

## **“Rights of Indigenous Children in Care” – March 17, 2016**

We met in the Gathering Place on University of the Fraser Valley, Chilliwack campus, Caen Avenue, Sardis. From 5:30 attendees filtered in, visited, and watched a recurring video: **George Manuel (1921 – 1989)** – Shuswap nation, Kamloops Residential School, contracted TB, transferred to TB hospital at what is now Coqualeetza – Sto:lo Nation. Became a political leader: Chief of Neskonlith Indian Band (Shuswap); worked for Dept. of Indian Affairs several times; National Chief (1970- 76) of the newly created National Indian Brotherhood (represented over 250,000 Indians) – renamed the Assembly of First Nations); President of World Council of Indigenous Peoples until 1981, travelling internationally advocating for the indigenous people; also president of Union of BC Indian Chiefs; received the Order of Canada, and honorary degree from UBC.

Over 75 in attendance. Event started 6:20 pm with Welcome songs (2 male drummers & female singer represented Skowkale and Soowahlie). MC wearing a cedar hat acknowledged we were on traditional land of the Sto:lo Nation and introduced Larry Commodore (former Chief of Soowahlie Indian Band) who spoke of their history. The original reserve land set aside by James Douglas for Soowahlie in 1864 was 4,000 acres from north side of Cultus Lake to Vedder Crossing, including much of what became CFB Chilliwack. In 1867 Joseph Trutch Chief Commissioner of Land & Works refused to recognize the legitimacy of the reserves established by former Lieutenant-Governor James Douglas and had them re-surveyed, resulting in Soowahlie being reduced to its present size of 1,100 acres. (Learned all about Joseph Trutch back at UCFV – not a nice guy!)

**At the beginning of their talk each speaker thanked Soowahlie and Sto:lo First Nation for being here tonight.** On behalf of UFV President & Vice-Chancellor Dr. Mark Evered we were welcomed to this Event and introduced to the **keynote speaker Grand Chief Stewart Phillip - Pres. of Union of BC Indian Chiefs 1998 -, member and past Chief of Penticton Indian Band.** He comes from a family of nine and his elder siblings attended residential school – while he and others were ‘apprehended’ in 1950 – the start of the “60’s Scoop” – the policy was not to allow any contact between the apprehended child and the family or community. Apprehended kids were the other side of residential school ‘coin’ – it’s a great largely-untold story. He was raised in Quesnel by a white family and did not know who he really was. He was told not to associate with Native people. In high school he realised brown wasn’t a popular colour. Nonetheless he excelled and was on the Honour Roll, resulting in him being driven down to the District Office one day where he articulated brilliantly and showed how successful this process was. He was used as an example on how well Indian kids can assimilate into white society. His father who did not drive went out looking for Stewart, to no avail. Stewart married his high school sweetheart “the wrong one” and had 2 beautiful daughters who are both teachers. “Childcare issues are in a state of crisis. B.C. is the strongest province financially in Canada, but not in child care. The Truth & Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC’s) first 5 points are about child welfare. In B.C. there is no real focus on this issue. Since 2007 there have been over 800 deaths of children in care, and over 300 incidents of serious injury. It has been said many times “suck it up – it is inevitable indigenous children are going to die.” Stewart spoke of: January ruling by Canadian Human Rights Tribunal – “on-reserve child welfare system receives up to 38% less funding than elsewhere; it is incumbent upon all of us coming together collectively to make sure the PM follows through – March federal budget; committed on behalf of grandkids to resolve this issue”; he spoke of Cindy Blackstock, Exec. Dir. First Nations &

Family Caring Society, who along with the Assembly of First Nations, filed a complaint against Ottawa with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in February 2007. The Tribunal said the government must "cease the discriminatory practice and take measures to redress and prevent it." It calls for the redesign of the child welfare system and its funding model, urging the use of experts to ensure First Nations are given culturally appropriate services. The decision also compares on-reserve child welfare to the residential schools system, where "the fate and future of many First Nations children is still being determined by the government." It recommends increasing funding and support to allow First Nations to deliver their own child welfare. **(After his talk he was thanked with a 'gift of gratitude' – this was the protocol after each speaker.)**

**June Quipp (Sto:lo matriarch, Councillor, past Chief & member of Cheam First Nation)** has seen many kids apprehended - it's supposed to be the Ministry of Families and Children! Most were apprehended due to family substance abuse (her daughter Leanne works for Families & Children). June mentioned the Anglican Church funded a program to reconnect kids to families and communities; but quit after 2 years, couldn't afford to carry it through, "Hoping we can start it again." There is a need for treatment centers but not enough funding available. Last summer June took eight of the worst drug addicts to withdrawal - **"It's not just kids in care we have to look after, it's the families – we have to break this cycle** – 26 drug addicts enlisted, only 11 showed up - they have to want to do it themselves." June's been in her community 20 years now, invites people to have a meal with them if they are hungry – she'll never turn her back on them, "they need someone there when they make the move to give up addiction. These are the issues we really need to look at – until parents and families are themselves healed the children will never be free. Treatment Centers, Healing Centers, family consultations - we should not be set up for failure, but success."

