



RESISTANCE ON THE GIIMOOCH:

THE LIFE OF MARY COURCHENE

By Anne Bennett, MTS Staff

Resistance on the Giimooch: The Life of Mary Courchene, a comprehensive learning resource that includes sixteen lesson plans and a teacher's guide, launches this month on The Manitoba Teachers' Society website mbteach.org. Through storytelling both written and oral, Mary Courchene, Elder in Residence in Seven Oaks School Division, shares her life and how her history, family, culture, language, and ways of knowing preserved her spirit, sharpened her focus, fuelled her determination and led her to the place – and person – she is today.

When asked about the title of the project, Mary says, "It means on the down-low, in secret," with a little laugh, she adds, "We had to hold onto our identity quietly, unseen. It was very risky, but there was power in it."

GIFT OF TRUTH AND THE POWER OF STORIES

It was only near the completion of the project that its title, *Resistance on the Giimooch*, came to Mary.

"When I was about 12, a nun locked me and my best friend in the bathroom so we couldn't go to supper. We were being punished because we didn't pick up the things in the playroom that we were told to. I got my friend to stand on my shoulders and squeeze out the window. She came around and unlocked the door so we could go to supper. When we were eating, the nun saw us and took us back to the playroom. When we got

there, she told us to get back into the bathroom and I said no. She picked up a bat and aimed it at my friend. I thought she was going to kill her, so I ran and grabbed the bat. The nun fell and I unintentionally stepped on her veil, and it came off. I said, “don’t do that again”, in the language. I didn’t think about it, I just knew I had to protect my friend. The nun just sat there on the floor; she was so stunned by it. We went back and ate supper and she never came to punish us again. We sure got away with that one.”

STEPPING INTO ROLE OF TEACHER

Throughout her time at Residential School and the years since, Mary has routinely reflected on the intentional acts of genocide against her being and spirit. As an adult, undefeated by the loneliness and devastation of her past and an education system determined to destroy her, Mary would step into the role of a teacher. She recognized that one of the ways she could change a school system that attempted to erase who she was as an Indigenous person was to disrupt it from within.

“In the early 70s, I found out there was a new program starting at Brandon University. And I thought, wow, there’s an opportunity for me. I lived on the reserve, but I wasn’t going to leave my kids. So I wrote a letter to the university about my life in the Residential School and why I wanted to leave the reserve to take this program. I felt it was an opportunity to do something for me and for my children. I basically wrote an autobiography. And based on that, they wrote me back and said I was accepted. The only problem was they wanted me for an orientation the very next weekend. I had very little money, with seven kids from ages three months to 13 years old, and I thought “What am I going to do, how can I get to Brandon with my kids?” Then I thought of a plan, once again on the Giimooch. I decided to borrow my husband’s car, and I say my husband’s car because back then you were subservient to your husband. I couldn’t just ask him if

“

I CAN SEE THE CHANGES OVER THE YEARS, OVER THE GENERATIONS. I CAN’T HELP BUT NOTICE THAT THE THIRD GENERATION, MY GRANDCHILDREN, THEY’RE ANGRY. THEY’RE MAD AT THE WORLD FOR THE WAY THEIR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS WERE TREATED, AND THEY ARE STRONG IN CLAIMING BACK WHAT WAS DENIED THEM. AND I UNDERSTAND THAT. BUT WITH THE FOURTH GENERATION, MY GREAT GRANDCHILDREN, IT IS ALREADY DIFFERENT AND THAT FILLS MY SOUL. THEY ARE JOYFUL AND HAPPY BEING WHO THEY ARE, AND THEY EMBRACE THE LANGUAGE, THEY EMBRACE THE CULTURE. I AM A HOPEFUL PERSON, AND MY HOPE IS WITH THE LITTLE ONES. THEY ARE THE HEALERS.

I could go because he would have said no, and I would’ve listened as he was the authority. So, I told him I wanted to go to bingo, and he gave me a bit of money for it, which I used for gas. I didn’t even have a driver’s license, but that was beside the point. I drove my husband to work, went back to the

house and packed up the kids. We put our stuff in garbage bags and took off. I wrote my husband a note and told him “I’m going to School in Brandon, I’ll talk to you later, love Mary”. That’s all I said. We went to Brandon and showed up at my brother’s place because I had nowhere else to go, and he let us stay. When my husband found the note, he got someone to drive him to Brandon to find us. He had quit his job on the reserve and followed us out there. He understood. He knew it was so we could have a better life, so our children could have a better life.”

