

What is Orange Shirt Day?



The Orange Shirt is a symbol of the harm done to the indigenous children, who were forced to attend residential schools in Canada and the U.S.

In 1973 six-year-old Phyllis Webstad began school at St. Joseph Mission Residential School near Williams Lake, British Columbia. Phyllis was scared, as not only was she starting school, but the school would be her home. To ease her fears, her grandmother gave her a brand-new orange shirt to wear on her journey. New clothes were rare on the reserve where the grandmother was raising Phyllis. When Phyllis arrived at the school, the orange shirt was taken from her, and she was issued a school uniform. The girl never again saw her orange shirt. Phyllis only attended the school at Williams Lake for one year, nevertheless, the experience contributed to low self-esteem. She says, “that feeling of worthlessness and insignificance, ingrained in me from my first day at the mission, affected the way I lived my life for many years. Even now, when I know nothing could be further than the truth, I still sometimes feel that I don’t matter.” Wearing an orange shirt is symbolic of a commitment to reconciliation, anti-racism and anti-bullying. Every child counts; every child matters!

In Canada, Phyllis' story has become the nucleus for a national movement recognizing the experiences of the survivors of Indian residential schools, to honor the survivors and to say, definitively, that every child matters. As a movement, Orange Shirt Day began in Canada in 2013, and it is celebrated there on September 30th. In 2021 September 30th officially became the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada.

The orange shirt is beginning to be recognized in the U.S. In June 2021 community members in Ferndale, including some members of the Lummi Nation, demonstrated in downtown Ferndale wearing orange shirts. This coincided with the discovery of 215 unmarked graves by Canada’s Tk’emlúps te Secwepemc First Nation at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The graves at Kamloops were

the impetus for the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative introduced by the U.S. Department of Interior on June 22, 2021. This initiative states in part:

"Beginning with the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 and running through the 1960s, the United States enacted laws and implemented policies establishing and supporting Indian boarding schools across the Nation. During that time, the purpose of Indian boarding schools was to culturally assimilate Indigenous children by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities to distant residential facilities where their American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian identities, languages, and beliefs were to be forcibly suppressed.

In most instances, Indigenous parents could not visit their children at these schools. Many students endured routine injury and abuse. Some perished and were interred in unmarked graves. Survivors of the traumas of boarding school policies carried their memories into adulthood as they became the aunts and uncles, parents, and grandparents to subsequent generations. The loss of those who did not return left an enduring need in their families for answers that, in many cases, were never provided. Distance, time, and the scattering of school records have made it more difficult, if not impossible, for their families to locate a loved one's final resting place and bring closure through the appropriate ceremonies."

Hence, the U.S. Dept. of Interior has launched an investigation into the historical record of the losses of life at the sites of indigenous boarding schools. A final report is due shortly (Spring of 2022). In 2021 Orange Shirt Day was officially recognized in the U.S. October is now officially Indigenous Peoples month.

The Orange Shirt Banner was the idea of the **American Indian Alaska Native Lutheran Association**. These banners, displayed in sanctuaries, mosques, temples, synagogues and/or public buildings, help us to be in solidarity with indigenous communities.