

# Orange Shirt Day: Remembering Indigenous children traumatized in residential schools





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Some Native American children in Lake Shore schools learn at home about the tragedies wrought at residential schools, but others know nothing of the institutions where thousands of Indigenous children were stripped of their heritage.

“Some of it is so traumatic that grandparents don’t want to talk about it,” said Jordan Cooke, who teaches the Seneca language at Lake Shore.

Lake Shore is among several districts in the region, most with sizable Indigenous populations, observing Orange Shirt Day, a day set aside to remember and recognize families and communities affected by Indigenous residential or boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries.

*Students at John T. Waugh elementary learn about Orange Shirt Day.*

The name comes from the experiences of Phyllis Websted of Canada, and symbolizes the motto that “every child matters.”

When she was 6 years old in 1973, Websted was excited to be going to a First Nations school.

She picked out a shiny orange shirt and her grandmother bought it for her. But when she went to the school, the staff stripped her and took away her clothes – including the orange shirt – alienating her and other children from their language, culture and families. Thousands of children died at the residential schools in the U.S. and Canada.

“The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn’t matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared,” Websted writes on [orangeshirtday.org](http://orangeshirtday.org).

“Many of our native students don’t even realize the effects boarding and residential schools had on our family units and our cultural longevity,” Cooke said. “They’re dealing with historical intergenerational trauma that they didn’t even realize that they had.”

Canada in 2021 recognized Sept. 30 as the national day for truth and reconciliation. Several Western New York schools are observing it this week and next week, including the Buffalo, Gowanda and Niagara-Wheatfield districts.

Akron High School students read Websted’s book to elementary students, and middle and high school students watched a video with local experts on residential schools. A contest was held last year to design orange T-shirts that raise awareness.

Elementary children at Lake Shore on Thursday stuck orange pinwheels in the ground, while older students read from Websted’s book and learned about the nearby Thomas Indian School in Irving, on the Seneca Cattaraugus Territory in Irving. The school closed in the mid-1950s.

Helping children learn the past often empowers them, Cooke said.

“We have high school students and college students who may have had parents who went there, and they’re trying to figure out why they have certain attitudes about institutional learning that were ingrained at home,” Cooke said.

Observing Orange Shirt Day is helpful not only for Indigenous students. It gives their non-Native peers insight. Knowing there was a school nearby also brings the issue closer to home.

“There’s some shock there, too,” said Jacinta Garcia of Native American Services at Lake Shore. “It helps create empathy, a better peer relationship, if these communities can start to understand each other a little bit better.”