

## Search

CONTINUED FROM A1

the shade of a leafy tree, ending their late-August work day. They're the descendants of residential school survivors working to search the properties of the Brantford institute and nearby chapel for potential unmarked graves of kids gone missing.

This work, Hill said, takes "mental, physical and spiritual strength." "It gives me hope for the coming generations because it takes a lot of strength to do this with commitment," she said.

Angelina Bomberry rolled a wheeled machine along the 10-metre axis of her freshly laid grid on the lawn adjacent to the Mohawk Chapel, expertly demonstrating a skill she's honed over the last two summers. On the other side of the nearby white picket fence, the rest of the youth team uses ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to search the terrestrial depths of the 238-year-old cemetery.

Observing the search for potential unmarked graves, a daunting task for many on this team of intergenerational survivors, isn't allowed, so Bomberry instead demonstrates in an area that's already been searched.

"We search every 0.25-metre increments, so that's approximately 40 lines on one axis," the 22-year-old said, describing the data collection process.

With the push of a button, jagged lines appeared on the machine's screen, showing information gathered from underground. But Bomberry and her team don't know what they're looking at. The data is collected and stored, she said, and later interpreted — a complex, evolving science.

From May through September, eight students searched the grounds of the Mohawk Chapel down the road from the school, which includes a cemetery with 123 known burials. Laying grids, scanning the ground using GPR, taking aerial images using drones, and collecting data from old photos, maps and other resources is part of the work at the chapel, which comprises 10 acres of land.

Bomberry is a team lead for the Youth Supporting Survivors Student Program, which recently wrapped its second summer. Eight students elected to spend their summers supporting the Survivors' Secretariat in its mission to "uncover, document and share the truth" about what happened at the Brantford residential school that operated for more than 140 years.

After the first summer, the team had data from more than 200 grids, an estimated one per cent of the Mohawk Institute grounds. Then



**Above:** Angelina Bomberry, team lead with the Youth Supporting Survivors Summer Student Program, has just completed her second summer using ground-penetrating radar to look for unmarked graves. **Left:** Bomberry reviews the map of searched grids.

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came the task of figuring out how to store it, a project for the winter months when GPR is less effective. As of late September, about two per cent of the 600 acres of grounds had been searched.

Six Nations is one of several communities across the country searching residential school grounds, but the youth program is the first of its kind, said secretariat lead Laura Arndt.

"What we really wanted ... is for the young people to be part of the

community's work and conversation, not just a summer job," she said.

Built into the summer program is cultural and legacy education, including a wampum belt workshop and conversations with survivors, human rights monitor and police involved in the search.

A typical day starts with a circle to "check in on each other," Bomberry said. The compassionate nature of the job is one of the things she appreciates.

"We're all students. We're all intergenerational survivors, so we've had family members that have went to the Mohawk Institute," said Bomberry, who recently graduated from McMaster University's Indigenous studies and anthropology program.

It wasn't until high school Bomberry began to learn details about the residential school her father and other family members attended. She took on this job to "find out the truth for my community members, my family, but also for the children who aren't here today."

"It's for them," she said. "I kind of just focus on that, not how hot I am; how sweaty, how tired I am."

Long days on foot and in the sun can be gruelling, she admits. But it's the rain that impedes the work.

The unpredictable summer weather slowed progress, Arndt said, adding that a saturated ground can mean inaccurate results.

Plans to search the grounds, now managed by the Woodland Cultural Centre, were announced in 2021 after the creation of the Survivors' Secretariat. A multi-jurisdictional task force comprising three police services and representatives from the province's death investigation system was created, and a criminal investigation into deaths and missing children was launched.

Arndt said the police work is winding down, but there's a long road ahead.

"Some of the great minds in this country who are leading the archeological work have reminded everybody time and time again that it could take somewhere between 10 and 20 years to really understand what the story is that the ground is telling us," she said.

While they wait for technology to catch up, the group is using available records, documents and photos — with millions more set to be released to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation — to piece together the stories of the children who lived and died at the residential school.

"Neither can exist without the other," she said. "We get to know the children through the records and the documents. We know how old they are, we know when they came to the school, we might see some reports with their names in them. And then if they stop being in the records, we can start asking questions."

Government funding of about \$10 million over three years — short of the \$28-million ask, she said — has kept them afloat, but the group says it could take a decade or more.

"If we're going to get to the truth, they're going to have to fund the work," Arndt said.

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# National Day for TRUTH and RECONCILIATION

September 30, 2023



## Truth and Reconciliation Day 2023

September 30 will mark the annual National Truth and Reconciliation Day in Canada. Here's the history behind it and why it's important to remember and reflect on this day.

On Sept 30, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation — a federal holiday first recognized in 2021, in response to a call to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) — Canada reflects on the lasting legacy of residential schools and honours the survivors, their families and the children who never returned home.

The first church-run residential school opened in Brantford, Ont., in 1831. In the 1880s, the federal government officially began funding residential schools across Canada. In 1920, the Indian Act was amended to make attendance compulsory for Treaty-status children between the ages of seven and 15. The schools operated for more than 150 years. Most closed in the 1970s, though the last federally run school closed its doors in 1996.

During this time, approximately 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation children were separated from their families and communities to live at

the residential schools, where their culture and language were stripped from them through forced assimilation.

Thousands of Indigenous children died in residential schools from abuse or neglect, or went missing and never returned home. The exact number is still unknown, as many of the schools did not keep adequate records of student deaths, and did not send the remains back to their home communities. A National Student Memorial Register of deceased or missing residential school students, searchable by name or school, can be accessed at [nctr.ca/memorial](http://nctr.ca/memorial).

Sources: National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation ([nctr.ca](http://nctr.ca)); *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Volume 4; Government of Canada, "National Day for Truth and Reconciliation" ([canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/national-day-truth-reconciliation.html](http://canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/national-day-truth-reconciliation.html)); Orange Shirt Society ([orangeshirtday.org](http://orangeshirtday.org)).

### ORANGE SHIRT DAY

Orange Shirt Day also falls on Sept. 30. It is an Indigenous-led grassroots commemorative day to raise awareness about the intergenerational impacts of the residential school system, because the effects of the harm that was done continue to this day.

The movement is inspired by a story told by Phyllis Webstad, a residential school survivor. At age six, she was sent to St. Joseph's Mission Residential School in B.C. On the day she arrived, excited to attend a new school, she wore a bright orange shirt, but her clothing was confiscated and she was never allowed to wear it again. The colour orange now symbolizes the loss of freedom and the stripping of identity experienced by Indigenous children over generations — because Every Child Matters.

By wearing an orange shirt on Sept. 30, Canadians can show their support for survivors and commit to learning about a dark part of our history in the spirit of reconciliation. Visit [orangeshirtday.org](http://orangeshirtday.org) to learn more, and to search for community events in your area.

**A National Residential School Crisis Line has been set up to provide support to residential school survivors. It can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at 1-866-925-4419. Indigenous people across Canada can also call the Hope for Wellness Help Line at 1-855-242-3310 for counselling and crisis intervention.**

