Seeking justice for experimental Eskimos

With no resolution in sight 10 years after lawsuit launched, lawyer worries about looming federal election

There was a time when Jeanne Mike faced a lifetime sentence of loss and longing, a sentence that began when she was removed from her family home in Pangnirtung at age seven.

Mike's braids were shorn and she became one of seven known Inuit children who were collected into a federal government program called The Eskimo Experiment. The program was designed to determine whether Inuit children could be successfully relocated from their Northern homes into southern cultures and societies located throughout Canada.

by Michele LeTourneau

Northern News Services

Panniqtuuq/Pangnirtung

In 1965 Sarah Silou of Baker Lake was sent to Edmonton, Alta., and in 1966 Jeanne Mike, Leesee Komoartok and Rosie Joamie of Pangnirtung were sent to Petite Riviere, Nova Scotia.

The girls were relocated to foster homes as part of the same federal government program that plucked three 12-year-old boys – Peter Ittinuar, Zebedee Nungak and Eric Tagoona – from Inuit communities in 1962 and 1963 and placed them in foster homes in Ottawa to attend school there.

The program was called The Eskimo Experiment.

"Three of us (girls) were sent to Nova Scotia, but we were much younger than the boys were. I was seven. The other two were eight," said Mike.

More than fifty years later, the federal government has yet to provide answers – or restitution – for tearing these children from their homes.

"The most important questions I have are for what reason was I separ-

THE ESKIMO

Part One of a Two-Part Series

ated from family and community, and what did the federal government gain by sending us south for school," she said.

The group has been fighting the federal government in court for 10 years. Lawyer Steven Cooper, who for almost 30 years has acted for people who have been "the victims of colonial thinking and racist policies," represents all seven in two claims filed at the Nunavut Court of Justice in January 2008.

Their case is one of several examples of systematic assimilation efforts – including residential schools, Indian hospitals, the Sixties Scoop – that lasted from a century to several decades.

"They were all part of the same colonial thinking. These are savages, we are the superior culture. We are going to train them to be more like us, and less like them.' They did it ÈG LΔÞ, Þ&G (dÞSÞ<15 1966-Γ, ΛίΓΥΓ ΡΛΗΡΕΡΥΠΈΣΓ ΖΕ «ΔΡΈΓΘΑΕΝΠΈΣΙ «ΦΘΡΊΓ U&LN) 1660 166-3626 ΔΕΚΑ ΔΦΠΟΡΘΕΙΕΊ ΔΑ ΤΟ ΔΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΕΊ ΑΝ ΤΟ ΔΑ ΤΟ ΔΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΕΊ ΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΕΊ ΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΕΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΕΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΙΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΙΙΑΝ ΤΟ ΜΕΝΟΡΘΕΙΙΙ

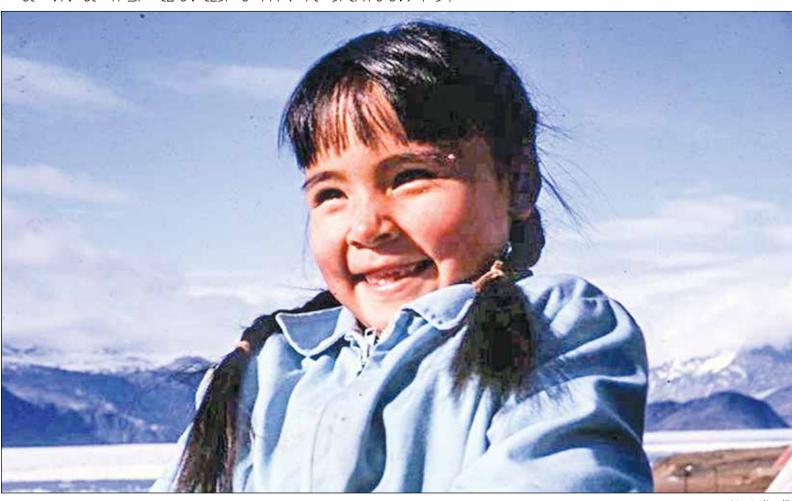


photo courtesy of Jeanne M

Jeanne Mike, seen here in 1966, the year before her braids were shorn and the federal government decided to move her from Pangnirtung to Nova Scotia as part of a program called The Eskimo Experiment. Seven Inuit children were taken, without permission, from their families, their culture and language – everything they knew. Their legal claims are 10 years old, and there's no resolution in sight.

through a concerted series of steps, whether it was the residential school system, whether it was by remov-

ing the children from their home and their culture and placing them around the world, whether it was to subject them to segregated hospi-

tals ... it all follows the same theme – which is 'we know what's best for them," he said.

The name of this particular program of assimilation, The Eskimo Experiment, is the most telling, he says.