**Samantha Langton (Exec. Dir. Fraser Valley Aboriginal Children & Family Services Society)** "It's a real challenge getting up each morning" – at the age of 17 she discovered she was adopted, and was 22 when she located her biological parents. Even though the figures are high, "at present we have the lowest number of kids we've ever had in care. (However), **there are more aboriginal kids in care now than were in residential schools at its height....** There are some good caregivers. Funding for children IN care is wrong – should be for those NOT in care! It costs around \$10,000 to get a child back home from across the country (in man-power etc.)" She'd rather do what is right and apologize afterwards! "Kids have an inherent right to be connected to their families and community – **Jordan's Principle** should apply more. You shouldn't have to fundraise to get a kid a wheelchair..... It is traumatic for kids to have to sleep in a bed to themselves in their own room when used to sharing both in over-crowded homes." (We never think of this as adding to their trauma!) "There should be an 82% increase in funds. It is not a case of one size fits all."

**Joanne Hugh (new Tribal Chief with Sto:lo Tribal Council)** Her dad was impacted by the '60's Scoop', he and his brother were old enough to look after themselves so weren't taken, but his cousins were taken into foster care. "Our people are tired of the high incarceration figures, trauma, residential schools, abuse, we have to spare our kids from ourselves – lot of lateral violence." She wants to focus on a return to indigenous law – stand up for our women. Mt. Cheam stands over our Nation, the river,

and resources.” Joanne is not an elected chief under the Indian Act but under their own community leadership selection process - she’s glad she’s a tribal chief – it is like being a matriarch in a family who guides them in the right way. “Women often get ostracized - we need to strengthen our women. We can talk all we want, but what are we going to do?” They have their own way of ‘belonging’. “Consider working together as Sto:lo people - we can do a ‘home-coming’ - the Tsimshian, the Nisga’a have done this.”

**Maureen Chapman (Hereditary Chief, 1999 - , of Skawahlook First Nation - Ruby Creek between Agassiz and Hope, Chief’s representative for the Sto:lo Nation Chief’s Council, active Aboriginal Children & Family’s Chiefs coalition, First Nation Children & Family Wellness Council and many more):** her native name means ‘strong-minded & gets the work done’. “We had the same discussion 23-years ago and nothing has changed.... Need to address intergenerational trauma. The residential school is where the widespread violence began.... What’s missing drastically? The social workers need to experience living with us, in poverty, to know what we are going through. We know how to look after our kids – it’s the government that is causing a problem. (The answer is) **we need to research their resources where the kids can come to, to be looked after, after school in their own community.** We need to end turf wars about our kids.”

**Dr. Gwen Point (Chancellor, University of the Fraser Valley)** “Words are just words” When you begin to put experiences together, reality - no White, Indian, Asian, - just ‘homo’, the same. Only the name should come from mother’s mother - matriarchal.... Before you use speech – consult your mind and heart – that which you say becomes reality. (Just) One person cannot do this work – (it’s) not just leadership, (or the) Board - we are the only ones that (can) make a difference, the only ones who can make a change, can’t do it if we are sitting opposite each other.... If what you are doing is right, is good – that’s the measure of your work....it’s not just up to you, it’s up to every man, woman, and child – you can’t save the world on your own... Some lights burn a little brighter – some not. How do you know that what you are doing is right and good – you can’t. You’re not allowed to feel sad, or sorry for yourself – you’re wasting energy. You are doing what you’re supposed to be doing in a good way. We are going to get through this without challenge..... You need to stand up and be counted – make a contribution. It’s the action we take when we leave this room (the Gathering Place)..... interested members of the larger Chilliwack community.”

**A male senior, who worked as an Elder in a penitentiary spoke next** – he dropped out of school early, became alcoholic, and his children were apprehended.

**Ernie Crey (Social worker and Chief of Cheam First Nation)** spoke last – worked in several places, also helped in BC’s far north. “Nothing like publicizing facts – Stewart Phillip gives a great service to B.C” In 1974 the Union of B.C Chiefs hired Ernie as a social worker, he worked out of the Ministry office in Kamloops – spoke of rejection of funding, Aboriginal Child & Family Services was not operating in the Okanagan at that time, etc.

The event ended with a “Healing Song”.

(Submitted by Monica Gibson-Pugsley)