



About a boy...

After the interviews in Grouard, Alberta was completed, I spent some time photographing St. Bernard Catholic church, the residential school, which is now a store, and the boys' residence. The town was quiet, almost eerie, as I focused on everything except the heavy silence that enclosed me. It was a sweltering summer day that failed to entice anyone outdoors, so I was surprised to see a young boy out riding his bike along the road.

He was wearing a dirt bike helmet, much too big for his head, and it bobbed back and forth to the rhythm of his pedaling legs. He didn't seem to have a particular destination in mind, only the simplicity of freedom a child his age has for adventure.

He rode closer to me with a curious apprehension, and I waved at him. He took my gesture as an invitation and came towards me, hitting the brakes, stopping abruptly, while his tires skidded to a halt creating a cloud of dust that consumed the air around us.

He got off his bike, swung his leg around in one fluid motion, and set the kickstand in place. He took off his dirt bike helmet to reveal a dirty face and a toothless grin that beamed with pride as he gently put his helmet down.

His keen big brown eyes stared up at me, sparkling with interest that held my gaze as I smiled back at him. I knew he wondered about me as much as I did him and introduced myself.

He told me his name was Stephen, and he was seven years old, explaining to me he and his older brother Michael were out riding bikes. As Michael rode towards us, I quickly realized their family had probably noticed me well before I even knew they were there.

The boys, excited to have a new captive audience, were eager to share stories of their life to me. They described their daily adventures, where their family lived, and some areas of interest that provided me with knowledge about the small town.

After catching up like cousins who hadn't seen each other in a while, Stephen's attention went to the camera I had

slung over my neck. I saw his interest and asked if he wanted to look at it. His face lit up, and I put the strap around his neck, letting him know it was a bit heavy. He told me not to worry and explained that he was a very hard-working boy with big muscles to hold the camera. He brought the camera to his eye and looked through the viewfinder, looked up at me then back, instantly in awe of how different everything looked through a new lens. I showed him how to take a photograph, and Stephen snapped away with a big grin on his face.

Once he finished, it was Michael's turn. They asked what I was doing with the camera, and I briefly explained to them that I was working on a residential school project called the Forgotten People when suddenly, their smiles fell from their faces. The boys looked at each other with silent words, and Michael began to tell me about his Moshum and Kokum, who had attended several residential schools. His words pulled us back in time to memories that took place right where we stood.

We looked towards the church steps as the boys talked about people from the community placing kids' shoes to represent the remains of the 215 missing children in Kamloops, B.C. We left the bikes behind and walked over. Stephen slowly walked up the steps, pausing to show me some of the shoes. When he got up to the top, he sat down.

I looked up at him for a moment, pondering his life, and wondered what his ancestors must have endured for him to be there. I thought of my own children and I honestly could not comprehend the instant pain that engulfed me as I thought of the countless children who disappeared at residential schools, their deaths hidden away in unmarked graves. The thousands of children who didn't return home and their families never to see them again. So many lost generations. So much suffering.

In the short amount of time I spent with Stephen, I quickly realized he is loved. He is a child unbending in his joy for life, unbeknownst of the surrounding chaos of an outside world that can't seem to accept him for the color of his skin.

I walked up the steps and sat down beside him. I asked Stephen if he was ok as he sat with his silence. He turned his head to me and said, "I'm ok; I'm just sitting with the kids who didn't get to go home..."