University of Lethbridge

NEWS RELEASE

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Constance Day Chief leads the way in educating educators about the impacts of residential schools

Constance Day Chief (BN ’17, MN ’21) is a changemaker and her University of Lethbridge experience is testament to that. The newly minted Master of Nursing graduate saw a need for change in how Indigenous people were presented in the nursing curriculum while she was a student and that propelled her to focus her master’s project on the health impacts of residential schools.

“I’m the daughter of a residential school survivor, so undertaking this project did have a very big emotional toll on my well-being,” says Day Chief. “However, I did feel like this was something that needed to be done to help bring this dark part of Canadian history to light.”

Day Chief, who now works as a plasma nurse for Canadian Blood Services, couldn’t have known it when she began her project that this dismal part of Canada’s history would be spotlighted by the discovery of 215 children’s graves at a former residential school in Kamloops, B.C.

“I feel non-Indigenous people do not understand the extent of what happened with these schools and what it did to our ways of life and what it took from us,” says Day Chief. “People thought these schools operated a long time ago and that people should just get over it. It is sad and unfortunate that it took the finding of those 215 buried children for the rest of Canada to understand and feel the heartache that our people have been feeling since the start of those schools.”

Even as an undergraduate student, Day Chief thought stereotypes were being perpetuated in the curriculum and leading to negative attitudes towards Indigenous people. She recalls a class where she and her fellow students were examining a case study about an Indigenous man who came to the Emergency Room in an intoxicated state. The students were asked to consider how to provide culturally safe care to the man.

“I immediately spoke up and asked why was it that, whenever the Indigenous population was brought up, there were always addictions or negative behaviour attached to them,” she says. “How come this Indigenous man could not be presenting with coming to the ER with chest pain or a broken bone? Me speaking up did change the material in that course and for future courses.”

Initially, Day Chief wanted to focus her project on developing curriculum about residential schools for the Nursing Education in Southern Alberta (NESA) program. However, when she pursued it further, she learned that process was already underway. Instead, she developed a workshop for faculty and instructors to help them understand the material they would be teaching and translate that knowledge in the classroom.

Her goals for the workshop were to build a basic understanding of Indian residential schools, who operated them and the impact on Indigenous ways of life, including the impacts on Indigenous people’s health to this day. She also provided knowledge and strategies on how to provide this education in a culturally safe and sensitive manner.

“I did have a personal connection to the material of my project,” she says. “My own family did not realize the extent of the abuse until after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s investigation. My parent who did attend Indian residential school began to open up about their experiences, but it caused them in turn to relive their traumas. It was a tough time for our family and a learning period for all of us. My brother and I were never taught our Blackfoot language as there was a fear of us being beaten, as my parent was for speaking their language in school. Growing up, we had a strict upbringing and only certain adults were trusted with taking care of us, as our parent did not want us being abused as they were by the adults who were in charge of taking care of them. Addiction was also present with my parent; it was seen as a way to numb their memories and the emotions of their experiences. Overall, this has been a journey of learning, healing and understanding for our family and it will be ongoing in the future, as it will be for other families and communities.”

The last residential school closed in 1996 and Day Chief knows other family members, including her grandfather, who sadly passed away shortly after she began her master’s program, and her grandmother and aunts and uncles also attended these schools. She suspects their stories just scratch the surface of what really happened.

“I think people need to be open to what happened to us to fully understand the circumstances we’re in right now in regard to our own health and well-being,” says Day Chief. “We do have a lot of addictions within our community and I feel a lot of that has to do with the traumas that we’ve experienced in these schools. The adults didn’t learn proper parenting skills and that’s why you see a lot of the youth being raised by their grandparents instead of their own parents. Our whole well-being has been affected by these schools and I don’t think people fully understand that.”

Overall, Day Chief says she enjoyed a positive experience at the U of L and the support of faculty members and her friends and family helped her realize how much she could achieve. And she has a few tips for other up-and-coming changemakers.

“My advice for youth who are going into post-secondary education is to never silence your voice at the risk of making others feel uncomfortable,” says Day Chief. “If you want change to happen, be willing to engage in those uncomfortable situations and conversations.”

This news release can be found online at Constance Day Chief.

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