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THE
CROSS LAKE
EXPERIMENT:
Reaching
Indigenous Kids

Hosted by MICHAEL SERAPIO

 **NEWS
IN
REVIEW**

IN THIS ISSUE

The Cross Lake Experiment: Reaching Indigenous Kids (Duration 15:04)

Suicide rates among Indigenous youth in Canada, who are five to six times more likely to take their own lives than non-Indigenous teens, are reaching epidemic proportions. The CBC's Nick Purdon follows cultural awareness teacher Kerry Muswagon on a goose hunt with students from Mikisew school in Cross Lake, Manitoba. He believes if he teaches the students about their culture, they'll feel better about themselves.

News in Review Study Modules

Residential School Shame: The TRC Report, September 2015
Canada's Disgrace: Our Missing Aboriginal Women, October 2014
Residential Schools: Truth and Healing, September 2010
Canada's Residential School Apology, September 2008

Related CBC Programs

Collection – Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women
Collection – Residential Schools: A Sad Chapter in Canadian History
8th Fire series
First Nations Teen Told Not to Smudge Before School
Mansbridge One on One: Cindy Blackstock
Reaching Out: Sandy Bay, SK
Stories from the River's Edge
An Urban Aboriginal High School

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THE CROSS LAKE EXPERIMENT: Reaching Indigenous Kids

VIDEO REVIEW

Before Viewing

Cross Lake, an isolated Cree community in Northern Manitoba, has faced a horrendous tragedy: they have lost three youths to suicide, and there are about 100 more who are on suicide watch. One teacher, Kerry Muswagon, believes taking students on traditional Cree goose hunts may provide a connection to traditional values that can put local youth back on track. You'll learn about Muswagon's efforts in the video.

What do you think can be done to help reduce the number of suicides in isolated Indigenous communities?

Viewing

1. How does Kerry Muswagon build a solid relationship with his students?

2. Nick Purdon says, "Nobody really wants to hear this, and I don't want to say it, but when you arrive here, it feels like a different country." Why does Cross Lake seem like "a different country"?

3. Consider Nick Purdon's interview with Justin Umpherville, a 14-year old student on the hunt:

a) Why does Justin enjoy being on the hunt so much?

b) What is being in town like for Justin?

c) How does Justin regard death after his recent experiences in Cross Lake?

4. Why does Kerry Muswagon feel that it's acceptable to allow students to handle guns?

5. What is the goose hunting experience like for the students?

6. Why does Kerry Muswagon feel that taking students on the hunt is so rewarding?

7. How do Kerry Muswagon's own experiences with hunting as a child connect to what he does with students today?

8. Consider Nick Purdon's interview with Tyrell Halcrow:

a) How has Tyrell been impacted by the recent suicides in Cross Lake?

b) What does Tyrell enjoy about being on the hunt?

c) How does being on the hunt help Tyrell?

After Viewing

At the end of the video, we heard that the Canadian Medical Association Journal is calling on Canada to adopt a national strategy for suicide prevention and that the federal government should include funding for specific measures designed to lower suicide rates especially among Aboriginal youth.

- Work with a partner and draft your own strategies for suicide prevention in Indigenous communities.
- Write to your local MP to request more funding and suggest strategies for reducing rates of Indigenous youth suicide.



Try This!

Use the viewing questions above as short answer questions in the Socrative program (go to: www.socrative.com). Socrative is a platform where you can see the responses of your peers within a chat room. After you are done, share your answers in a group of three or four to see how your answers compare with other students in your class.

THE STORY

Minds On

The rate of suicide amongst Indigenous youth in Canada is five to six times higher than in the non-Indigenous population, which indicates a glaring national social crisis. Some of the reasons for the crisis are readily apparent. In these isolated communities there are



few organized activities available for youth and employment opportunities are scarce. Substance abuse is common and many young people become parents before they are ready. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission says that the current generation of Indigenous youth represents the tragic after effects of the residential school system. The legacy of this reprehensible system will be felt for generations.

1. What do you know about the residential school system?
2. What do you know about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?
3. Why do you think the national Indigenous suicide rate is so high? Provide a reason beyond the ones mentioned above.

BACKGROUND: The Residential School System in Canada

From the late 19th century until deep into the 20th century, the Canadian government had a policy of “aggressive assimilation” for First Nations, Inuit and Metis children. Children aged five to 15 were forced to attend government sponsored, church-run boarding schools now infamously known as residential schools. The purpose of the residential school system was to assimilate these students into English or French speaking, Christian culture.

It is estimated that more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children were separated from their families and communities and were forced to attend residential schools, where they learned basic educational and menial skills. They lived in substandard conditions and were often undernourished. Many of these children were physically and sexually abused. When children returned to their home communities, they felt disconnected both from their own people and from the society into which they were meant to be assimilated.

Over the last decade, there has been recognition that the system constituted a serious human rights injustice perpetrated by the Canadian government on Indigenous people. This system separated a group of people from the rest of our society and served to perpetuate racism. In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered an official apology for the residential school system. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was given a mandate to hear from survivors and others involved with the residential school system and to prepare a list of recommendations going forward.