"This was an experiment with children," he said. "By starting with children, our government chose consciously, in my view, to take advantage of their vulnerability and malleability without having a clue, possibly not even caring, about the consequences."

When claims for the seven were filed, the Conservative government in power threatened to quash them, insisting too much time had passed. Cooper and his clients kept their

heads down until about a year-and-a-half ago, when a change in govern-

ment suggested a change in policy.

The Truth and Reconciliation
Commission's call to action 26 states:
"We call upon the federal, provincial,
and territorial governments to review
and amend their respective statutes
of limitations to ensure that they
conform to the principle that governments and other entities cannot rely
on limitation defences to defend legal
actions of historical abuse brought by
Aboriginal people."

The Attorney General of Canada is the defendant in both claims. The Department of Justice forwarded questions from *Nunavut News* to the new Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs (CIRNA).

Citing the "fundamental shift in the relationship between the Crown and Inuit," spokesperson Stephanie Palma stated via e-mail that "finding a new way forward to resolve litigation in a compassionate, respectful and fair manner is key to advancing reconciliation with Inuit. It is an important path to renewing the Inuit-Crown relationship, based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership."

Palma added, "The government will work with plaintiffs, their counsel and other parties to negotiate settlements to include compensation as well as investments in healing, commemoration, wellness, language and culture initiatives. Our goal is to work with survivors to bring healing, closure and resolution to this dark chapter in our shared history."

While Cooper says the federal government deserves full credit for implementing a complete change of approach to historical injustices on large claims, he notes that's not the case with the smaller claims.

"The Experimental Eskimos claim is almost as old as the Newfoundland and Labrador residential School claim – 2007 versus 2008 – and much, much older than the Sixties Scoop, which was only commenced last year, yet we have difficulty getting the feds to pay attention to it," he said.

Cooper is concerned with a federal election on the horizon.

"Action in this case must equate to coming to the negotiation table with

the settlement mandate. These seven plaintiffs have a right to have their matter resolved in accordance with the government's repeated protestations that they are all about reconciliation and addressing historical wrongs. We're waiting."

Mike says she's been "waiting and waiting and waiting."

"Here we are. I'm 59. Fifty years later and I have no more information than I had before. None of us are getting any younger. In fact, I think one of the girls that had been down is older than me and she's been sick."

The claim seeks \$250,000 for each of the seven for breach of fiduciary duty and the corresponding negative effects and \$100,000 in punitive, aggravated, or exemplary damages for the intentional loss of Inuit culture, plus legal costs.

But Mike says she will consider the legal claim successful as closure "if it includes all documents pertaining to being sent to Nova Scotia."

Yet, Mike feels some fear about what might be found in government files

"Maybe it's something I won't be able to handle."

'I am named Appalialuk'

Healing for Jeanne Mike comes 50 years after The Eskimo Experiment

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by Michele LeTourneau
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For many years, Jeanne Mike believed her parents agreed to send her away from home to Petite Riviere, Nova Scotia in 1966.

"How could you let me go?" she wanted to know.

But as she learned from her father's testimony at a 2012 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) subhearing in Pangnirtung, her parents were rendered powerless in the face of racist government policies.

"Dad talked about never being asked permission, never giving permission, either verbally or written," said Mike.

"Back at that time, you couldn't say anything. You couldn't say no. When the Qallunaat came and said, 'OK, Jeanne is going,' you had no say. There was no denying. That's how helpless they felt back then."

Just as suddenly as she was taken away, Mike was returned to her community a few years later, assimilation well underway.

"We went back to Pangnirtung and we had no friends. We were missing our friends and longing to go back to Petite Riviere," said Mike.

The changes in the young girl took a toll on her family.

"My dad told me that when I returned home, I couldn't speak Inuktitut. I couldn't eat

country food. I have no idea how they managed to feed me," said Mike.

The young child no longer fit in with the other children in the community.

"They cut my hair. Girls back then never had short hair. We always wore them in braids. Quite often I would get bullied. I would be made fun of. 'Oh, you're a Qallunaat. You're not Inuk," Mike recalls, adding her brothers, a few of her male cousins and her older sister Eena were protective of her, and instrumental in her slow reintegration.

She also recalls her parents' embarrassment. As an English speaker, she could address Qallunaat.

"My parents would often be embarrassed of me to speak to white people in a challenging or talking-back way," she said.

"It must have been a difficult time for all of my family."

