

Ta'an Kwäch'än Council
Kwanlin Dün First Nation



MEDIA RELEASE

April 19, 2024 – Ta'an Kwäch'än Council (TKC) and Kwanlin Dün First Nation, (KDFN) would like to acknowledge with respect and consideration their full support of ground search efforts starting April 22, 2024, at two former First Nation student residential sites in Whitehorse.

The Yukon Residential School Missing Children Project (YRSMCP) will oversee the ground search of two parcels of land in Riverdale where First Nation student residences once operated in the 1960s and 1970s. Yukon Hall, a non-denominational, Church-operated residence, was open between 1960 and 1985, and Coudert Hall, the former Whitehorse Roman Catholic Indian Hostel, operated from 1960 to 1971. While all buildings have been demolished, both sites were since identified and claimed as First Nation Settlement Lands – Yukon Hall (KDFN); Coudert Hall (TKC).

Utilizing a special ground penetrating radar system, technology that has proven to detect anomalies, crews will be on site starting April 22 (Yukon Hall) and continue their work until May 4, 2024. The search will enlist a small technical crew using minimal equipment, and the scientific exercise is not expected to cause any disruption to neighbouring areas.

Private ceremonies by both Ta'an Kwäch'än Council and Kwanlin Dün First Nation Citizens are scheduled to take place prior to the work commencing. Both TKC and KDFN would like to ask individuals, including the public, not to visit these sites during the search efforts, as to not disrupt the crews and their work.

Yukon Residential School Missing Children Project (YRSMCP) was created in 2021 after 215 unmarked graves were discovered at the former residential school in Kamloops, B.C. Since then, and under the direction of YRSMCP, several Yukon communities have, and will be able to assist in research and consultation focused on former residential school sites in Carcross, Dawson City, Whitehorse and beyond. Mandated to learn the truth about children who went missing from Yukon Residential Schools, including those who may be buried in unmarked burial sites, the project is conducting survivor interviews, organizing ground searches, and archiving research materials to uncover the truth about missing children. Through this process, the YRSMCP aims to better understand what happened during these times and bring closure and healing to families and communities.

Chief Amanda Leas, Ta’an Kwäch’än Council

“This search effort marks an important chapter for Yukon First Nations, not just here in Whitehorse, but for all Yukon families who lost a child, many still unaccounted for, during the residential school system era. It is our hope these efforts may help Yukon families, Ta’an members included, who may have suffered unfathomable abuse while residing in the dorms and hostels that once operated on these sites. This TKC parcel of Settlement Land once housed a hostel that has a known history of abuse and has been a painful reminder that the trauma endured here, and other residential school properties not too long ago, was very real. The work that Judy Gingell, Doris Bill, and our Elders involved in this project are doing takes courage and we at TKC want to thank them from our hearts for all they do. If you have stories, they will listen. If you have anything to share about missing children, now is the time to come forward, so we can get some answers and better our children’s tomorrow.”

Chief Sean Uyenets’echja Smith, Kwanlin Dün First Nation

“Since the discovery of unmarked graves of young children who went to residential school in Kamloops, many Canadians have become aware of the truths of residential school and the horrific, violent past that First Nation children had to face and live with. In Whitehorse, many of my people from Kwanlin Dün and others stayed at Yukon Hall and Coudert Hall in Whitehorse, Yukon. This search will allow for the beginning of healing for KDFN and TKC Citizens who attended schools in Whitehorse. When we face truths of what happened in those institutions and acknowledge their stories, then healing can begin. There have been many community groups in Yukon and across Canada involved with unmasking the truths of what occurred in residential school. Kwanlin Dün First Nation leadership raise our hands to Yukon Residential School Missing Children Project, Ground Truth Technicians and First Nations for the hard work they are doing in our respective communities.”

Premier Ranj Pillai

“It is with humility and open minds and hearts that we acknowledge the truth and learn of the harms caused by the tragic and hurtful legacy of residential schools. Let us hold space for Survivors, their families and communities who continue to mourn all that was lost. Let us connect and help each other through this trying time. We must carry the weight of residential schools together as a community in solidarity, unity and with great compassion. I want to express my ongoing support and gratitude to the Yukon Residential School Missing Children Project, Kwanlin Dün First Nation, and Ta’an Kwäch’än Council for leading this important and difficult work. In better understanding the truth of the Yukon’s past, we can continue along the path towards reconciliation.”

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BACKGROUND:

The Yukon Residential Schools Missing Children Project (YRSMCP) was established in 2021 by Carcross Tagish First Nation with Adeline Kh'ayàdê Webber as Chair. Adeline, who is a proud member of the Teslin Tlingit First Nation, had a brother Albert, who died of dysentery at five while attending the Choooutla Indian Residential School in Carcross in 1942. Her family, still to this day, do not know where he was buried. Adeline, who has spent much of her life championing Indigenous Rights in Yukon, passed the project into the hands of current Chair Judy Gingell when she was appointed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as Commissioner of Yukon. The YRSMCP Working Group consists of up to two representatives from each Yukon First Nation community as appointed by their First Nation.

Coudert Hall: In 1960, the Whitehorse Roman Catholic Indian Hostel opened in Whitehorse, Yukon for students attending the Christ the King Catholic School. In 1966, the hostel was renamed Coudert Hall. The residence had a capacity of 100, but the number of students in residence fluctuated between 35 and 70. In 1970, Coudert Hall was merged with the Protestant Yukon Hall. The following year, Coudert Hall was closed with all the students being relocated to Yukon Hall. In 1971, a child-care worker at Coudert Hall was fired following complaints that he had sexually assaulted students. It was not until 1990 that he was prosecuted and convicted for those assaults.

Yukon Hall: Operated by the federal government, Yukon Hall accommodated students attending Whitehorse public schools. Although non-denominational, the residence was intended to house students from Protestant families, and chaplains were provided for the facility. By 1963 the hostel was providing accommodation for non-Aboriginal students when space was available. In 1970, Yukon Hall was combined administratively with the neighbouring Roman Catholic residence, Coudert Hall, creating the "Whitehorse Student Residence." In 1971 students were housed at Yukon Hall and Coudert Hall was repurposed as a staff residence. In 1985 the residence was closed as a federal facility.

More information available at www.yrsmcp.com
www.nctr.ca