

Grandpa's Past:

Grandpa was just a young boy when he was sent to a residential school in Kenora, Ontario. The chief at that time did not allow the white people to come in and scoop children up, but they did have a school on reserve. Each year, the white teachers would select certain students to go out to school. Grandpa was one of the selected that year. It was 1962. He remembers getting on a water plane and leaving behind his family and everything that was familiar. Once in a while, he would get a letter from his parents and they would tell him what his siblings were up to and how they were doing. One time, a letter came, telling him his baby brother had passed away from an illness. He never got to see that brother again. Grandpa never went home for the holidays and only came back for the summers. Grandpa had no choice but to stay out there.

When he got to the school, he remembers seeing other kids there and wondering why he was taken to this building. When a child is scared, that child just wants their parents but my grandpa didn't have that. He had to comfort himself and the younger children around him. He was surrounded by strangers and was scared. As one of the older students, he felt he had to be strong for the children who were looking up to him. He had to grow up fast. He missed his family and knew that he wouldn't be able to see them any time soon. He wondered, *"Why did I have to come here? I wish I was at home eating my mom's cooking and playing with my cousins and siblings. Will it be different in the future?"* He got homesick and tried to run away with a group of friends but they eventually got caught and most likely got beaten for it. I say most likely because he doesn't talk about his personal experiences in the residential school. What little I know about his days there is through other people that were there with him.

He didn't finish school. He only went there for two years. But he took upgrading when he was older, then attended college at the same place where I eventually went to high school. He went on to become a bush pilot for our home community for 10 years, then worked in the social field for 20 years. One thing he decided early in his life is that he would not let the residential school experience ruin his life. He chose to look at life positively and used education to better himself, instead of turning to alcohol and drugs. I am proud of my grandpa for doing that. Seeing his family receive education is important to him and is continually encouraging us to stay in school and do our best. He reminds us that it can open new doors to a better life than if we just stayed at home. He always stresses to his children, like my mom, and my sister and I, to keep going to school because things change all the time and it is important to keep up with those changes. He believes education is the key to helping ourselves and our communities and to build it into a better place for future generations. He also encourages us to keep a positive outlook on life, that life is hard, but we can pull through anything if we don't give up.

My experience:

In our part of northwestern Ontario, high school students have to leave home and go to Thunder Bay or Sioux Lookout to attend high school. Charters of planes go to each reserve to pick them up, or when it's time, to drop them off. When I graduated from Grade 8, I had just turned 14. Mom felt I was too young to go out for school. So I tried going to the local Internet High School, but I didn't like it and felt that it was missing something that I needed- maybe a better school system with properly trained teachers, instead of hiring people who don't have any educational training background? Maybe

a person who understands that there are kids that struggle with mental health issues every day and having a better support system in place for students like that? I, myself, struggled personally, as I had just lost my grandpa to cancer, and fell into a deep depression. School and life was hard that year. After much thinking, I decided I wanted to go to a high school that was two provinces away, as I felt I needed to be in a different environment. I thought maybe it would help me do better in school. So I applied and was accepted. My family was excited for me. I was only 15, but I had chosen to leave my family, my friends, my home – everything I knew. When I was getting on the water plane to leave for school that fall, my grandpa said to me, “It is going to be hard, but you are going somewhere that will help you in your life”, and that stuck with me.

It took us two days of driving to get to our destination. When we arrived at my new school, a Christian High School to be exact, I was scared but excited to start fresh in a new place. My parents helped me move into the dorm and they were going to leave me around noon the next day, which would be the first day of school. I remember feeling so scared and lonely already, and they weren’t even gone yet. I didn’t know anyone there. I was surrounded by strangers. I started doubting myself, thinking negative thoughts like, *“What if my classmates and teachers don’t like me? What if I don’t make any friends because I’m too quiet and shy? What if I can’t make it out here and drop out and disappoint everyone back home?”* I was so far away from home and I was already homesick. I had only been gone for four days and still had a whole semester ahead of me until I would be able to go home for Christmas. It looked like it was going to be a long, lonely, four months. I knew that there were people, especially kids, who were watching me, seeing what I would do and how strong I would be. I knew there were some people doubting that I would make it. But even though I was feeling scared, I wanted to show them I could do it. I just didn’t realize how hard it was actually going to be. My grandpa’s words would keep popping up in my head.