Mike's lawyer Stephen Cooper represents all seven of the Inuit taken from their communities by this program, The Eskimo Experiment. The two unsettled legal claims, filed in the Nunavut Court of Justice in 2008, speak to the experiences of Peter Ittinuar, Zebedee Nungak and Eric Tagoona

– 12-year-old boys sent to Ottawa in the 1960s – as well as Mike, Leesee Komoartok and Rosie Joamie, who were sent to Petite Riviere together, and Baker Lake's Sarah Silou,

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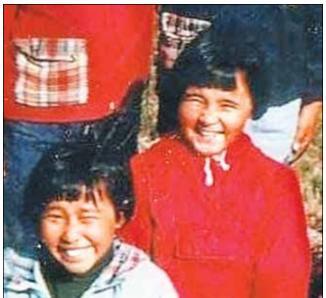


photo courtesy of Jeanne Mike

Seven young Inuit were picked for assimilation and schooling in the south, including Pangnirtung girls Jeanne Mike, 7, in red, and Rosie Joamie, 8, who were sent to Petite Riviere, Nova Scotia in 1966.

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photo courtesy of Jeanne Mike

Jeanne Mike, second from left, is seen here with Ilisaqsivik facilitator Ragilee Piungittuq, chairperson Joavee Etooangat and executive director Jakob Gearheard after her recent certification as a counselor with the culturally tailored counseling program Our Life's Journey in Clyde River.

who was sent to Edmonton.

"I'm very child-focused, principally, because they're the people who hire me," said Cooper, who has represented many Indigenous children captured by federal assimilation policies for almost 30 years.

"But, from a sociological perspective, the parents may have suffered even more than the children."

These days, Mike prides herself on being able to put on a Qallunaat hat.

"I can sit there and say, 'You want to play hardball with me, I have no problem with that."

Breaking through the pain

Mike says she doesn't know why her family, which includes 11 siblings, never spoke about her removal and return. But once her father testified, that silence started to ease a bit. Last year her brother Johnny Mike talked with her about those years.

"He said, 'You know, the atmosphere changed at home once you left.' And he said it never returned. He said, 'It never felt the same again even after you came back.' So there was a huge loss in the family which even my siblings felt and was never regained," said Mike.

As an adult, Mike initially worked in finance and administration, but soon turned her attention to healing.

"I went into social work. I realized then so many people were hurting. Up until then, I thought everyone grew up in a close functional family. So

I became determined to help and most of all saw how disempowered some Inuit were and I wanted to empower them."

Mike also worked as a child and youth outreach worker,

acted as project coordinator for Pang-nirtung's Pujua-

lussait Committee, and became an ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) trainer. She most recently completed Our Life's Journey counselor certification at Ilisaqsivik in Clyde River.

"My mother passed away when I was 24 years old, which devastated me. I felt a huge loss that lasted until my son died and then the continual loss I felt for my mother transferred to the loss of my son," she said.

"I felt like I was living a lifetime sentence of loss, missing and longing. The repressed feelings of longing for my parents and siblings were triggered when I lost my son. It has taken almost 19 years since he died to cope, heal and come to terms with these losses to finally feel I am in a peaceful space, and it feels really good."

Cooper is all too familiar with his clients' experiences as 'the victims of colonial thinking and racist policies.'

"In the most formative years of their lives ... they're told that their families, their cultures, their language, their history don't matter," he said. "As young children they grow up thinking themselves inferior. Then they often, as happened with these seven instances, try to reintegrate them-

THE ESKIMO

EXPERIMENT

Part Two of a Two-Part Series

selves into their communities, often with m i x e d results.

Even with

the seven

that we're talking about here, you can see people who succeeded or failed in equal measure. Some managed to get through for their entire lives and tamp down the harm, some managed to do that for a period of time, then collapsed, and some were the reverse. Some collapsed then managed to pull themselves back out of the pit that had been dug for them."

Government holds missing pieces

Mike has no doubt there's a generational effect caused by The Eskimo Experiment, with silence as a common thread.

"When I had my own children I had separation anxiety that controlled me from going away for any length longer than a week. I have since overcome the anxiety," she said.

"My children and I are close and I have not spoken to them about this and don't know if they are affected. Both of my daughters are pretty independent at age 25 and 22. My youngest son still lives with me."

Mike still feels like she

was kidnapped, and her memories are broken. Recovering

them hasn't been easy.

"Having been through Our Life's Journey in Clyde River, I talked so much about my experiences ... I realized that I have so many repressed memories, there are memories that I don't even have. I don't understand how I could not have memories of missing my family. No doubt that happened, but I just don't remember," she said.

"Here I am at this age and I remember being a child and feeling like ... and where did the rest of it go? I just felt like I went from childhood to ... here. It's so bizarre."

The Government of Canada holds the historical documents of this experiment on Inuit children which has had repercussions for half a century. Mike wants to look at the facts and determine for herself if the experiment was worth what she's lived.

"It took a lot of counseling just to get me here where I'm at peace with myself. But now I'm determined to see this (legal claim) to the finish. I know I have to be persistent about this, otherwise I'll be gone before I get any information," she said.

What the government can't provide is her identity, and at 59 she's clear:

"I am named Appalialuk, who had been the older brother of my father and our kinship term was as such. Our parents and grandparents always told us to help each other, love each other, so we have done that."