

LawCast BC: A conversation with Hank Adam

Vinnie Yuen:

Welcome to LawCast BC, a podcast produced by the Law Society of British Columbia. The Law Society regulates lawyers in BC. Our mandate is to protect the public. I'm Vinnie Yuen, host and producer.

Ahead of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, we are honored to speak with Hank Adam, a speaker with the Orange Shirt Society. The Orange Shirt Society was formed in 2015 to create awareness of intergenerational impacts of Residential Schools on the individual, family and community, to support reconciliation and to promote the truth that every child matters. Hank is here to share his story with us and to raise awareness on the effects of Residential Schools and the legacy they have left behind. This episode contains references to incidents of violence. Please take care when listening. If you are a Residential School survivor or a family member of a Residential School survivor and you need support, please call 866-925-4419 for emotional crisis referral services and other information on health supports.

Hank is from Stwecem'c/Xget'tem Nation in the Cariboo Region of British Columbia. Hank considers himself an intergenerational survivor as both his father and mother attended St. Joseph's Mission Residential School in Williams Lake. He also went to the St. Joseph's Mission for about two months in 1977 and then was moved to a boarding home. He has been on his own since he was 13. Hank later returned to his home community in 1996 and applied for a self-government coordinator position to facilitate the BC Treaty Process. He later ran for Chief and was elected in 2002. Assisting his community move toward independence through treaty negotiations and other avenues has been his passion for the last 28 years. Please join me in listening to Hank's story.

Thank you so much for joining us today Hank and we really appreciate your time. Can we start by if you could share a little bit about yourself and your family?

Hank Adam:

Sure. [Greeting in his language], Hank Adam, [speaks in his language]. Good morning everyone, I'm Hank Adams. I'm from Canoe Creek Dog Creek. Stwecem'c is Canoe Creek and

Xget'tem is Dog Creek so with the two communities and they're, belong to one band. At one time they were separated but now they're, they're one, they've amalgamated probably in the 30s or something like that. My grandfather was, on my dad's side, is Pascal Adams and Tillie Louie and then on my mother's side there's Willie Billy. My grandmother would be Mary Bill. I do have six children, I have five boys and one girl and currently I have 11, oh no, 12 grandchildren and one more on the way. My, my daughter got cancer when she was, in 2015. She had osteosarcoma, the bone cancer, and we never thought she would ever have kids with all the chemo she went through. Anyway, they were able, she had two, two girls and she's having another one now so kind of a miracle for us 'cause we, we never thought she would ever have children but that's me and my, my family. We grew up in this area in the Williams Lake area, Dog Creek, Canoe Creek and Kamloops, that's where most of my family lives, my sisters and my brothers live there. I have three brothers and three sisters and I'm right about the middle and all my brothers and sisters are living.

Vinnie Yuen:

And what made you decide to become an Orange Shirt Society speaker and to share about the Residential School experience?

Hank Adam:

Sometimes it's difficult to talk about you know what, what I've been through in my life but you know I think it's important. You know I've always thought about it, you know you never see any of our, our, the real history like taught in schools and so on. A lot of non-native people that I meet when I talk to them and we talk about our stories, they, they most of them don't really have an understanding of you know the Residential School era and what, what happened after you know the Residential School and so on so I think it's just the awareness that you know for myself you know along with Phyllis and a bunch of other people are doing is getting out there and talking about it. And I think it's important that we, that we do this type of work.

Vinnie Yuen:

Can you tell us a little bit more about the impact that that's made in the community including the younger generations, your, the impact on people like your children and your grandchildren when you share you and your family's experiences?

Hank Adam:

Well both my mom and my dad went to the Residential School. My dad, I think he said, I can recall that he said he went there until he was about Grade 3 and then he just kept running away. And then we have like a hay meadow where they, our family would cut hay in the summer but it's isolated and you only can get there if you know, if you know the route. And so that's where my grandmother and my grandfather hid my, hid my dad so he didn't have to go back.

And my mom was there and my mom's seen some pretty horrific things there. For example, like she said that some of the children, or some of the older girls would go missing for months on end. I guess what had happened was that the, the priests and the brothers would, would get them pregnant and then they would hide them until they had their babies. That's like my mom's story.

And, and then for me, like watching my dad over the years, like my dad is a, a violent person and so my dad was always that way, like he was always in and out of jail, like he, at some points you know when we moved from, from the res, from Canoe Creek to 70 Mile House, which is a, a non-native community, we thought it would stop but it just followed us because it was my dad you know growing up with that and seeing that, like I said I would never be like that but I did become like that because that's all I've, all I'd seen growing up. You know that's not everything, you know there was, there was some good thing that happened you know out of that but for the most part you know my sisters were the same, you know we all grew up in it. We, whenever there was drinking, my sisters or my mom would take us and hide us in the bush and take some blankets and stuff and we'd stay there because we knew that there was gonna be fighting. I believe that's you know where a lot of it stems from is you know the impacts from the residential school.

You know I was on my own when I was 13 and you know obviously there was a lot of dysfunction that came with it. I ended up in prison and using alcohol and drugs and so on and so forth and a lot of people knew, like my family over the years, and, and you know how my dad was and so on. The community in Canoe Creek in those days were, were pretty dangerous because there was a lot of violence. And then over the years, you know when I got into trouble

and when mother passed away and so on, I decided you know that I would change my life because my mother was always there for me.

