



Marlene Thomas, Lennox Island First Nation

My name is Marlene Thomas, I was born May 2, 1954, at Lennox Island, Prince Edward Island. I am a Mi'kmaq grandmother, a survivor of Residential School and a proud wife and mother. I am married to Joe Thomas, and together we have four children: Irene, Christopher, Robert, and Joseph, and four stepchildren: Patsy, Lennie, Paula, and Randy, as well as oodles of grandchildren.

My mother, Mary Sapier, was also a Residential School survivor. She never spoke about the impacts of the IRS, but I experienced the effects, such as abandonment and loss of love and caring. When I was born, my mother didn't know how to care for me and left me to be raised by people in different homes. I was run over by a tractor when I was 11 months old; my leg was badly broken, and I had to have surgery. After I was discharged from the hospital I was taken to live with my adoptive mother, Mary Isabelle.

Mom had to go to the United States for surgery on both her legs, so she asked if I wanted to go to the IRS while she was away getting help and recovering from surgery. I said yes because I thought of it as an adventure. I was excited to go because I would be with my best friends, sisters Christine and Rosie Labobe. We were there for two years, from 1965-1967. This was the first time we left Lennox Island. We didn't have any fear and went with the Indian Agent willingly, who drove us from PEI to Shubenacadie, NS. When we got there, the older girls told us not to speak Mi'kmaq so we wouldn't get beaten by the nuns. It was a total culture shock. We were mistreated daily in our institutional living and learned to clean and practice the Catholic religion. I didn't even know my brother was there at the same time until the year was over. I remember when Christine and Rosie were told that they were going home for the funeral of their uncle Roger who had been murdered. Roger was dating my mom at the time and used to refer to me as his daughter. The girls tried to get permission for me to go home with them, but I was not allowed. When they came back, they weren't my friends anymore. I was so mad at them for leaving me.

In 1967, the IRS closed for good and I was sent home to live with my mom. When I got home, I was treated like an outsider, alienated in my own community. A few months later, I was hit by a truck and was hospitalized for three months. I had a broken kneecap that required many surgeries and months of physiotherapy before I healed and was able to walk again. My teenage years were filled with the pain of loss and anger and I rebelled by breaking all the rules; drinking and partying, I did not care.

I became a single mom at the age of 15 and had no idea how to be a parent or raise a child. I lost my daughter to the Child Welfare System; she was adopted through the

Catholic Welfare Service when she was one year old. I had a second child at 16 and she was adopted from the hospital soon after she was born.

Sister Dean, from the Catholic Welfare Service, came to the hospital to get my babies. She asked for my son when he was born, even though I told her I was married and had decided to keep the baby. I think this agency participated in the 60's scoop; that there was a market for babies to fill Italian Catholic homes. I told Sister Dean that I wanted to meet my daughter, Nicole when she turned 19 if she wanted to meet me. She did want to meet me and requested the reunion, but Sister Dean interfered by telling us both that the other was not ready to meet. I continued my search for her until we finally found each other. We have a great relationship now and even invited Sister Dean to meet with us so we could confront her about lying to us.

I left Lennox Island, at the age of 17, and moved to South Boston, Massachusetts. I had Native friends there and was able to find a factory job. I continued to drink and be the life of the party but found myself still angry and trying to find acceptance and love in my life.

At 19, I fell for a man who I thought was the nicest guy, when he wasn't drinking. I was pregnant with my third daughter when I found out how abusive he could be and that he was an alcoholic. When my stepdad passed away, I went home to Lennox Island for his funeral and decided not to return to Boston because I wanted to have my baby at home. After my daughter Irene was born, my boyfriend came to Lennox Island to bring us back to Boston, promising to quit drinking and change his ways, but the drinking and violence soon continued. I found the strength to leave him and moved home to raise my daughter alone. I took Irene to meet with her family in Boston every year and she had a good relationship with her grandmother, who loved her.

I was 25 when I met my love, Joe Thomas, who treated me with respect from day one. He has always been there for me and supports me in whatever I want to do. He accepted my daughter, Irene as his own. Joe is a survivor of the IRS too. It was at this time that I went on my healing journey to Winnipeg for the Returning to Spirit program, which helped me deal with my past and to learn to forgive and heal. When I came back home, I was ready to settle down, so Joe and I married when I was 26. I have love and our family, and I have happiness in my life.

In the early '90s, I joined the board of directors for the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School Survivors Association (SIRSSA). The work of SIRSSA resulted in the class action lawsuit and the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. I volunteered with Nora Bernard and the group of survivors, who were also volunteers, to help IRS survivors apply for compensation. We helped them through the adjudication process for further compensation for IRS trauma. Sometimes we encountered the pain and rage of survivors who were frustrated by this process. SIRSSA understood the need for



gatherings to help survivors recollect and share their experiences, stories, and life journeys, as well as their growth during the healing process. We were able to facilitate gatherings through donations and grants from the United Church Healing Fund, and we even passed the hat at meetings to pay for phone bills. We were determined to not give up until we had an apology and won our case for the Settlement Agreement. SIRSSA closed its doors after the tragic death of Nora Bernard and we were all deeply impacted by her loss.

Joe and I are both survivors of the IRS and we raised our children, including my stepson Lenny, together. My stepchildren had challenges with the acceptance of divorce and remarriage, and our children experienced the intergenerational impacts of Residential School. When my girls were old enough to understand, I answered their questions about our IRS experiences and told them it affected our parenting, but it wasn't their fault. We have healed and love our family and want the best life for them. The healing programs and gatherings we attended helped us to heal from IRS experiences, our childhoods, and other life experiences. I wish our families could have had the opportunity to attend healing programs and meet with survivors and descendants and experience healing for their children and grandchildren too. We need these programs and services and likely will for several generations to help us to heal.

Canada's apology to the Survivors and families rang hollow to me as I didn't feel the sincerity and truth in those words. We, as Indigenous Peoples in Canada, have not seen reconciliation and remedy in the actions of Canada towards Survivors and our Nations. My friend, Charlotte Morris was teaching about the IRS Legacy in the schools in PEI and she referred me to teach as well. I think it is an honor to be asked to come into the schools to help educate a new generation of children about Mi'kmaq history, the legacy of the Residential School, and the resiliency and courage of the survivors.

Recently, I learned how precious life is after I had a heart attack. I must take good care of myself. I had to make peace with my past and have gratitude for my blessings and forgiveness for those who harmed me and for myself for harms I caused. The best advice I can give to others is that you will have a better life if you can learn to let go, let live and forgive. Forgiveness has been the hardest lesson, but the most valuable to me. I know from experience that hanging onto negative things will steal your happiness and make you sick. So, let go, let live and forgive.
Wela'lin.

