

## LEGACY SCHOOLS PROGRAM

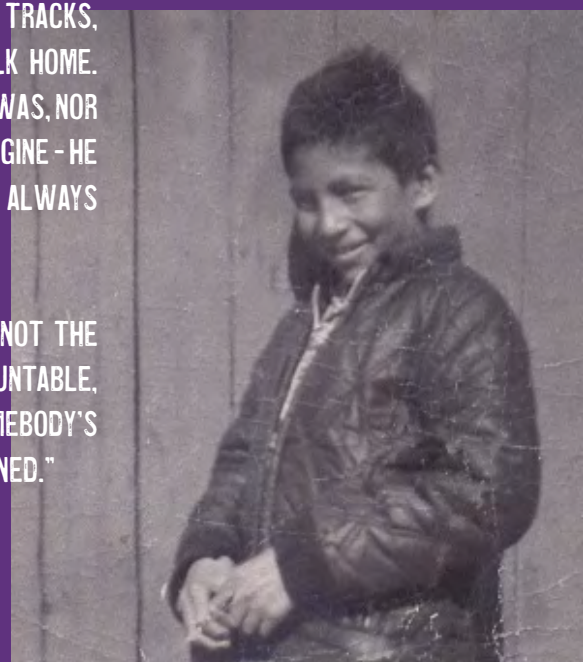
An Interview with **Sarah Midanik & Lisa Prinn**  
from the *Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund*

"CHANIE WAS A YOUNG BOY WHO DIED ON OCTOBER 22, 1966, WALKING THE RAILROAD TRACKS, TRYING TO ESCAPE FROM THE CECILIA JEFFREY INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL TO WALK HOME. CHANIE'S HOME WAS 400 MILES AWAY. HE DIDN'T KNOW THAT. HE DIDN'T KNOW WHERE IT WAS, NOR KNOW HOW TO FIND IT, BUT, LIKE SO MANY KIDS - MORE THAN ANYONE WILL BE ABLE TO IMAGINE - HE TRIED. I NEVER KNEW CHANIE, THE CHILD HIS TEACHERS MISNAMED CHARLIE, BUT I WILL ALWAYS LOVE HIM.

CHANIE HAUNTS ME. HIS STORY IS CANADA'S STORY. THIS IS ABOUT CANADA. WE ARE NOT THE COUNTRY WE THOUGHT WE WERE. HISTORY WILL BE RE-WRITTEN. WE ARE ALL ACCOUNTABLE, BUT THIS BEGINS IN THE LATE 1800S AND GOES TO 1996. "WHITE" CANADA KNEW - ON SOMEBODY'S PURPOSE - NOTHING ABOUT THIS. WE WEREN'T TAUGHT IT; IT WAS HARDLY EVER MENTIONED."

- GORD DOWNIE

*Canadian rock singer-songwriter, musician,  
writer and activist (1964 – 2017)*



**T**he Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund (DWF) was birthed from the inspiration both of Chanie's story and of Gord's call in his last years to build a better Canada. The DWF aims to build cultural understanding and create a path toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. In order to build upon Gord's vision for reconciliation, the DWF knew that investing in school communities and educators was critical. The Legacy Schools Program, a free, nation-wide initiative, was developed to engage, empower, and connect students and educators to further reconciliation

through awareness, education and action. Legacy Schools are now quickly growing and spreading to all corners of our nation.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Sarah Midanik, DWF'S President and CEO, and Lisa Prinn, Manager of Education and Activation, about the purpose of this renowned program as they shared stories of hope from Legacy Schools in BC, and emphasized the critical role that educators play in reconciliation.

by

**Paige Jung**

*Communications Assistant, BCPVPA*

## WHY AND HOW WAS THE LEGACY SCHOOLS PROGRAM CREATED? WHAT WAS GORD DOWNIE'S VISION FOR SCHOOLS?

**SARAH:** Going to the very beginning, Gord Downie first learned about Chanie's story from Mike Downie, Gord's brother and co-founder of DWF. Mike had read about it in a Maclean's article and showed it to Gord, to which Gord replied, "I didn't learn this in school". Since there was a focus of work being done around reconciliation in Canada at that time, it was becoming widely recognized that an education gap around reconciliation still largely existed.

After learning of Chanie's story, Gord started *The Secret Path*, a project to share the story of Chanie. *The Secret Path* started with just a collection of ten poems written by Gord, which went on to become an album, a graphic novel, an animated film, a three-city concert series, and finally two documentaries. There was this whole suite of storytelling happening – both about residential school experiences, and also about Gord's experience learning Chanie's story and sharing that with the nation.

DWF really grew organically from that momentum, and it was supported by two things that were happening at the same time: the completion of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and the 94 Calls to Action, and Gord's terminal diagnosis. At a time when people were focused on Gord for the *Tragically Hip*'s final tour, he wanted to redirect that spotlight to the true history of Indigenous people in

Canada, the residential school experience, and ways to move forward on the path towards reconciliation.

The Legacy Schools Program was really created to better support educators in their ability to teach about the history and legacy of residential schools and the true history of Indigenous people, outside of what was being offered through the formal curriculum.