Definition – State of Emergency

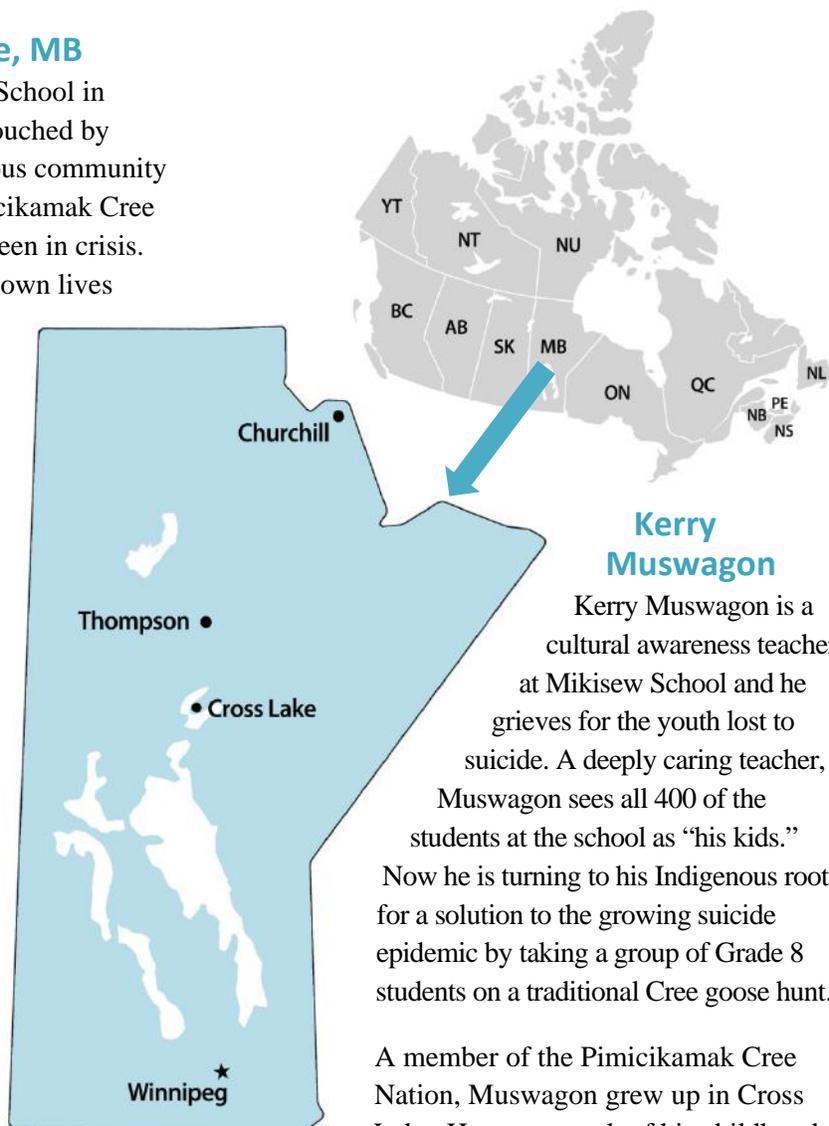
In many First Nations communities across Canada, leaders have declared a “state of emergency” to help deal with significant issues. A state of emergency can be declared by government officials when the safety and security of individuals is threatened by an imminent danger or disaster. During a state of emergency, normal constitutional procedures and rules can be suspended in order to regain control and stability.

The Situation in Cross Lake, MB

Almost every student at Mikisew School in Cross Lake, Manitoba, has been touched by suicide. Cross Lake is an Indigenous community where many members of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation live. The community has been in crisis. Six Pimicikamak youth took their own lives between January and March of 2016, and at least 18 youth attempted suicide in the same time period. With hundreds of Cross Lake youth on suicide watch, an anxious community was looking on. The isolated northern town of Cross Lake has fewer than 6000 residents, and the suicides have left the community — and the youth population — fragmented and devastated.

A National Crisis

In March 2016, community leaders declared a state of emergency to address the growing concerns surrounding youth mental health and suicide in Cross Lake. Sadly, Cross Lake is one of many isolated First Nations communities where suicide rates have soared in recent years. In places like Cross Lake, where many adults are survivors or children of survivors of the residential school system, high rates of suicide are a continuation of the cycle of dysfunction that has plagued Indigenous communities.



Kerry Muswagon

Kerry Muswagon is a cultural awareness teacher at Mikisew School and he grieves for the youth lost to suicide. A deeply caring teacher, Muswagon sees all 400 of the students at the school as “his kids.”

Now he is turning to his Indigenous roots for a solution to the growing suicide epidemic by taking a group of Grade 8 students on a traditional Cree goose hunt.