“WE ARE SORRY”

Fast forward to June 11, 2008. Mary sat in Ottawa in the gallery of the House of Commons as then Prime Minister Stephen Harper read a statement of apology to survivors of Indian Residential Schools in Canada.

“The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly,” he said. “Nous le regrettons. We are sorry. Nimitataynan. Niminchinowesamin. Mamiattugut.”

As the apology was read, Courchene began to sob. “My first instinct was to feel shame that I was showing emotion. But when I looked around, I saw other survivors openly crying, too. It was a moment of finally hearing the government say yes, you’re right, this happened, you were wronged. And we did this to you.”

Events such as the apologies by the Canadian prime minister and more recently the pope were particularly searing for Mary, as she felt her childhood experiences were being unpacked on varying levels—the impact on herself, and in the broader Canadian context.

Mary’s goal in sharing her story far and wide has always been in the name of a better future for Indigenous children and youth. Despite the genocide of Indigenous people, their culture, rights, language, and ways of knowing and being, despite the pain and suffering that have spanned generations, with *Resistance on the Giimooch*, Mary and



Elder Mary Courchene and her fourth generation grandchildren Sacha, Niko, James and Ava (L to R)

her family have both re-claimed and shared their power. The power to be, to heal, and through education, to change the course of history.

THE HEALERS WILL PREVAIL

“I can see the changes over the years, over the generations,” she says. “There is my generation, my children’s generation, the third generation of my grandchildren and now their children, the fourth generation, my great grandchildren, who are the young people now. I can’t help but notice that the third generation, my grandchildren, they’re angry. They’re mad at the world for the way their

parents and grandparents were treated, and they are strong in claiming back what was denied them. And I understand that. But with the fourth generation, my great grandchildren, it is already different and that fills my soul. They are joyful and happy being who they are, and they embrace the language, they embrace the culture. I am a hopeful person, and my hope is with the little ones. They are the healers.”

Mary concludes that it is the healers who will prevail, the healers who have heard the voices that cannot speak and will pass along hope to future generations.

DEDICATED TO THE YOUNG ONES

“*Resistance on the Giimooch: The Life of Mary Courchene*,” is dedicated to both the young ones who endured Canada’s Residential Schools through quiet, unseen, courageous moments of resistance and to the young ones today who will resist in plain sight. In their joyful defiance, they will help create a better life for themselves and generations to come. 📖

MARY:

A SURVIVOR'S STORY

At the age of five, Mary Courchene was forced to attend Fort Alexander Residential School in what is now Sagkeeng First Nation. Despite the School being within walking distance from her family home, Mary had to observe her parents and younger siblings' day-to-day lives from a short distance. Like looking through a keyhole at a family life that she longed to be a part of, Mary watched from a third-floor windowsill of the Residential School ten months of the year, for ten long years.

Mary was one of over 150,000 children forced into the Residential Schools in Canada. From the time she arrived until she was 16 years old, Mary's life revolved around the ways of the Residential School system. She was compelled to abandon all that she knew, all that made her who she was. And while Residential Schools may have been known in settler communities as places of learning, the lessons taught "were riddled with shame, devastation, and unimaginable trauma," she says. "These are lessons I have spent my whole life trying to make sense of."

In 2018/19, Elder Mary, her daughter Sherri Denysuik, director, Adult Education Centre and Indigenous Inclusion, and Sarah Gazan, a staff officer in the MTS Professional and French Language Services department, began a collaboration between The Manitoba Teachers' Society and Seven Oaks School Division.

The intent: Come together to create an Indian Residential School curriculum centered around Mary's story—how her time at Fort Alexander had shaped her life and family. The result: *Resistance on the Giimooch*, a comprehensive, multi-platform project that captures Elder Mary's early years, her time at Residential School and the impact of that experience not only on her own life, but the lives of her children and grandchildren as well.

IT TAKES A TEAM

The process included collaboration with an extensive team of educators. Taking on various roles within curriculum development, the team of educators listened to Mary's stories, briefly and methodically stepping into her lived experiences in an effort to distill her learning into teaching tools with the power to change the course of history. Five years after that work began, *Resistance on the Giimooch* was born.

"This project has been a long journey that's been challenging, emotional, so very personal and fulfilling," says Denysuik. "We began by recording Elder Mary's stories and the recorded interviews with two of her children and two of her grandchildren to share their stories as 2nd and 3rd generation Residential School survivors."

As both Elder Mary's daughter and an educator, Denysuik's investment was multi-layered and intensely personal. For her, the power and potential of both perspectives gave *Resistance on the Giimooch* a weight and significance unlike anything else.