And people seen that as well, you know when I moved, finally moved back to the community in 1996 and so on, I was there to do some work and then, and then I applied for a different position in the treaty process and then from there people seen that I had you know some skills and so on and knew that what I was talking about was true so they, some prominent family members, some heads of families approached me and asked me if I would run for Chief and so on so I did so you know that really shows that you know that people seen the change in myself because I became a violent person after a while as well, you know I ended up in jail, I, and people knew about those things you know and knew my past but when they seen the change in me over the years and electing me as Chief you know that big testament to the, to the change and to people's views about me and so on, so I think that's a significant event in our, in my life and you know our community's life to you know to see some of the change in people such as myself.

Vinnie Yuen:

You mentioned that your, when your mother passed away that was a bit of a turning point for you. What was your process through that?

Hank Adam:

Well my mother, like I mentioned, you know she was the, she was the one always there for me and I got in trouble a lot. I was like in and out of jail all the time, I was robbing people, you know because I was on my own since I was 13 so we, we stole to eat and so on and to survive and we slept in old houses, in old cars and all of that stuff. So I did go home and see my mom at, you know at times, you know like you know go visit her and so on. Whenever I got in trouble, she would be come here, go in the room, we have to go talk. She would really just me, you know give me the same speech pretty much every time. It was always repetitive and it was about how will I get my life together, what I needed to do, you know like quit drinking and so on, you know those types of things my mom would say. And so when she passed away in 1985 I figured you know that I would honour my mom's wishes by trying to better myself and quit drinking and so on.

Right around that time, I was, you know I kept trying to get my education, I finally got my Grade 10 right about that time and then I applied for the professional training in Kamloops and I was accepted like a few months after my mom passed away. But there was other things too that happened while I was in prison. The last time I was in prison, there was prison riot and so you know that was the last time I went to jail because I didn't want that, that type of a lifestyle in seeing the violence that came out of there. And right around that time, my son was probably about two, two years old and I didn't want anything, no letters, nothing sent to me while I was there but sister sent me a picture of my son with a chunk of bologna on his head and all of that helped you know, helped me change. But I think one of the important things is that you know it's, everybody in this life needs somebody there for them, you know to give them guidance or direction or even just to be there for them, to listen to them. And you know I certainly wouldn't be here right now if you know if it wasn't for my mom.

Vinnie Yuen:

Thank you for sharing that, yeah, it sounds like she was a really constant source of care and love in your life. I'm gonna sort of switch gears a little bit and just ask about Orange Shirt Day. We know that Orange Shirt Day began as a grassroots effort by Phyllis, Phyllis Webstad, in your community in your hometown of Williams Lake and that was in 2013. And then the government finally established the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation years later as a national stat holiday and when that finally happened, what did it mean for you and your community there?

Hank Adam:

For our community there was, we would have some speakers there from the Residential School, you know the ones that were willing to get up and speak, and also like really a day for prayer and you know drumming. Some of our, some of our people that were organizing would do tobacco ties for, and we would have a fire and people would come up and say a prayer and say, say the names out loud of the ones that they've lost that have, or survivors and then throw their tobacco ties into the fire. I think it's the, it's about sort of acknowledging our past and telling our truth and that being recognized, you know this whole idea about reconciliation. And so for our community, I think you know we've, over the years we've been really wanting to hear our voices. We want, we want people to understand that you know why this you know this dysfunction in

the communities and we are growing and so on and that there needs to be you know the, you know the general public out there needs to, needs to understand you know our past and to reconcile that as well. And that's, it's important you know for us you know in terms of moving ahead. There's a lot more understanding and I think it's gonna bring a lot more understanding to, to our history and it's really a shared history as well and we just have to come to terms with it as people living in this province, in this country.

In the past, like well, well in the near past you know there, in our community like even you know people that didn't go to the Residential School, you know it used to always like bother me that you know our own members would say well you know those guys can just get over it you know because there was a lot of community members that went for like eight, 10 years, and some of them are broken right, and they haven't, they didn't start their healing processes and so on and a lot of drinking and alcoholism so a lot of you know our members that didn't go to the Residential School would just say well you know they just need to get over it and they need to just get on with life and just put all of that behind them because it's not here right now. And September 30th you know is, is a day for us you know to, to remember and to share our stories and really to remember where we came from and more importantly where we're going.

Vinnie Yuen:

So as the Law Society, we regulate lawyers and just knowing that lawyers and legal professionals they, they do work with Indigenous people, do you have any advice that you would share with them on advancing truth and reconciliation?

Hank Adam:

Cultural awareness I think is really important. You know I think it's important that they, that they are, you know if they're representing our, our Secwépemc people, they really need to understand our cultures because our cultures are quite different. And sometimes there's, at least in Secwépemc like if you're going to speak to an elder or something or you're trying to get information from an elder, you know there's protocols that you can't just approach and start talking to them. You know there is a protocol in place when you, when you're talking about certain things.

So I think it's really important that they have you know those understandings and that they represent our people knowing, knowing our history, you know the impacts of Residential School, you know some of the fallout. Like you know, for example, my story, you know there's a lot of people like me out there, you know that have, you know that have been on their own since they were young and so you know they, you know we grew up and we grew up with a lot of different values and so on and a lot of different understandings of our past as well. Of course [inaudible 18:13] respect some of us that carry a lot of hatred and carry a lot of fear as well, you know I think there needs to be a different approach.

Also I think speaking in laymen's terms obviously is, is important. You don't just come out you know throwing a hundred dollar words around the room and so on when you're talking to say an elder or some of the younger people who you know don't really understand you know some, some of the, some of the jargon or acronyms that are being thrown forward. So you know I think if you have taken some of the cultural sensitivity programs out there then you would you know understand that respect and how you, how you speak to elders and so on.

Vinnie Yuen:

I completely agree with you. I think that respect is so important and being open to learning the history and customs of that community. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and we really appreciate your time.

Thank you for listening. For resources on truth and reconciliation, please visit the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation's website at nctr.ca.