



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER · DECEMBER 2023

THE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL PROJECT

Updates on the Search for Unmarked Burial Sites at Blue Quills Indian Residential School (St. Paul site)

Project Background

University nuhelot'jine thaiyots'j nistameyimakanak Blue Quills (UnBQ) began the project in ceremony in May 2021. The process of searching for unmarked burial sites at UnBQ began in June 2022. The IRS Project Team worked alongside Blue Quills Indian Residential School (BQIRS) Survivors and their families, Elders, UnBQ First Nations' Leadership, University staff members, and community members to create a respectful process for the ground search and related activities at the St. Paul site, ensuring that ceremony and Survivors voices are at the forefront.

The IRS Project Team is utilizing different technologies to conduct the Search, such as Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) scans, historic human remains detection (HHRD) dogs, and Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) scans, along with information learned from Survivor interviews and archival research. Current archival research is being conducted through publicly available archival collections, sourced through various archives, such as those in the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Library and Archives Canada, and the Provincial Archives of Alberta, to support the IRS Project. The IRS Project Team will continue to explore the use of other technologies that will assist in the Search.

In order to keep Survivors and their families, along with UnBQ staff, students, and UnBQ First Nations Leadership and their communities informed about the status of the IRS Project, the IRS Project Team is working on creating a dedicated IRS Project webpage on the UnBQ website, where updates via quarterly newsletters, University Statements, Search reports, and upcoming events will be available to the public.



Meet the Team

Joel Cardinal is from Saddle Lake Cree Nation and he joined (UnBQ) in October 2023 as the Indian Residential School Project Coordinator.

Joel has a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies from Simon Fraser University and is currently a student in the Indigenous Master of Education program at UnBQ. For over 3 years Joel worked as a Client Management Paralegal focused on interviewing residential school survivors on their experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses at residential schools. Joel has been engaged with the IRS Project since the phase 1 search where he volunteered his time to interview survivors.



Felicity Collins is from Kehewin Cree Nation and she joined UnBQ in April 2023 as the Indian Residential School Administrative Assistant and Researcher.

Felicity has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, an after degree in Native Studies (Honors), and Certificates in Aboriginal Sport & Recreation and in Aboriginal Governance & Partnership, all from the University of Alberta. Felicity brings over 4 years of experience as an analyst and researcher for Indigenous-related projects.



Indian Residential School Project Team

The Indian Residential School (IRS) Project Team is leading the search for unmarked burial sites at the St. Paul site of Blue Quills Indian Residential School. In addition to coordinating the search phases, the IRS Project Team is also responsible for the coordination of survivor supports, survivor interviews, community dialogues, ceremonies, archival research, and facilitating the Advisory Committee meetings for the IRS Project.



Contact Information

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Phase 1 Search

The Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology (IPIA) from the University of Alberta was invited to partner with UnBQ to conduct the Phase 1 ground search. IPIA is an Indigenous-led institute with a commitment to continuing to support Indigenous-engaged archaeological research and is the first of its kind in Canada and the first institute focused on Indigenous archaeology in the world.

Between August 9th to 13th, 2022, the IPIA Team visited UnBQ to begin the search using GPR technology. Beginning with a pipe ceremony led by a BQIRS Survivor, the IPIA Team began the first GPR scan on 1.29 acres in areas identified by Elders and Survivors. The GPR Scan was done over the course of 5 days, during which interviews with Survivors were held and wellness supports were available to Survivors and their families.

UnBQ hosted an Indian Residential School Gathering from April 19th to 22nd, 2023 where communities were invited to join in ceremony and dialogue and for the public release of the Phase 1 search summary report, which was held on April 19th, 2023.

In the Search Summary report, a total of 19 reflections of interest were identified in the 1.29 acres searched using GPR. The term 'reflections of interest' is used to describe reflections that have traits consistent with burials, but lack a local comparison. Additional work is needed to determine the exact nature of these reflections and this work is scheduled for Spring/Summer 2024.

The summary report was provided to those in attendance and is also available on the UnBQ website.



Phase 1 Markers

For those of you who have visited UnBQ since April 2023, you may have noticed orange flag markers posted South/Southwest of the UnBQ Old Building. In preparation for the announcement of the Phase 1 GPR scan results, the IRS Project Team, under the cultural and spiritual guidance of Elders, setup 19 temporary markers. Honouring protocol, tobacco was put down before each marker was put in place. Each of the 19 flags were prayed for while an honour song was sung.

The 19 markers do not represent the locations of where the exact 19 reflections of interest were found during Phase 1 but represent the boundary where the Phase 1 work was done.

The 19 markers are meant to be a temporary measure as a permanent memorial/commemoration will be created in the coming years as directed by Survivors, their families, and the IRS Advisory Committee.



LiDAR & Search Dogs

Since April 2023, additional work has been done including a preliminary LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) search. LiDAR uses aerial drone technology to map the landscape to detect anomalies.

The Search and Rescue Dog Association of Alberta has done an initial visit with their air-scenting dogs, more work is pending in the future

With the new IRS Project Team in place, they will continue to explore search methods and technologies to support the search for unmarked burial sites.



Advisory Committee

In 2022, an IRS Advisory Committee was created to provide support, offer recommendations and guide the IRS Project. The committee is composed of leadership from the 7 governing First Nations communities, BQIRS Survivors, Elders, UnBQ Leadership, UnBQ staff, a UnBQ student, and the IRS Project Team who facilitate the committee meetings.



Currently, we are seeking the following:

- 1 Survivor from each of the 7 governing First Nations communities
- 1 current UnBQ student

If you are a Survivor or know of a Survivor who attended BQIRS between 1931 to 1970 who would be interested in being a member of the IRS Advisory Committee, please contact the IRS Project Team.

For BQIRS Survivors who are not a member of 1 of the 7 communities listed above, and are interested in participating in the IRS Advisory Committee, please contact the IRS Project Team.

University nuhelot'jne thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills is owned and governed by 7 First Nations communities

- Beaver Lake Cree Nation
- Cold Lake First Nation
- Frog Lake First Nation
- Whitefish Lake First Nation (Goodfish Lake)
- Heart Lake First Nation
- Kehewin Cree Nation
- Saddle Lake Cree Nation



Community Dialogues

Three community dialogues were completed in 2023, in Kehewin Cree Nation, Cold Lake First Nation, and St. Paul. The IRS Project Team will continue to facilitate these community dialogues in the surrounding communities in the upcoming year. These sessions are meant to create a safe space for BQIRS Survivors to share stories that will support the Search at the St. Paul site of the BQIRS.

The IRS Project Team will work with each of the 7 governing First Nations, as well as other Nations whose children were sent to BQIRS to ensure Community Dialogues can be hosted within their community, when possible. Wellness support will be available at all Community Dialogue sessions.



Survivor Interview Call Out

The IRS Project team is launching a process to invite Survivors to share their memories and experiences that will contribute to the historical record, as well as help us focus our search for unmarked burial sites. Opportunities to participate in ceremonies and other healing supports will be made available.

If you are a survivor, or a descendent of a survivor, who attended Blue Quills Indian Residential School between 1931 to 1970 and would like to share memories and experiences, both lived and shared with, that could be helpful in the search for unmarked burial sites, please contact the IRS Project team.



Wellness Supports

- National Indian Residential School Crisis Line @ 1-866-925-4419
- Hope for Wellness Helpline @ 1-855-242-3310 or chat online @ www.hopeforwellness.ca

Upcoming Events

- Community Dialogues – Spring/Summer 2024
- Newsletter – March 2024