Legacy Schools receive a toolkit of resources that provide a starting place for educators to feel comfortable enough to teach Indigenous history in their classroom.

A main aspect of the Legacy Schools Program is the concept of **reconciliACTION**: translating one's learning of Indigenous history into positive acts of reconciliation to implement positive, constructive social change. Along with the Legacy Schools toolkit a ReconciliACTION Guidebook is provided which offers suggestions and examples of how educators can create reconciliACTIONS within their schools or community learning models. It isn't meant to be a one-size-fits-all remedy, rather it's meant to provide a starting place to take that next step beyond the learning.

**"RECONCILIATION: TRANSLATING ONE'S  
LEARNING OF INDIGENOUS HISTORY INTO POSITIVE  
ACTS OF RECONCILIATION TO IMPLEMENT  
POSITIVE, CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIAL CHANGE."**

We have Legacy Schools in every province and territory across the country, and we've had tremendous growth within the program. We're in more than 2,000 schools across the country in just three years, and in BC, we have 296 unique Legacy Schools right now. Educators are always saying to us, 'that sounds exactly like the kind of support that we need'.

## WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW RECONCILIATIONS HAVE BEEN EMBRACED IN LEGACY SCHOOLS IN BC?

**LISA:** There are a ton of great reconciliACTIONS happening, especially throughout BC. What's really unique about the Legacy Schools Program is that we





get educators to focus on local Indigenous cultures, specific to their area, which creates an awareness of the vast variety of Indigenous cultures throughout Canada. We really try to promote ongoing learning and have a community focus, as we're aware that approaches to learning can vary throughout Canada.

ReconciliACTIONS can look really different depending on the school and what they've been learning. For example, the Comox Valley School District – the first district in Canada to sign up all of their schools as Legacy Schools – participates in the **Walk for Wenjack** annually. The Walk for Wenjack is a challenge to collectively walk the 600 kilometres that Chanie needed to get home. They've also set up the route so students go along the abandoned railroad tracks and learn about the residential school system at different stations.

One school in Comox Valley has done peer-to-peer learning, where the senior grades teach the elementary grades about the residential schools and their impact. Another school got their students to paint stones with different messages of hope and spread them out as they did the Walk for Wenjack.

ReconciliACTIONS and the ideas that the students and educators come up with are all very unique to each school, which is why we don't want to give a 'cookie cutter' guide or tell schools exactly what they 'should' do. We want people to get educated and think of their own ideas so that they can inspire themselves and others in their own way.

## WHAT'S IN THE LEGACY SCHOOL TOOLKIT, AND WHAT WAS IT DESIGNED TO DO?

**SARAH:** The toolkits change slightly every year because we constantly update the information in them to make sure the language is still relevant. Along with classroom mementos such as pencils and pins, calendars with Indigenous days of significance and the 94 Calls to Action, the toolkit contains a guide that educators can quickly reference for activity and lesson ideas. For example, one of the suggested ideas is to have your class write letters to the Wenjack or Downie families about their experiences in the Legacy



Schools Program. There's a consortium of resources from K to 12 that educators can access for educational supports such as lesson plans, worksheets, teaching tools – you name it.

**LISA:** We're trying to break the online resources down further and further, for instance by region, grade level, language, and specific topics like allyship or Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. We want educators to be able to easily access different resources, wherever their conversations may lead.

### HOW IS *THE SECRET PATH* WEEK INTEGRATED WITH THE LEGACY SCHOOLS PROGRAM?

**SARAH:** *The Secret Path* week occurs every year from October 17 to 22, which commemorates when Gord and Chanie passed on to the Spirit World, respectively. During that time, we call on all our Legacy Schools and champions to engage in acts of reconciliation or reconciliACTIONS. We have a few flagship events, one being the Walk for Wenjack.

In the past, we've had big concerts or community-based events which bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities together during that time. Obviously, last year everything moved to being virtual, so we did a re-screening of our 2019 event which was an incredible concert that brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. There's so many different events that occurred during *The Secret Path* week. Last year, we had more than fifty different events happening nationally during just that one week.

### HOW HAVE COMMUNITIES BEEN IMPACTED BY THE LEGACY SCHOOLS PROGRAM?

**LISA:** I often think about the Comox Valley School District. What was interesting about them is that they actually engaged not only their teachers in the Professional Development sessions, but their caretakers, office staff, directors, and trustees as well. Everybody came together to really engage in what reconciliation meant to them – their whole community was involved.

Bruce Carlos, District Principal of Indigenous Education in Comox, has worked hard to ensure educators embraced the program in ways unique to each school. Champions like Bruce make sure that the program remains strong year after year.

**SARAH:** I keep thinking about the North Vancouver School District. They were already so far along in terms of starting to do this work, but after engaging with DWF, they were able to use us as a tool to get schools and educators within their district excited. They encouraged and pushed each other to really think through what reconciliation means within *their* school, and how they can advance their journey.

I remember this SD44 Principal had told me that he had never met the parents of one of their Indigenous students before, but after their school became a Legacy School, he saw them coming and participating in all the different events. It just made me want to cry and have goosebumps all at the same time. I mean, that's the whole point, right? The engagement from the Principal affects the teachers and students, who then go home and engage with their families – you can really see the difference.