"I had a dual role with the project," she says. "The first as daughter of Elder Mary, and the second as project lead. This meant I was deeply connected on both a personal and professional level. It's been a huge honour and a gift to be working so closely with my mom on this project and especially in all her years as Elder in


Residence for Seven Oaks. I can remember as a child thinking my mom is the greatest storyteller in the world, and as an adult this perspective has not changed."

"I am so grateful to every single person who was part of this journey and were dedicated to this special project," Denysuik continues. "And I am especially grateful to them for honouring and holding Elder Mary's story close to their hearts."

POWERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO CHAMPION TRUTH

Today's teachers have a powerful opportunity to champion the truth. They are positioned, perhaps better than anyone else, to create fundamental and enduring change.

Both Mary and her daughter recognize that this is one story of thousands that is being shared. Collectively as we unpack the truths of Residential Schools, we must remember the stories that were never given voice, and those that have yet to be heard.

In Mary's words: "Those deceased who were never given the voice they so deserved—for them, for myself, for my grandchildren, great grandchildren, and for our collective whole, I share these stories. In an act of both truth and reconciliation, I bring voice to the stories that have been woven into the person I am today. A person who I have been working to reclaim for as far back as I can remember." 



Elder Mary Courchene and her daughter Sherri Denysuik

NANA:

THE GRANDCHILDREN'S STORY

The best and brightest reflection of Mary's legacy is without a doubt her grandchildren. Growing up, the young people learned much as they observed her way of being. And while each has their own perspective on her life, their stories of Nana contain similar threads, woven together in a portrait glowing with admiration and the resolve to continue her work.

Here, three of Mary's grandchildren reflect on her life and the impact it has had on their family.

JONATHAN

Jonathan Courchene is Mary's grandson. As a child, he spent almost every weekend at his Nana and Grandpa's home, watching in awe as his grandmother cared for her family and community and still found time to sit at the kitchen table, late into the night, focused on her reading and studies. Today Jonathan works as a student support facilitator at the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre and recognizes now that her discipline was and is rooted in her belief in lifelong learning.

"Learning is her passion; she loves it. And when you love something, you give it all of yourself through your presence, just like she has done her whole life."

Young people owe Mary a debt of thanks, he says, for the priority she placed on learning and the sacrifices she made to continue doing it. "Her life's work means brighter tomorrows for so many First Nations children and youth across our province and country. Her hardships and struggles have turned into their comforts and securities."

JAIMIE

Jaimie Isaac, Mary's granddaughter, is an interdisciplinary artist and chief curator at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Jaimie's vision of her

grandmother's life and work is shaped by storytelling and Mary's deep connection to those who have come before.



NANA HAS INSTILLED IN ME A STRONG SENSE OF PRIDE IN MY IDENTITY AS AN ANISHINAABE KWE AND HAS GIVEN ME THE LOVE AND PASSION OF ANISHINAABEMOWIN. IT IS WITH HER IN MIND THAT I AM LEARNING OUR LANGUAGE TO TAKE BACK WHAT WE WERE DENIED. HER LIFE'S WORK, THAT SHE IS GRACIOUSLY SHARING WITH US, IS AN IMPORTANT TRUTH WE ALL MUST LISTEN TO AND LEARN FROM.

"Nana's work as an educator, as a knowledge keeper and storyteller exist because of her courage, resilience and survival," says Jaimie. "Her personal perseverance, power and will were

developed through necessity. She shares with us the collective power and beautiful resistance of our ancestors."

It is this power, combined with the support of Mary's children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, that fuels the hope of generational healing gifted to us through the stories of survivors like Mary.

"She has worked for a cultural resurgence that we as her family must carry forward," says Jaimie. "I learn from Nana every day and aspire to follow in her footsteps. She empowers all of us to be the best we can be."

ALYSSA

Granddaughter Alyssa Denysuik is also following a path towards a career in education. She is enrolled in the Community Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (CATEP) at the University of Winnipeg and will begin teaching in 2024. Alyssa credits Mary, her family's "brave, sharp-minded matriarch", for the connection she feels to her culture and history.

"She has instilled in me a strong sense of pride in my identity as an Anishinaabe kwe and has given me the love and passion of Anishinaabemowin. It is with her in mind that I am learning our language to take back what we were denied. Her life's work, that she is graciously sharing with us, is an important truth we all must listen to and learn from."



Elder Mary Courchene has 7 children, 18 grandchildren, 22 great-grandchildren (Here she is with 2 of her daughters and their families)

Each of Mary's grandchildren speak to their hope that *Resistance on the Giimooch* leads teachers and students alike towards the truth and a deeper understanding of the legacy and ongoing impact of Residential Schools.

