



In Profile: Alex Nelson

A member of the Musgamagw Dzawada'enuwx First Nation, Alex Nelson has made outstanding contributions to education, language and cultural revitalization, and youth in sport in his community. He is a past executive director of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, a founder of the Aboriginal Sports & Recreation Association of BC, first Chair and three-time president of the North American Indigenous Games Council and a member of the BC Sports Hall of Fame. Alex is also a residential school survivor and often shares his experience with schools and community groups. Learn spoke with Alex about his experience in residential schools, the power of education and what Orange Shirt Day means to him.

Tell us about your early life

I am a member of the Musgamagw Dzawada'enuwx First Nation, and I lived in Kingcome Inlet, just north of Vancouver Island, for the first seven years of my life. I have fond memories of family, community and nature, as well as the teachings that come from growing up alongside the river and mountains. There was a strong sense of communal life – like when the eulachon fish returned each year and we all came together to harvest and dry the fish so that no one was hungry throughout the year.

What was your experience of residential school?

Although my dad and older brothers were sent to residential school, I don't remember anyone talking about it. There was a lot of silence. It was only later that I understood why. What was there to talk about?

I was sent to the St. Michael's residential school in Alert Bay when I was seven and that's where I lived for the next seven years. The first three or four days of school were exciting. It was a new place and a chance to meet others. But I soon felt the absence of the loving arms of my mother. That's when the reality



started sinking in. Although there were five of us from the Nelson family at the school at the same time, because of the regimentation of age categories and genders we were all separated.

The school was a place of discipline and rules. We weren't allowed to speak our language. There was a lot of regimentation, punishment, silence and authority. Later in life, I worked as a prison liaison officer and couldn't help but notice the similarities between prison and residential school. We were used to being punished – it became a way of life. Prison is supposed to be a deterrent, but when you come to expect that you will be punished, prison isn't a deterrent. It's just a re-enactment of residential school.

Where did you go after Alert Bay?

When I was 14, I was told I was going to Mission City in the Fraser Valley. By that point, I was compliant and I just went along with it. I was in a boarding home program and attended a public secondary school where I was one of six First Nations students. There were two things that were really positive from that time: I was fortunate to have a caring guardian and I was on the school soccer team. Soccer was my saviour. Sport was always there for me, helping me deal with the feelings of isolation that came with being even further away from my parents and community. Some families of my teammates also spoiled me to the hilt. That was good.

There have been a lot of changes in our education system over the past five decades. What are your thoughts on this?

I was very fortunate to marry into a family that was educationally driven. My wife, Nella, was a teacher for 40 years and served as district co-ordinator for the Victoria School District. When we went to the University of Victoria way back when, there were only a half-dozen First Nations students. There's been a lot of improvements in high school graduation rates since then with more First Nations students going on to higher education. I think some of those improvements come from a more inclusive curriculum. First Nations history was the silent shadow when we were learning about Canada's history in school. There was simply nothing there about us.



I also think that improvement has come from having school counsellors and others working to build bridges between on- and off-reserve schools and communities. Education enhancement agreements, for example, bring more visibility and opportunities for inclusion. I see this when we showcase our vibrant culture and I see people marvelling at and learning from our songs, dances, regalia and connection to the earth.

I see teachers as motivators who can take opportunities to influence curriculum, share culture and be involved in reconciliation. One way I've seen this happen is in reconnecting schools to our big houses. At the Mungo Martin House in Victoria we invite students to participate in these wonderful teachings and bring our culture to life.

What gives you hope when you look to the future?

When I was leaving to go to school in Mission my dad said, "You need to learn the way of white man's education, but when you get a chance, you teach them of who you are." I remember that purely and soundly. These words could be said by any individual, Indigenous or not. Speak of who you are.

Tell us about Orange Shirt Day and what it means to you

The story of Orange Shirt Day is the story of a young girl named Phyllis who was so excited to wear her prettiest clothing on her first day of residential school, only to be stripped of her new orange shirt and to never see it again. For me, Orange Shirt Day is a powerful and symbolic way of saying if you see that glory and brightness of who you are inside your heart, let it shine. Others may want to take it away from you, but you need to let your brightness and glory shine through.

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