

My life, so far

by Melanie Mark

L'auteure jette un regard en arrière sur sa vie de jeune femme des Premières Nations qui a grandi à Vancouver et les choix qu'elle a faits en regard de son passé et de son avenir.

I am 25 years old, of Nisga'a, Gitksan, Cree and Scottish decent, and come from the Eagle clan. I have four brothers, one sister, and a deceased brother. I was raised in Vancouver, B.C. and grew up in a single-parent home with my mother. My father deserted us when I was three. The men in my mother's life hung around long enough to use or abuse her and get her pregnant. As a result, I spent 16 years of my life raising my siblings, before leaving home.

I suppose my mother can best be described as an alcoholic and a fanatical woman who would often rage about the condition of the house. If it wasn't spotless, she would bitch and complain and/or beat the crap out of me for being lazy and ungrateful. Wetting the bed didn't help either. She would flip out. I recall one evening my mother ripped me off of the top of my bunk-bed by my hair, threw my pissed-on sheets in my face, and ordered me to wash them. I was not allowed to return to bed until my sheets were clean (I was five years old). I learned at a young age how to take a beating for hiding my sheets, amongst other things. I did however, stop wetting the bed when I was ten years old. Like most children of alcoholics, I learned how to cope with my mother's volatility.

At the age of five, my mother, her boyfriend, my little brother Wayne, and I lived in a basement suite in Vancouver's east side. She was still drinking heavily. One evening, when

the two girls who normally babysat were unavailable, she asked a teenage boy who lived upstairs to watch us. The babysitter took advantage of the opportunity to touch me sexually and made threats to hit me if I resisted his advances or told my mother. So I kept this secret to myself. A couple of weeks after the incident I stole a lighter that someone had left behind at one of my mother's parties, and lit my bed on fire. I remember telling my mother that there was a fire in my bedroom, but I did not explain until later in my life why I had lit that fire; I knew that I did not want to live in an environment where I was too vulnerable.

We then moved to a low-income housing complex, better known as the projects, right in the hood. By the time I was seven my mother had quit drinking and went back to school. She joined Alcoholics Anonymous and relied heavily on meetings and round-ups for her sobriety. I suppose this was the window in my childhood that was relatively normal. I always had a lot of friends and enjoyed sports, but maintained mediocre grades in school. Despite my love for my brothers and sister, I was resentful that I spent my childhood raising them. Although my mother compensated me by providing for my wants, she failed miserably to meet my needs. I would have done anything to have a mother who was interested in my well-being rather than in pacifying me with material objects.

The summer of 1986 infected my life. I was given the chance to travel across Canada and the U.S. with my good friend Jill, her stepbrother, her biological brother, and her stepfa-

ther. Considering the fact that I was a Native girl from the projects, this was a golden opportunity. The trip was scheduled to last for two months. When we reached Ontario my friend Jill decided she wanted to stay with her grandmother. I wanted to see Disneyland and visit the Grand Old Opera so I continued on. By the time we reached the Maritimes, Jill's stepfather began touching and fondling my body and subsequently had intercourse with me. As traumatized as I had been, I was more afraid than anything to tell my mother what was happening to me, especially while I was thousands of kilometers away from home. I did not know where to go. And he made sure every postcard and telephone call was monitored. Meanwhile the intercourse and the oral sex occurred every chance he had which was usually at each stop. It was not until we picked up Jill again that the abuse and exploitation ended.

The up-side to this time in my life

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was the fact that I could at least depend on my mother's sobriety. It took me three months to tell her and only after finding the courage through a friend to disclose. I was very upset and afraid. My mother wanted to kill Jill's stepfather for touching me. Once the police arrived, the interrogation began, with their 20 intrusive ques-

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tions, after which the rape squad arrived for further questioning. I was finally taken to the Children's Hospital. There, I was again questioned about my sexuality, required to provide details of the allegation, and physically examined. The doctor concluded that my hymen had been torn and the Vancouver City Police further investigated my allegations. However, with little evidence besides my statement and the medical examination, the crown council could not bring this to case to court. The court could not assume the expense of flying in witnesses from across the country. I maintained contact with the two detectives assigned to my file but never saw a day in court with the accused.

When I was 12 years old, my younger brother Wayne was killed in a bicycle accident. After enjoying a family picnic with my aunts and cousins, Wayne was hit by an eighteen-wheeler at a very busy intersection in

Vancouver. This loss affected the rest of my life as Wayne was the only person that I loved. I could not accept this reality and was very angry at the world for being so cruel.