Teachers have a unique opportunity to share the truth with students, says Jaimie, so that "they carry forth these teachings and stories with care. Educational reform will redress a history of harmful education, so that generations of the future aren't bereft of important cultural knowledge that Elders like Nana have fought to

protect, revive and share. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action should be the guiding principles and values that instill change and nourish ways of being and learning."

"My hope is that the judgement and criticism against our people, harboured in the minds of yesterday, slowly fades away," says Jonathan. "The students who grow up in times of truth and reconciliation can nurture kinder and more understanding hearts so the relationships with our relatives can heal. Healing cannot take place until the truth is told and accepted."

Alyssa agrees.

"I hope that educators and students will see the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and learning in both historical and contemporary contexts. We all have a responsibility to one another through the teachings of *mino pimatisiwin*—living the good life. Through my grandmother's gift of these truths, we are better equipped to live in harmony with the teachings of the good life that she has generously shared with us."

TEACHERS AS LEARNERS: A TEAM'S STORY

Imagine you are approached with an opportunity: Take the life story of Residential School survivor Mary Courchene, and create a learning resource reflective of truth, founded in resistance and connected to a hope for Canada rooted in meaningful reconciliation. No small task.

Unfazed by the overwhelming responsibility, a team of Manitoba teachers took up the challenge, aware of the incredible opportunity to create positive, lasting change.

From 2018/19 till today the following educators were part of a team who created the educational resource, *Resistance on the Giimooch*: Alyssa Denysuik, Amy Carpenter, Christine M'Lot, Hayden LaRiviere, Janelle Prairie, Jenna Firth, Jonathan Traverse, Melissa Neapew, Niki Simard, Sarah Gazan, Sheri Ingram, Sherri Denysuik, Sopear Chhin, Stephanie Luna, Tanya Muswagon, Teri McKay, and Wendy Coveney.

"They recognized that in creating this curriculum they would pave the way for settler teachers to invite students into the story of Canada's history and the impact of colonization on the peoples of Turtle Island," Sherri Denysuik says. "Their contributions rose from their hearts and minds, evidence of a strong commitment to honouring the voices of Residential School survivors and providing authentic resources for teachers to guide students in a kind and good way."

Working collaboratively, guided by traditional teachings and inspired by Mary's life and example, the educators wove her experiences and message into 16 lesson plans and a teacher's guide that:

- honour the truth of those who attended Residential Schools;
- prompt thoughtful examination of those experiences and their ongoing impact, and;
- motivate teachers and students alike to make fundamental changes necessary for real, enduring reconciliation to occur.



Sopear Chhin, Janelle Prairie, Elder Mary Courchene, Sherri Denysuik, Sarah Gazan and Amy Carpenter (L to R)

AN MTS AND SEVEN OAKS COLLABORATION

This project was inspired by a model originally conceived by Gail Stromquists at the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. Sarah Gazan, a staff officer in the MTS Professional and French Language Services department, approached Courchene's daughter, Sherri Denysuik, director, Adult Education Centre and Indigenous Inclusion, with a proposal; a collaboration between MTS and Seven Oaks School Division to create an Indian Residential School curriculum around her mother's story. Gazan was inspired by the work begun with BCTF and saw the opportunity to develop the project further. Together, they built the team that would create *Resistance on the Giimooch*.

"Gail's work at BCTF taught about generosity, about story, about commitment

and about the love that carries us through even the darkest times," says Gazan. "Mary's story is one of trauma but also of resistance, healing, and love. She has carried her Residential School story and has also continued to carry the Anishinaabe language and her teachings. That is her strength and the strength of our people."

Each of the teachers who shared reflections on the experience, pointed out the personal growth they felt bringing *Resistance on the Giimooch* to life.

For Amy Carpenter, a teacher of 19 years currently pursuing her Ph.D., the process drew on her history with the Courchene family, permitting an even richer relationship with Mary's story.

"To be part of this project helped me see the power of healing, remembering and resurgence through the power of story. It helped me to be a better listener and to ponder stories on a deeper level."

Amy Carpenter adds, "I want to see educators and students delve into the oppressive, violent and intentional actions on the part of the colonial Canadian government. I hope this project will help students better understand the intricate and collective impact Residential Schools have had on this place we call home. I hope it will help students not only understand Mary's story, but also their own."

Mary Courchene's story resonated deeply with Sopear Chhin, a teacher at Seven Oaks Middle School and the only member of the teacher team who is not Indigenous.

