these memories back to the forefront.

"In the last two months, I think about it most of the day. I go to sleep thinking about it. I dream about residential school. And I wake up, and I am so tired of it. Besides the obedience, it's the criticism of yourself-of not being the ideal, or this perfect model that the nuns put in front of us, while they were not practicing it," said Sen. McCallum.

"There was sexual abuse, there was physical abuse, emotional abuse. And I think, what were they thinking telling us we would go to hell as children, and we hadn't done anything wrong. And they were the ones committing the sins," she said. "Sexual abuse of girls and the sexual abuse of boys by both nuns and priests."

The first residential school opened in about 1883. The last residential school closed in 1996. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has said the residential schools were a system of "cultural genocide," and it estimated that at least 4,000 to 6,000 children died while attending the federal government-sponsored and mostly Catholic Church-run schools. **Murray Sinclair**, who headed the TRC, has suggested that number will be higher. The remains of more than 1,000 Indigenous children have so far been found since May in British Columbia and Saskatchewan at the sites of former residential schools. For more than 100 years, Indigenous children were removed from their homes and forced to attend these institutions where they were malnourished, and faced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. There was also disease outbreaks 100 years ago. An estimate 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend the 150 residential schools across the country.

Sen. McCallum said the sexual abuse is one of the most difficult aspects that survivors continue to deal with because it is so hard to talk about.

"I've gone to visit different residential school sites and heard how each residential school was so full of pedophiles," said Sen. McCallum. "They had total freedom to do what they wanted because there was no oversight body."

Sen. McCallum said she is grateful for what she learned from her community before she was taken to the residential school. After leaving the residential school, she reconnected with those traditional teachings.

"I subconsciously adopted the view that I had been defective to be sent there, and when I realized that, I thought, 'I was never defective. When I went in, I was already a spiritual being,'" she said.

"And I remember the Indian agent coming in. I remember incidents of how he started to control our lives. But those moments of being with the people on the land and the tradition of hospitality, the ceremony of sharing, the ceremony of the family, the nurturing, the laughter, the freedom: I remember those. It is that time that has actually been the main shaper of me as a Parliamentarian," she said.

Sen. McCallum said this realization began with her career in dentistry. Sen. McCallum has worked in the dentistry field for more than 40 years, first as a dental assistant, then a dental nurse, a dental therapist, and finally as a dentist. She taught dentistry at the University of Manitoba and led the Aboriginal Dental Health Programs. She also provided dental care and health services to First Nations and Indigenous communities throughout Manitoba and practised dentistry at the Opaskwayak Cree Nation reserve near The Pas.

"At the beginning, I thought, 'Oh, residential school did this for me,'" said Sen. McCallum. "And then, when I went home to work in dentistry and I started working with chief and council on housing and the different issues they have on the reserve, I realized at that moment it was not residential school, but what the people [at home] had taught me, because I was now back in land-based education; because I was back home on my reserve."

Sen. McCallum said this realization caused her to start reaching back to that five-year-old child for her wisdom.

As part of her work as a dentist in Indigenous communities, she spoke to youth about traditional teachings, and saw the role this learning played in promoting positive health outcomes.

"You could see the social determinants of health and how they played a big part in your ability to do self-care," she said. "Whether it's self-care of the mind, self-care of the teeth, self-care of your body, self-care of your sexual health, because we have been made obedient, people have given up responsibility for their health and their bodies, and they've given it to the health professionals or to the church."

Sen. McCallum said she is grateful to those people in her early years, and others who came after residential school, who guided her on this journey, such as Elders from her community and colleagues who encouraged her to pursue the field of dentistry.

"Each and every one of [them] have shaped me to become the person I am," she said. "So it's not the individual Mary Jane that went in [to the Senate], but the collective Mary Jane. And when you think of yourself as a person in the collective you have the responsibility to give back, and to demonstrate to the Elders that you have absorbed their teachings."

Her arrival in the Senate required her to confront the legacy of that Chamber and its role in the policies that produced residential schools.

"You know, it was a law that allowed the residential school system to flourish and expand," said Sen. McCallum. "So when I went into the Senate, one of my friends said, 'It's going to be interesting to see how you operate within the Senate, because it's the most colonialist body in Canada.'"

One aspect of this was meeting Senate colleagues who, Sen. McCallum said, still hold up that legacy.

"There's too much privilege in there. Just because they weren't part of the old system doesn't mean that they don't come in with their own oppression, their own privilege," she said. "Like the former senator **Lynn Beyak** and how she continually said [residential schools] were a good place."

Sen. McCallum called for former Sen. Beyak to be expelled from the Senate. But she said this came after serious reflection and consultation with survivors and Elders.

"That was not lightly taken," she said. "I spoke to former students, and said, 'We're not doing this out of revenge. We cannot introduce negative energy into this process. Why are we doing this?'"

She said the consultation with Elders focused around the importance of making sure the truth about what happened in residential schools was known.

After more than three years in the Senate, Sen. McCallum said she is finding it to be a place where she can make a positive impact. She's a member of the Senate Energy, Environment, and Natural Resources Committee.

But there are still some files that hit too close to home.

"In residential school, we weren't taught life skills or critical thinking skills, so when we left at 16 we were really vulnerable to society," said Sen. McCallum. "So there were many years where I put myself in such high risk areas, and I'm truly grateful that I was not one of the missing and murdered, because I could easily, easily have been one of them. So to this day, I haven't really looked at the file on missing and murdered women. That's one area that I haven't opened up totally yet, because every time you open up something, I put myself in a vulnerable state, because I'm dismantling things I carried all these years."

Sen. McCallum said all Parliamentarians have a role to play in this process of going to vulnerable and uncomfortable places, and she sees an evolving relationship in her own life as a model for reconciliation.

"It's not well-known that I had given up a son for adoption when I was 23," said Sen. McCallum. "I reunited with him in 2016."

"So when I look at reconciliation, I look at the relationship I have with him, because it's fragile. And it's always scary, you know, and he feels the same way. It's good to form a deeper and lasting relationship each time we meet. It's that putting yourself in an uncomfortable situation because you know you want to make change."

She said the best way for Parliamentarians to engage in reconciliation is to put themselves into those same uncomfortable situations by visiting First Nations communities and listening to the people.

"When the MPs go, they're uncomfortable with them because they haven't done it, but it shouldn't stop them," said Sen. McCallum.

"Reach out to the communities, contact chief and council, and ask to meet with them, with former students of residential schools, and just be with them for a day. Just going to speak with them and spending the day with them will do such wonders," she said.

"This is education you will never learn from a textbook. This is education that you're going to see in the community," Sen. McCallum said.

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