I got lost trying to find my classes but I shyly asked my photography teacher where my next class was and he showed me the way. Pretty soon, it was lunch time. My parents had planned to have lunch with me before they left and I dreaded it. When it was time for me to go back to school for my afternoon classes, we stopped at the front of the school to say our “See you in four months” good-byes. I walked up to my mom to give her a hug and just started to cry. Then my mom started to cry too. She was also feeling emotional. While she was holding me, she said, “I know it’s scary, I know you’re scared, I went through the same thing. You’ll be fine. You’re safe here. I wouldn’t put you where I thought you’d get hurt.”

I wondered, *“Why do I have to come out here just to continue my education? I’m only 15 and two provinces away from home.”* And I thought to myself, *“I’m going to have to grow up fast.”*

Once my parents left to head back to Ontario, I headed to my dorm room, hoping my roommate wasn’t in there. I wanted to be alone while I cried. When it was time to head to my next class. I went there with red, puffy eyes. I walked in and found a desk in the back. My classmates came walking in one by one, finding the desk that they wanted; I knew no one. When we were told to introduce ourselves, I was so terrified. I had never talked in front of strangers before. Then it was my turn to speak. I spoke so quietly that my English teacher had to ask me to speak a bit louder. A few days passed, and I wanted friends to hang out with, but I didn’t know how to make them as it had always been an awkward thing

for me to do growing up. I was scared to talk to my classmates and teachers. I cried every single day for the first month of being in Caronport; early morning, lunch break, after school, bedtime. I cried in the shower, I cried on lonely walks after study period, I cried in the bathroom at school and would pretend that I was ok. I was numb for the next few weeks. I begged my mom to let me come home but she didn't waver. She wanted me home too but knew that by letting me give up would destroy other kids' chances of coming to the same high school in the future. The funding agency would look at how I did. Mom told me I was paving a road for them, as I was the first to go so far way for school. My friends back home were so supportive and encouraging; they posted photos on my Facebook page with one saying:

"It's okay to let sadness in, but don't let the sadness win."

I had adults encouraging me, telling me to stay where I was. I was told that there were kids asking my parents where I went and that they were surprised that I was in Saskatchewan to attend high school as most students went to Sioux Lookout or Thunder Bay – some kids and adults said that I was their role model. I was starting something new for the younger generation; showing them that they can choose to go somewhere different, where they want to go **not** where they're told to go.

I think of my grandpa as a young boy, alone in a strange place. He must have felt similar feelings; the loneliness, the fear, the tears he must have cried; the longing to be home with family but having no choice but to stay at the school because it was forced on him to go there. He was among other young children who were also without their parents and feeling the way he did. The fact that I had to leave home to attend high school shows that things have not really changed from back then to now. Grandpa left home when he was 12; I left home when I was 15. Residential School still exists for us but with a different name: High School. It is where First Nation teenagers, from isolated reserves, have no choice but to leave home and go to a different environment, where they have to find their way in a strange environment, live with strangers and exist in a society where being a Native is not desirable.

I am my grandpa's granddaughter. We share a different yet similar path. A path where we had to leave what we knew, a path where we battled ever-crushing emotions. But we chose to take our situations and look at it in a positive way. My own father also attended residential school, but he chose a different road, a lifestyle that is harmful and deadly, to deal with what happened to him there. But Grandpa didn't. And I choose to follow his example instead because if he had walked the path of destruction, I would have done the same, for that would have been everything I knew.