"Whether you're Indigenous or not," says Chhin, "the lessons are approachable and helpful in allowing classes to make connections with the histories of our past in order to make sense of our current world. It has reminded me to listen with an open, courageous heart and not shy away from using my own voice."

The intention of the curricular resource is to provide educators with the opportunity to delve deeply into the stories of truth that surround the impacts of residential schools. The hope is classrooms will engage in multiple lessons over a period of time, versus a one-day event to honour Orange Shirt Day.

CANADA'S TRUE HISTORY

"This is a part of Canada's history that many of us did not learn about in school," says Janelle Prairie, a graduate of the Community Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (CATEP) and vice principal at École Belmont. "Through the stories and voices of Elder Mary and her family, my hope is that school communities meaningfully engage in truth and reconciliation while they learn about Canada's true history. This is an opportunity for students to share what they learn and inform other generations, building on our collective healing."

Curriculum editor Christine M'Lot, a teacher at the University of Winnipeg Collegiate shared that, "As educators we need to understand that truth has to come before reconciliation. That means listening to the stories and learning the truth about what happened at Residential Schools, the intergenerational trauma that followed and the historical and ongoing effects of settler colonialism."


Tanya Muswagon, a teacher at Elwick Community School, says that while Mary's life was uniquely hers, her story illustrates the commonalities fundamental to a just and caring society. "This is a way for students to learn about forgiveness, kindness and empathy."

We are here to teach our kids to be good to themselves and one another."

M'Lot adds that the teacher's guide is a key facet of *Resistance on the Giimooch*. Following the Anishinaabe teachings of the Four Directions, the guide is informed by learnings from Knowledge Keeper Sherry Copenace and a summary by Elder Dan Thomas.

"It assists teachers to understand the importance of the directions and how Mary's life journey has taken her through the stages of life—childhood, adolescence, adulthood and now Elderhood."

This project has been a work of heart for everyone involved. At times the work was heavy, at other times it was joyous and at all times there was a sense of responsibility to honour survivors who fought with their lives to resist acts of genocide against all aspects of their being.

"The lives of survivors are complicated," says Gazan. "The injustices of the Residential Schools, the dark history and the legacy of this country are perpetuated through our child welfare and education systems. I hope students will fight for justice, for truth and for equity and against oppression and racism, and I am forever thankful to Mary, her family and the teachers involved for all they have shared and given of themselves to make this project a reality." 

LESSON PLANS: THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

EAST

- Lesson 1: Mino Pimatisiwin (The Good Life)
- Lesson 2: Land, Language, and Identity
- Lesson 3: "The Best Years of my Life"
- Lesson 4: Stages of Life

SOUTH

- Lesson 5: Displacement
- Lesson 6: Fear
- Lesson 7: Residential Schools, Thousands of Stories
- Lesson 8: History of Education and Schools

WEST

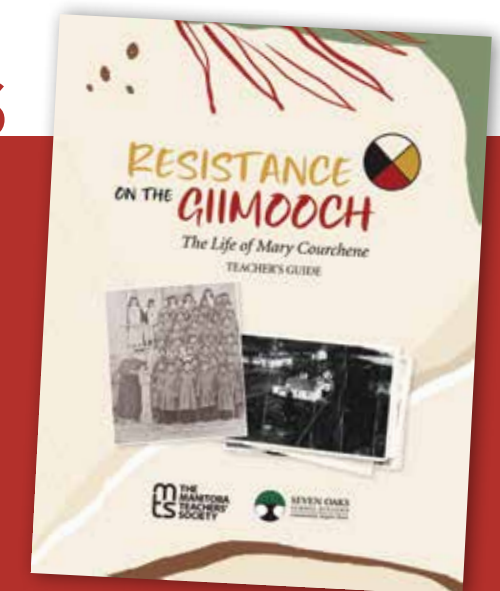
- Lesson 9: Who am I?
- Lesson 10: Finding Her Way
- Lesson 11: Life as an Educator
- Lesson 12: The Four Essential Questions

NORTH

- Lesson 13: Blood Memory
- Lesson 14: Unmarked Graves
- Lesson 15: The Apology and Reconciliation
- Lesson 16: Mino Pimatisiwin (The Good Life)

HOLDING SPACE

Some topics in this resource will be difficult to learn about. It is important to create a safe learning environment that holds space for all experiences and emotions. Teachers are encouraged to engage with students from a Trauma-Informed perspective. For more information on Trauma-Informed practice visit the Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre at trauma-informed.ca



For *Resistance on the Giimooch* lesson plans visit mbteach.org or scan the QR code.