Coping with the loss of my brother, a mother who had returned to the bottle, a rape that had not been properly addressed, and an overall insecurity with myself, I entered high school. Although, I survived my teenage years, like most teenagers, I struggled with my sexuality, had no support system, and few role models in place. I was kicked out of school for fighting with other girls. The fighting was a way to vent my anger. I had great difficulty with dating and relationships, partly because I had witnessed a mother with numerous boyfriends, but more importantly, my boundaries and trust had been violated at a young age. I became quite promiscuous because having sex meant that boys liked me. I also had a very low self-esteem. I became suicidal, hating my life and my bleak reality. I left home when I was 16 and, almost instantantly, my mother took a turn for the worse. She was introduced to cocaine by one of her many boyfriends and became heavily addicted. Afterwards, she became abusive towards my siblings and often abandoned them for drugs. The Ministry for Children and Families consequently apprehended my brothers and my sister was taken into her father's care. I moved in with two of my aunts and they were like the mothers I never had. I managed to graduate from high school with minimal grades but thrived as the captain of our girl's rugby team for grades eleven and twelve. I enrolled in college with the hope of becoming a physical education teacher. It didn't last though. I didn't think I was not cut out for school.

After a year of college, I ended up working as a waitress for minimum wage. But as the party life became dull, I started looking for a new job. I stumbled across a job as an Art Interpreter at the Vancouver International Airport for the well-known

Haida artist Bill Reid. My role was to answer travelers' questions about the Reid's artwork, the mythology, the design, costs, and the artist himself.

Now I have to make something very clear. I grew up fully aware that I was Native. I knew that I was Nisga'a, Gitksan, Cree and Scottish. My grandparents spoke the language and I grew up on the traditional foods, salmon, bannock, deer and Indian tacos. But I also knew that being an Indian was not a cool thing. People associated me with terms such as wagon-burner, chug, squaw, Lysol drinker, and welfare case. I learned to be ashamed to tell people that I was Native.

I was inspired by Bill Reid's work, not because I had any artistic ability, but because I was curious about the Native culture that was unknown to me. The more I learned about Native mythology and spirituality, the more intrigued I was to learn about my own history.

I decided to go back to school. I wanted to become a police officer and contribute to community development, so I enrolled at Native Education Centre, in partnership with Douglas College, as a Criminology student in 1997 and completed my studies with a Criminology diploma in 1999. During the course of my studies, I learned about the disproportionate number of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. I wanted practical experience so I began volunteering at the Youth Detention Centre and also with the Native Liaison Policing Society with the Vancouver City Police. In addition, I also worked as an Aboriginal summer student with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and gained some experience with the Native Courtworkers Counseling Association.

Through my work experiences, I found that the statistics on Aboriginal people are true and I wanted to take action. Clearly there was a reason for this disparity. Perhaps the

history of Aboriginal people in Canada and our forced assimilation, or the impact of residential schools contributed to the disease that has infected Aboriginal peoples in Canada. I am certain that capitalism, demographics, the *Indian Act*, the paternalism of western society, and ignorance have also had a negative impact on Aboriginal people in Canada. However, I am an optimist and believe that the cycle can only be broken but only if we are willing as a collective to address the tough issues, humble ourselves, and constructively assess them.

Currently, I am a coordinator for a National Aboriginal project with Save the Children Canada. Last year, I spent six months consulting with sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth across Canada. We presented our report titled *Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak Out about Sexual Exploitation* to the Canadian public at Parliament Hill last December. Launching *Sacred Lives* was an opportunity to increase the awareness of the Canadian public. The report chronicles the struggles that Aboriginal children and youth are faced with today. Whether or not we can relate to these issues, I have learned that we are all either a part of the solution or a part of the problem.

This job became a passion of mine, as I could fully relate to the issues that young people were encountering. Over the course of six months, I had the opportunity to speak to over 150 children and youth who had experienced sexual exploitation, or knew of friends or family that had been or are being sexually exploited. Some of these youth worked the streets of Prince George, B.C., others were abused by strangers, their fathers, or boyfriends. In any event, what these children and youth had experienced was sexual exploitation, whether for money, a place to stay, because they were forced to, because they had children or families to feed, or severe addictions that would numb the pain. For many of the youth much like

myself, I had issues with my boundaries. I had never witnessed a "healthy" relationship, and I did not have anyone to talk to about all of my shit, because I felt like nobody could relate. I was an angry resentful child and I hated the world for all of the injustices in my life. If only I was protected, not only by my mother but by society, from pedophiles that get their kicks from having sex with children. Like the popular New Zealand film, *Once We Were Warriors*, I felt like my warrior spirit was guiding me to help children and youth break the silence, to create an environment where children and youth can feel safe. We have a responsibility to ensure that these young people have a place to go or a person to call (that will listen and to some degree understand). I, like many of the youth I spoke with, agree it doesn't matter how many letters follow your name, if you have never experienced the violation that many of us have had, or the abuse (verbal, emotional, and or physical), how in the world can you truly understand our issues?

