

Indigenous Peoples of Canada

Heritage - Video 2

Michaela Washburn:

So I used to be a counsellor in a high school in Alberta, in Onoway. And I was working with a couple of students and they - we had made a contract, because they were skipping a lot. Bright girls. Bright. And potential. And we had met and agreed, and they were going to follow the rules, and they skipped. And so when they were coming in the front doors the secretary called me and said, "Okay; they're coming in the front doors." So I intercepted them and brought them into my office and said, "Guys, we made a contract. And holding you accountable is how I show you that I respect you and I believe in your potential, so I'm calling in your moms." They were upset; "I'm going to get beaten", "I'm going to get this" - like all these reasons why we couldn't do this; very dramatic. And I said, "Well, I didn't choose to break the contract. You chose to break the contract, so we gotta deal with it because I can't support you at home in the way they can." Needless to say, the two mothers were coming in but one was particularly known - the student had been going to the school for some time - and one mother was particularly known for having a bit of a temper and being a bit challenging. And so apparently I was going to be backed up by another counsellor - I was very green [inexperienced]; I was a few months in; I was very, very green, right out of school, and the vice-principal was going to be there; it was all going to be good.

As it comes the mothers are in the office and the daughters are in the office, and "Oh, gee, I got a meeting" "Sorry; I got to take the call", so I had to deal with it on my own. So I go in there. The first thing - one of the first things I'm accused of is racism; that I'm racist towards their daughter, you know, because of passing [Michaela passes as white; people look at her and think that she is white]. And this mother started yelling, and she had a really loud tone, and she was so angry, that I was picking on her kids, and she's a smart girl and doesn't cause problems, and so she's, you know. And I said, "You're really angry, aren't you!" and she said, "Yes I am!" And I said, "You came down here; you had to leave work didn't you!" And she said, "Yes I did!" And I said, "Wow - I'm really impressed." She said, "What?" I said, "The fact that you came down here in the middle of your day to make sure your daughter is being treated right and is having access to her education shows me that you really care about her, and I'm impressed by that. I wish more parents cared as much as you did." And by kind of leading it and

validating her, it was awesome, and it went really well, and we had a great conversation. And by the end of it the mom was like, "I just want you to do really well" and the daughter's like "I just want you to be proud of me". And I come out of the room and there's a bit of a huddle and "How'd it go" because everyone knew this was a volatile person, or could be, right? And so when I came out they said, "What's happening? What's happening?" I said, "I'm just giving them some privacy. They're just kind of hugging it out and having a bit of a cry." So that was a really, really exciting moment. It was an interesting moment of passing and racism, but at the same time: "I'm going to meet you where you are and see where we can go from there." Because at that point it didn't matter, my blood quantum; it didn't matter that I was Métis. It mattered that we're on the same page, and we actually both want your - your daughters to have success.

There's an analogy that I often like to use. It's regardless of your race or your creed or sexual preference or any of those things. It's the invisible knapsack [backpack]. And it's that you never know what is inside someone else's invisible knapsack. I don't know if your relationship ended; I don't know if you've had a death in your family; maybe you didn't have breakfast this morning; maybe you can't actually afford food. Maybe you don't even have a place to live. I don't know your circumstances, and so regardless, it's interesting, because when you say that to me one of the first things that I think of is it's important for me - and I can't speak for all indigenous people - but hypothetically, if I were in this moment, one of the things that's important for me to remember is to have just as much compassion. Because there are a lot of people who have white privilege, but I did a project yesterday for National Housing Day, and there is a lot of white people who don't have homes either. There's a lot of white people who also struggle without privilege, and struggle for discrimination because of their - that they're homeless. And so I think it's always an important thing to remember that we're all doing our best; we're all struggling along on this journey, and everybody has their challenges, and yours might be - I guess to not compare. It's hard to not compare. I'm going through a situation right now where my relationship did end and I don't have a place to live, but I'm staying with friends and I'm very blessed, and there's no bedbugs and there's no violence and I'm not waking up to hypodermic needles in the hallway; that's not my reality. But that's the reality for a lot of people. And so it's to recognize that we each have struggles, and it's okay to have those struggles, but to - that we all have something that we're navigating or trying to overcome. And I think we just really need to have compassion with each other.