**“WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT HERE ISN'T JUST A PROGRAM FOR SCHOOLS TO PARTICIPATE IN. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT PARTICIPATING IN SYSTEMIC CHANGE, AND THAT'S SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE CAN BE EXCITED ABOUT AND PROUD TO BE A PART OF.”**



If it makes a difference in the life of one kid, that's going to have a critical mass effect on the next generation of young Canadians. That generation can then grow up differently and have a greater appreciation and respect for Indigenous peoples, history, and cultures, which will ultimately improve the lives of Indigenous people in Canada for generations to come. What we're talking about here isn't just a program for schools to participate in. We're talking about participating in systemic change, and that's something that everyone can be excited about and proud to be a part of.

### WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR EDUCATORS WANTING TO 'DO SOMETHING' AND ENGAGE THEIR SCHOOL IN MORE RECONCILIATIONS?

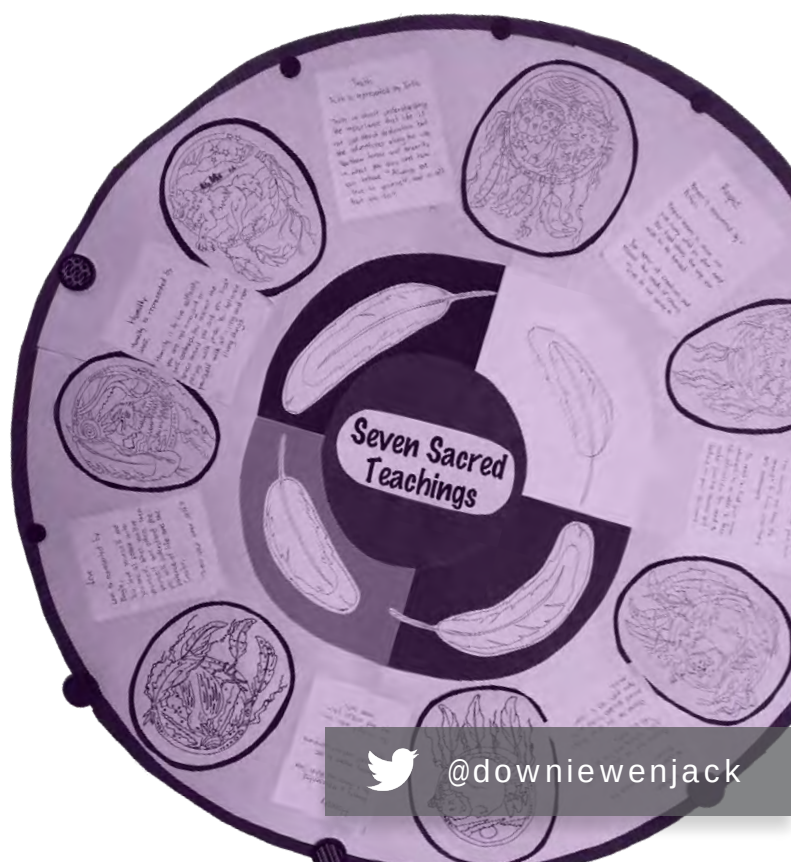
**LISA:** It's common for many educators to feel intimidated but there are so many available resources to utilize and there are Indigenous leaders in their schools that can support and guide them. Start small – you don't have to make big changes quickly – and then grow, learn, and keep going from there. Don't be afraid to include Indigenous perspectives in any aspect, or all of your curriculum. We provide educational resources to teachers and educators so that they can help include Indigenous perspectives in their classes – no matter what curriculum that they're teaching. It doesn't need to be just in art classes or social sciences – there's Indigenous history in *everything*.

**SARAH:** I would say the biggest thing is taking the first step. I think our biggest barrier is the fear of doing something wrong, or the fear of not teaching the subject in the right way, or perhaps the risk of offending a student or a family. You can become paralyzed by that fear of doing it wrong. There's no one way to engage in this work, and there is no one

way to participate in reconciliation. Participation is the most important piece.

Being able to lean into those hard conversations and those hard parts of our history to say, 'I didn't know' or 'I don't know how to do this' is critical. Don't be afraid to stick your hand up to ask for help or to seek resources and support from those who might have a better idea and are willing to share that knowledge with you as an educator.

So many of our Legacy School educators have been brave – they've stepped forward and they've acted as a champion within their school. For many, what started with just one teacher has grown to the entire school – and possibly the entire district – getting involved. That's bravery. That willingness to be uncomfortable has resulted in such positive change and has helped grow the community. It's helped educators guide not only their classroom, but their school and community on the path towards reconciliation.



“The Legacy Schools Program in the North Vancouver School District has had a significant impact on the Three Pathways of Indigenous Education. Students, educators, and parents have been able to learn the story of Chanie together through the words and images of *The Secret Path*. The Legacy Schools Program is a great entry point for a school or school district to continue the pathway of understanding *Truth and Reconciliation*.”

**Brad Baker**

SD44 District Principal

Indigenous Education and Safe Schools



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