Assisting young people with their challenges has been difficult at times. Had I not let go of some of my baggage, I certainly would not be here today. I try to live by the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, "let it begin with me."

I vowed at a young age, like some of us do, that I would not be like my mother. I would not scream or beat my kids, or abandon them for a man. The reality is I do not have children or a man for that matter; nevertheless, I will at least attempt to break the cycle.

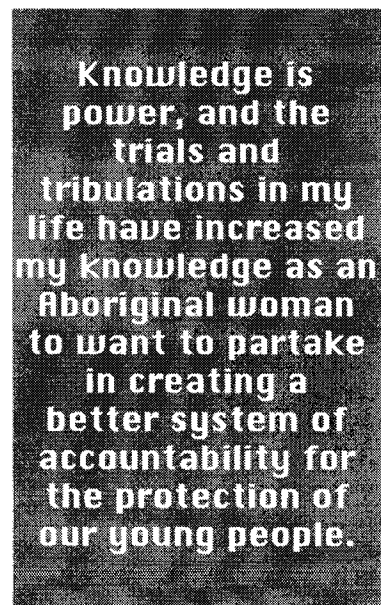
In my current position, my overall goal is to provide choices and opportunity for young Aboriginal people struggling with sexual exploitation. I hope that by revealing my life to young people, I am able to provide a better understanding to those who

feel like they are alone.

Please forgive me if I have portrayed my thoughts on life to be black and white. I do not want to be a victim anymore, or silenced because I know too much about this cruel world. Knowledge is power, and the trials and tribulations in my life have increased my knowledge as an Aboriginal woman to want to partake in creating a better system of accountability for the protection of our young people.

I have revealed my life for you in great length, not out of pity but out of awareness. I have met people that have assumed that I am lucky, or fortunate, or that I have it easy. Yes, now I am 25 years old with a rewarding job. But it took years of working through the sexual abuse and exploitation to be where I am today.

I am grateful to my parents for bringing me into this cruel world and I thank my mother for teaching me the things she could. My mother and I have a relatively good relationship. She understands that I will never forget what she has done, but I will forgive her, as she is the only mother I have. My father died from a heroin overdose when I was 22-years-old and my grandfather died the same year. I miss them both very much. I also maintain a very close relationship with my brothers and sister as



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they are still quite young and need all of the support and love they can get. I can't imagine living in a foster home without any contact with my family, regardless of how dysfunctional they are.

I believe our experiences make us who we are despite the grief they may have caused. Spiritually I know someone is watching over me and guiding me down my path. And I am certain that my brother Wayne, my father, grandfather, and grandmother—who recently died of cancer—are all a part of my spirit. Along with my extended family and friends who support my honesty and accept me for who I am.

Melanie Mark has a Criminology diploma and is actively raising awareness about sexual exploitation and its effects on youth, in her community.

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Emma K. Penner

Every time I opened Baba's apartment door the same wonderful smell drifted out. And I always knew what it was.

"Perogies!" I would scream and run into her kitchen. "This time can I help roll them Baba? I grew since last time. I know I did!"

Baba's perogie table was as familiar to me as the smell of the house. It was faded and thin and it dipped down in the middle; that's what made it a special perogie table. Each time I went to her house I asked my great-grandmother the same question, "How come your table sags in the middle?"

"Well, I have rolled perogies on that table for a long time," explained Baba. "I brought it from Slovakia, it's older than me!" At that point she would always laugh.

The only problem with the table was that it was too tall or I was too short, so I couldn't help Baba roll the perogies, something I had been dying to do forever.

"This is what we'll do," explained Baba. "We'll go to Simpson's Department Store and buy a perogie table just for you." I was ecstatic.

Once we arrived at Simpson's we headed straight for the furniture section. I pulled Baba's strong, callused hand all the way. Finally we found a little table that was just right for me. A few hours later we were back at Baba's, and I was ready to test out my new table. Baba gave me some dough and some potato filling. She didn't have to explain; I was sure I knew exactly how to roll the perogies and pinch the ends.

However, my perogies weren't turning out very well; they looked like balloons. I glanced over at Baba's perfect crescent shaped perogies. I knew what was wrong.

"Baba, I know why my perogies aren't working! My table doesn't sag. We need to fix it."

Together we carried the table to the basement and got out my great-grandfather's old tools. Baba and I sanded out the middle for an hour, until it was just right. We hauled the table back up the stairs and began rolling again. It was just me, Baba, and the perogies.

Emma K. Penner is 17, and a Grade 11 student at HumberSide Collegiate in Toronto. She is a musician and an avid hockey player.