A member of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation, Muswagon grew up in Cross Lake. He spent much of his childhood in the bush with his own father who taught him many traditional practices including the goose hunt. Muswagon sees that time with his father as integral to his own success and he hopes sharing the goose hunt experience with his students will help them build a sense of self-esteem. For students who have lost family members and

loved ones to suicide, Muswagon also sees the goose hunt as a way to heal. Taking them to the bush gives these students a break from the overwhelming grief that continues to envelop the town.

Initially, Muswagon worried about handing guns to students at a time when so many were thinking about suicide, but the Cree have been using guns to hunt geese for generations. After listening to his heart, Muswagon believes teaching the students to use guns appropriately, for a specific purpose, can be a way of building healthy attitudes toward firearms.

Justin Umpherville

Justin Umpherville is one of the students who has taken part in the hunt. He is quite candid in his love of the experience. In town, he feels that the peer pressure to smoke, drink alcohol, and use drugs is all around him. This is not the life he wants for himself. While he has never considered suicide, he is very conscious that death is inevitable for all of us. Justin also believes that many youths who are thinking about suicide hide their depression behind a fake smile.

When Justin talks about the hunt, his emotions are discernibly different than when he is interviewed about the issues facing youth in Cross Lake. He expresses joy when speaking of the goose hunt — the spoils of which he will take home to his mother. Justin eagerly anticipates the pride that his mother will feel, demonstrating a deep connection to her which is similar to Muswagon's connection with his own father.

Tyrell Halcrow

The reality of the situation in Cross Lake is all too tangible for Tyrell Halcrow, another student on the trip, who lost a family member to suicide a few months ago. When he is in town, he feels surrounded by the talk about suicide. Tyler has

actually thought about suicide himself. In fact, he says that he is connected to three people lost to suicide. But in the bush, and on this trip in particular, Tyrell feels free and finds comfort and healing in hunting, sitting around the fire, and drinking tea with others. He says that the bush helps him forget and accept. For Tyrell, this goose hunt is a chance to connect with people and find the courage to go on.

Going Forward

It still remains to be seen if the goose hunt and learning about other traditional ways will stem the tide of suicide in the community of Cross Lake. A growing body of research points to lower rates of suicide in communities that are culturally healthy. For Justin and Tyrell, it certainly seems to be a way to gain confidence in themselves and develop deep connections with family and other members of the community. The people of Cross Lake hope the efforts of Kerry Muswagon will continue to bring kids back from the brink and into a circle of safety and love in the isolated Manitoba town.

Sources:

1. Mason, G. (March 18, 2016). The suicide epidemic of Cross Lake: Consider urban resettlement. *The Globe and Mail*.
2. Pauls, K. (March 4, 2016). Cry for help after four teens take their own lives on Manitoba First Nation. *CBC News*. Retrieved from cbc.ca/news/
3. Purdon, N. (May 11, 2016). Manitoba teacher hopes goose hunting will help save his students. *CBC News*. Retrieved from cbc.ca/news/
4. Taylor, J., Glowacki, L. & Hoffman, K. (March 9, 2016). Pimicikamak declares state of emergency to deal with suicide crisis. *CBC News*. Retrieved from cbc.ca/news/

To Consider

1. Cross Lake is a very isolated community. What factors other than the town’s isolation could account for the high rate of suicide and suicidal ideation in its youth?
 2. Why is the goose hunt so enjoyable for the students? What do you think they gain from the experience other than simply learning to hunt?
 3. Youth suicide rates for Indigenous youth are five to six times higher than the non-Indigenous population. Why do you think the rates are so much higher?
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Follow-Up Activity #1: State of Emergency

- a) A state of emergency has been called in numerous First Nations communities in Canada in the past few years, including:
- Cross Lake, Manitoba,
 - Attawapiskat, Ontario
 - Laloche, Saskatchewan

Research the situations leading to the declaration of a state of emergency and share your findings with the class in a group discussion.

- b) Take a look at Canada’s Emergencies Act, which can be found at:
laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/e-4.5/page-1.html

As a class, consider the following question:

- Do these situations qualify as states of emergency? Why or why not?
 - Why do you think that some First Nations communities have turned to declaring a state of emergency to address social crises? Does this seem like an effective way to address the problems?
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Follow-up Activity #2: Culturally Health Communities

Recent research suggests that communities that are “culturally healthy” are less likely to have high rates of suicide among their youth. Examples include:

- Snuneymuxw First Nation in Nanaimo, B.C. – Students can read the CBC Indigenous article, “For First Nations facing suicide crisis, the solution is rooted in the community” at cbc.ca/news/indigenous/suicide-first-nations-snuneymuxw-1.3536821

- Heiltsuk First Nation in Bella Bella, B.C. –
Students can read the Maclean’s article, “Bella Bella, B.C.: The town that solved suicide” at macleans.ca/news/bella-bella-the-town-that-solved-suicide/

Read the articles, find common characteristics in both communities and complete the following chart:

Success Factor Record “common threads” that link the success of these two communities.	Snuneymuxw First Nation Record evidence of the Snuneymuxw’s success	Heiltsuk First Nation Record evidence of the Heiltsuk’s success