

For years residential school in B.C. destroyed Indigenous culture. Now it's a thriving golf resort

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Margaret Teneese, archivist of the Ktunaxa Nation Council, stands in front of the former residential school which has been transformed into St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino near Cranbrook, B.C. PHOTO BY VALERIE FORTNEY/POSTMEDIA

It was the fall of 1966, and Margaret Teneese was eager to start the new school year.

“I was so excited, I went bounding up the stairs of St. Eugene with my brothers and sisters,” she says. “I only realized later that by coming here, I’d be losing my language and my culture.”

St. Eugene Mission, home to a residential school near Cranbrook, B.C., was in its final years of existence when Teneese, a member of the Shuswap band near Invermere, arrived. She would be housed in a dormitory there and bused in each day to another nearby school. Still, she would be subject to the stringent rules, homesickness and cultural deprivation that befell generations before her in the imposing, red-brick building.

Much later, she'd learn about the far more devastating experiences of other children that came from all over British Columbia and Alberta to the school, ones that left scars both emotional and physical. "It wasn't until I came back to work at St. Eugene that I heard the stories," says the soft-spoken woman. "There were a lot of people still hurting from having to come here."



Exterior of St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino, a former residential school near Cranbrook, B.C. PHOTO BY COURTESY, ST. EUGENE GOLF RESORT

Teneese is now playing a major role in the healing process of those former students — along with the entire community — in the valley she now calls home. As the archivist of the Ktunaxa Nation Council, she is a regular fixture on the grounds of the St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino, teaching visitors about the history of the Indigenous people of the Elk Valley, including their traditions and language.

And that imposing, three-storey structure that affected so many young lives during its tenure from 1912 to 1970? The old school has been gutted and given new life as a hotel, its formerly spartan surroundings now a stately accommodation overlooking part of its 132 hectares, which includes stunning mountain views, a swimming pool and a par-72 championship golf course.

It's a repurposing of the most unexpected kind — and Teneese and her colleagues are well aware of its eyebrow-raising presence on what today is a luxury resort in a spectacular setting.

“It was our people, our choice,” says Sophie Pierre, who stops in for lunch at the 19th Hole, one of the resort's restaurants, during a recent tour of the resort. “Here, we have changed the narrative of this building, this place.”

Pierre, who serves as the resort's board chair, has an impressive pedigree. She's a former chief of the Ktunaxa Nation and, for her many other accomplishments, was named an officer of the Order of Canada in 2016. Like so many others at St. Eugene Resort today, Pierre refers to a quote from elder Mary Paul, whose portrait hangs in the hotel's lobby, to explain their unorthodox thinking: “Since it was within the St. Eugene Mission school that the culture of the Kootenay Indian was taken away, it should be within the building that it is returned.”



A classroom in St. Eugene Mission residential school.

Pierre was also one of more than 5,000 children who were sent to the school over its 58-year life. “I could see my parents' home from my window, but couldn't go see them,” she says. “It was a lonely way to grow up.”

While Pierre and her supporters were given the green light decades ago by the five bands in the area, the journey to realizing the dream met more than a few roadblocks.

Convincing former students of their plan to transform the building's meaning — in a video shown in the resort's interpretive centre, one says he'd prefer it be "blown up" — actually proved the easy part. "We held a lot of consultations in the community," says Teneese, "and many of those former students came back for healing."

As in all things, it was money, or the lack of it, that almost killed the dream. After getting an agreement from five bands that stretch from Creston to Tobacco Plains on the American border, to the Shuswap in the north, they undertook a long and often frustrating land designation process. Then, it took more than a decade to raise the \$40 million required for the ambitious plan.

In 2003, the resort evaded a near-bankruptcy when the Ktunaxa formed a partnership with the Samson Cree of Alberta and the Mnjikaning First Nations of Ontario. Teneese says some recent visitors were pleasantly surprised to hear they were the resort's saviours. "It was a group from Hobbema, Alberta," she says, the home of the Samson Cree. "They were thrilled to learn they helped to make this a reality."

The Ktunaxa were eventually able to buy out their partners and, last year, the St. Eugene Golf Resort & Casino had its best year ever.



Along with other key Indigenous employees at the resort, including Teneese's nephew,

Jared Teneese, and elder Don Sam, St. Eugene's CEO Barry Zwueste helps ensure the founders' vision continues and evolves.

In addition to a new RV park and a corporate program where groups learn about Indigenous history and modern-day issues, Zwueste, whose resume includes hospitality jobs at some of Western Canada's best-known resorts, is overseeing plans to commemorate on June 26, 2020, the 50th anniversary of the school's closing.

"All the things you heard about residential schools were no less true here," says Zwueste, who adds that the bulk of their clientele comes from Alberta. "But they've taken something dark and turned it into something that benefits so many."

Sophie Pierre agrees. "Part of the healing involves recognizing what this was and for everyone else to recognize what it was," she says of her team's contribution to the rapidly growing field of Indigenous tourism. "My grandkids now call it the hotel — we're putting a different memory of it into our children and grandchildren's minds. Yes, this is a part of our history and this is how we move on."

While she may not bound up the school steps these days, for Margaret Teneese, there's still a youthful enthusiasm of a different kind in her work at St. Eugene Resort. "This is our way of reconciliation," she says. "In the very place where I lost my language and culture, I'm helping to bring it back."

