

james bay project

A friend of mine from the NFB called Willie Dunn asked me if I wanted to do a VTR project on Indian boarding students in Hull, Quebec and their parents living in James Bay. The project was sponsored by the Department of Education of Ottawa. He wanted an Indian to do it because he didn't want Indians to be misrepresented by a white man and also because I know the area. I accepted the offer because I know my people and I did not want some white man screwing my people up.

I was assigned to tape Indian students in class talking about their teachers and their boarding houses but I included their feeling of going away to school at the age they did (usually as young as 9-13) and what problems they had. I spent 5 days altogether with the students but I felt the contact was too short.

The first day was the hardest because the students were shy and didn't want to say anything. But, as soon as I told them they could speak in Cree, their mother tongue, and let them handle the equipment, we had a ball.

We talked about everything in Cree. We joked about their teachers and everything was wide open. The reason they were afraid at first was because they thought the teachers would hear but then they realized the teachers couldn't speak Cree and neither could the rest of the school board. So they expressed themselves freely in Cree without the English language barrier. They realized the situation they were in as soon as they started speaking Cree and fooling around with the equipment. One girl said to me "I just realized from the moment I got on the plane leaving for school that this whole place is like living in dream. The school system and the boarding houses are all unreal."

Most of the students said it was like going away to a boarding home. The boarding home parents make up different rules for their own kids than for the Indian boarding students. The rules are made up by both the boarding home parents and the Indian Affairs so the students are very restricted with the two sets of rules. The boarding students also said that if they had any say they would not want their brothers or sisters to come to these schools.

Many of the students have no idea why they are there. They leave home before they have grown up and feel bad to leave their culture. The students thought that if they could get the chief and parents aware of the present situation a new High School could be built in James Bay. If this was done then the Indians could have a choice of continuing to college. At this point it is very difficult for them in English boarding school because they speak and read very little English. The students told me that 99.9% of their teachers have no idea about the Indian people, their environment, language, etc.; the only thing the teachers think they know about Indians

is what they have read in history books which is pure crap. When the Indian students read about Indians they feel they are the losers because they are always made to appear as the bad guy.

After I spoke with the students, we went to Amos, Quebec and from there we chartered two small planes, one for equipment and one for people. The first stop was Rupert's House, Quebec. We arrived about 6 pm and the temperature was minus 45 degrees. It took one hour for the equipment to warm up. Then we showed the parents the videotapes of their children and talked with them. It was the first time the parents really got involved with their children's education.

The parents' reaction at first was, "Are they really our children?" I had to show the tapes over and over again because they didn't believe it was really their children. It was like seeing a film. It was the first time they felt close to their children's education. Right away they felt involved in it. The children were missing their home, their parents. Most of the time they had to take care of themselves. The first question the parents asked was "How can we get them back right away?"



It was the first time the kids really expressed themselves and they talked about it as a group. I guess they don't usually express themselves because they think their parents won't understand. The parents themselves were all together as a group too, seeing the tapes. An old man said, "Listen, this is the first time we have been together for our children's education. Let them finish this year and then we'll get the chiefs to talk with them!" Then the parents talked to their children and encouraged them to stay at school. They said they could come home at Easter and wouldn't have to go back.

They wanted to see the films over and over again and see themselves over and over. One woman said she didn't say enough and I taped her again. From 7 until 3 in the morning I showed them themselves over and over again. It was the first time they had seen TV. When I turned it on they figured it was a light. People were sitting all around the TV., on the sides, in back; they thought the picture would come on the wall. They called it some sort of a box that you could expect anything from.

People operated the equipment. They said to the education department that they needed a high school and the chief Willie Diamond spoke 1/2 hour—first in Cree to the students and then to the government.

The councillors had a meeting the same night and agreed that Fort George was the central place to have a high school so at least the students would be boarding in Indian homes. All the members of the band agreed and they said that the Eskimo children could come down from Hudson Bay because there are some Eskimo families at Fort George so the children wouldn't have to leave their culture too early.

The next day it wasn't so cold—minus 20 degrees—we landed in Eastmain and we stopped for one day. Only one kid from this settlement was at school so I showed tapes of kids from other settlements so the parents of the kids about to leave would know what was happening. The chief there doesn't speak English so he spoke Cree for the next chief on the next stop. He wanted to know how to get his people involved.

The next stop was Paint Hills. I only had 4 hours there because Indian Affairs said there was hardly anything there. I had to rush and rush. About 500 people live here. I showed the tapes about their children and they wanted me to stay so they could see the films over again, but Indian Affairs wanted me to go.

It was the first time they had seen real Indian people instead of other people playing Indian people. There was only one small room and there were about 50 people in it. The chief called all the parents and picked them up in Ski-doo's. People dropped by and wanted to see the tapes so I was showing tapes and interviewing parents at the same time. People were laughing and excited and people were crying. The sound is very mixed up. There was one lady there who had adopted one of the children. She called and called to him and she was waiting for an answer and other people behind her were waiting for an answer but one said "you don't get an answer you just talk" so she was very disappointed at first and then happy and she said all kinds of jokes.

It was time to leave and the plane was leaving and people said don't leave yet show it again, we will help you pack and carry the equipment. Then it was time and ten people were carrying little pieces of equipment one by one.

That evening we arrived at Fort George. I managed to stay there two days because the weather was very bad. I showed tapes all the time and saw my family. They had meetings and I showed the films from around the coast to all the chiefs. The representative from the Indian and Eskimo Association lives at Fort George and he had a chance to speak to the students. He told them that he would do his best to get a high school up there. When I got back to Ottawa he told me next year we will have a grade 7 then the next year grade 8, and the next year grade 9.

After that I went to Ottawa. I was supposed to edit the tapes right away but it took Indian Affairs 3 weeks to see the tapes. I was supposed to show the tapes to the children right away but they said "no". After 3 weeks I went back to Ottawa but there were some tapes missing. Then I showed them to the children.

The main thing was I was very happy that they will start grade 7 next year.

The tapes are at Indian Affairs.

Gilbert Herodier

