

## A hug from Totah ("Grandparent")

By: Deyenunyahkwa S. Jonathan

I grew up on the Six Nations Reserve believing that it was the nicest, cleanest reserve in the whole world. Like any kid growing up, my favorite place to go was my Totah's. It always made me feel pure excitement driving up her bumpy lane way to her little yellow house sitting up on the hill. I do not recall a time in my childhood where I was not at my Totah's house playing. My Totah is a wise but very funny Mohawk lady. I never had the chance to meet my Grandpa since he had passed away before I was born, but she spoke of him often enough to make it seem as if he was still there. My Grandpa's nickname was Longshot Bomberry, a name he got from playing lacrosse. There was a lot of men in my life I never got to meet and it always makes me wonder how different of a person I would be if I had men in my life. Both of my grandfathers were long gone before I came around and my own father had passed away while I was in my 2nd year of life. As much as it makes me miss them, I am proud of the woman I have become raised by women. I also consider myself lucky since not a lot of families have close connections as mine. This is what began my thinking on how I feel receiving a simple hug from my Totah.

One day, as I sat on my grandma's rocking chair in the kitchen listening to her Willie Nelson's greatest hits on the stereo, I started to wonder, why hugs from Totah are so important to me. I looked outside and tried to imagine how different my family, my people would be if we did not hug each other. I began to ask my Totah "Did your mother or grandma ever hug you?" She let out a chuckle and said "no". Surprised and curious, I asked "why is that gram"? She replied, "well that was a different time for our people, some people are still learning that today, how to show affection or love". I started to wonder why and how it still affects our people today. Of

course, my first thought of this was because of the impact residential schools had on us.

Sometimes I found myself wondering how those children in those schools felt and often find myself wiping away tears when I think too hard about it.

The time in our history of residential schools still haunt people to this day. The closest residential school to my reserve was the Mohawk Institute, located in Brantford, Ontario. I have done many student placements and trips there and always find it extremely creepy. Walking through the building you can hear footsteps of children running around. Other times if you are walking around you may hear screams or cries, a friend of mine once heard a little boy singing a song in Cayuga. I still find it hard to believe that it was not too long ago where that building was filled with native children who were taken from their homes.

The children were taken away to residential schools where they were stripped from their traditional clothing, their Native names, their language and identity. Residential schools tore the children apart. They were mentally, physically, verbally, emotionally, sexually abused in those schools. The children became lost in themselves and their spirits. They were not allowed to speak their language nor practice their traditions. The priests and nuns of those schools brainwashed our children into different people. Most children were referred to by numbers instead of names. Other children had English names and had to learn about their gods, their history and their language. The children had no parents to look up to and received no love during their critical childhood years.

After losing their children to the residential schools, the women and men were forced to no longer have responsibility. This most often forced parents to turn to mind changers, also known as alcohol or drugs. Having turned into those bad habits, they began to lose themselves

and their good minds. The parents also began violence amongst one another, or others who were nearby. We no longer lived in longhouses. Families were broken apart and lost. We began to lose our traditions, ceremonies, clan systems and languages. Some men and women also drifted away or moved to another place leaving their families and home.

The residential schools did not teach the native children about respect, love, sharing or caring. When the children were returned home, they were lost and broken. Some of the children rebelled as they grew up becoming depression, suicidal, addicted to alcohol or drugs or involved with crime. Others became silent. When it was time for these children to have families of their own, they did not learn their tradition roles of becoming parents, so they lacked proper parenting skills. They had families to rejoice their need of being wanted and loved. Sometimes they had enough children to fill up a house, often leaving the older children to look after the younger ones. The parents were not hugged or kissed when they were children, so they did not have the ability to pass it onto their children. This is where it began, the loss of affection amongst families and relatives. Going up to hug your Totah back than was never heard of. Sometimes a hand shake was enough. From being abused as children, being touched never felt warm and comforting, it was often for discipline or getting abused.

As I go to visit my 74 year old Totah today along with my 3 year old daughter, I teach her the importance of greeting her with a hug and one to say goodbye. My Totah enjoys spoiling my daughter Ogranaweh and I hope in the future, she learns the importance of affection to loved ones around her. Often elders in my longhouse and community describe my daughter as being an old soul. She has the warm gentle feeling of an elder stuck inside a 3 year old body. Sometimes it worries me that she can go up to anyone to say hi or give them a hug but other times it makes me

feel proud. I have high hopes for my people and community to one day heal and return back to our traditions and languages we once had. All it takes is one simple hug.

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March 2012

Author's Statement  
Hugs from Totah(Grandparent)

*My name is Deyenunyahkwa Shelbi Jonathan. I am a Mohawk, Bear Clan from the Six Nations and Grand River Territory. I am a mother of a beautiful 3 year old daughter, a wife, a daughter, granddaughter, a sister, an honours student and a friend. I am currently an honours graduating student of the Social Service Worker program. I plan to continue my education in September by completing my Bachelor of Social Work degree. My community is my strength for wanting to help us heal and to return back to our traditional ways. I have a big heart for wanting to help my people and try my best every day to learn more about how I can help. My family is my motivation in my life and I have always kept my family as my first priority.*

*The piece I have written was inspired by my Totah. She has always been a light in my life. Nothing feels better than getting a hug from your grandma. I believe that we can become affectionate people as we once were before. It all starts with wanting to heal, wanting to learn our languages, using a good mind and having respect for yourself, others and the community we live in. If you think about it, we all come from the same place, therefore we are all one, we are all family.*