

## First Peoples Child & Family Review

An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

# Interracial Adoption: One Family's Journey

Barb Nahwegahbow, Jeff Lee, Bill Lee, Cecelia Lee et Barbra Lee

Volume 11, numéro 2, 2016

Special Issue: The "Sixties Scoop" and Indigenous Child Welfare

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082335ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082335ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

ISSN

1708-489X (imprimé)

2293-6610 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Nahwegahbow, B., Lee, J., Lee, B., Lee, C. & Lee, B. (2016). Interracial Adoption: One Family's Journey. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 11(2), 32–42.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1082335ar>

Résumé de l'article

*A crucial concern regarding the adoption of Indigenous children into "white" families is the separation of the child from her/his Indigenous community and the struggles for the children involved. This paper examines the struggles faced by one Anishinawbe child and his family, the Lees, to come to terms with this dynamic when they adopted him in the early 70s. After the adoption they came to understand themselves as a family that was no longer "white", one that faced unique challenges as well as opportunities. The initial strategy of the parents was to maintain his contact with the Indigenous community and culture. However, it became apparent that they had to find a way to Indigenize themselves as well. This was accomplished with the assistance of the Indigenous community. This story, unfortunately, does not reflect the majority of transracial adoptions. It is a hopeful one but also raises questions for the role of Indigenous communities, adoptive parents and in particular for policy makers.*

## An Interdisciplinary Journal

*Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews*

## Interracial Adoption: One Family's Journey

Barb Nahwegahbow with Jeff Lee, Bill Lee, Cecelia Lee and Barbra Lee

Corresponding author: Barb Nahwegahbow, [barbran@sympatico.ca](mailto:barbran@sympatico.ca)

### Abstract

*A crucial concern regarding the adoption of Indigenous children into “white” families is the separation of the child from her/his Indigenous community and the struggles for the children involved. This paper examines the struggles faced by one Anishinaabe child and his family, the Lees, to come to terms with this dynamic when they adopted him in the early 70s. After the adoption they came to understand themselves as a family that was no longer “white”, one that faced unique challenges as well as opportunities. The initial strategy of the parents was to maintain his contact with the Indigenous community and culture. However, it became apparent that they had to find a way to Indigenize themselves as well. This was accomplished with the assistance of the Indigenous community. This story, unfortunately, does not reflect the majority of transracial adoptions. It is a hopeful one but also raises questions for the role of Indigenous communities, adoptive parents and in particular for policy makers.*

### Introduction

The journey of the Lee family, Jeff, his father Bill, his mother Cecelia and his sister Barbra, is told through their individual voices. They were interviewed by the author, a cultural activist, community organizer and former social worker who then structured the paper around their voiced experiences. The family members have given their permission for their names to be used in this paper.

Jeff Lee is very positive about his experience of transracial adoption. At the same time, he is very clear on the challenges and the amount of work that is required to make it a success. He believes that, “[i]f you’re thinking about adopting a child from an Indigenous community, you gotta do your homework! You gotta know the historical context, the social conditions...” Jeff, who’s now forty-six years old, was adopted by a non-Indigenous Catholic family when he was three months old. He reflects:

“There’s a lot more literature out there today than there was 40, 50 years ago. Back then, it wasn’t necessarily taboo, but a lot of it wasn’t written. A lot of parents just came in wanting to adopt. ‘Oh, there’s a cute Aboriginal kid, yeah, let’s grab him or her.’ After the fact, some stories that I read, ‘Oh, we didn’t actually know what we were getting involved in.’

So I’m saying, you’re taking on a commitment. Let’s hope it’s lifetime and it’s something beautiful, but part of that is knowing who you’re bringing in and where they’re from. And that’s not just preparing for things that come up, but it’s also the positive things, you know. The

celebration of that culture.

In adopting inter-racial, you definitely want to pick up on that culture and all that it encompasses, both good and bad.”

## The Journey

This advice would have been helpful to Bill and Ceil Lee when they adopted Jeff. But it was 1970. The importance of sustaining the Indigenous child's attachment to their culture and community wasn't something that was considered important, at least not to the majority of non-Indigenous workers working within the dominant culture's child welfare system. Jeff's advice comes from his own positive adoption experience with parents who had an intuitive sense about the importance of culture:

“Over the years, Ceil and I rarely talked about it,” said Bill, “but I thought Ceil said it best. Something like, it was because being Indigenous is who he is...So, since we believed that, or maybe more accurately, we intuited it (because we never had a big conversation about it), what does it mean? Well, culture is important, it is part of the environment we take sustenance from to learn who we are and how to be the best person possible. So, my sense is we kind of figured that out, but it wasn't something we had in our heads before his coming to us. It just seemed natural.”

Bill Lee and his American-born wife Ceil were living in north Toronto with their two daughters - Barbra who was four and Mary Jo who was three. Bill had moved back to Canada with his new bride in 1964 when he discovered he was eligible for the U.S. draft even though he was a Canadian citizen. He didn't want to end up in Vietnam fighting a war he didn't believe in.

It was Bill's work that led to the conversation about adopting, and specifically adopting an Indigenous boy. A social work position with the Catholic Children's Aid Society (CCAS) had opened up for Bill shortly after his arrival back in his hometown. After a couple of years, he left to pursue a teaching career. After some practice teaching, he concluded that teaching wasn't for him. It was back to social work and after completing his Masters degree, he returned to CCAS in 1969 for his second stint there, first as a case worker and then as a supervisor in their satellite office.

Ceil was acclimatizing to Canadian winters and was, for the most part, a stay at home mom to their two little girls. When Bill got home from work, she'd listen as he talked about the high number of Indigenous kids going into CCAS care. “There were lots more Indigenous kids in terms of the percentage of the whole population of kids in care,” she said.

Bill began to introduce the subject of adopting an Indigenous child, “because there were so many of them not being adopted because of prejudice,” Ceil remembers him saying. Bill recalls it this way:

“I think our thinking had something to do with zero population growth. It was a way of having kids without adding to the population. And we were very interested in an Indigenous kid and that was partly because I was aware from my work that a number of Indigenous kids became Crown wards, but they often weren't adopted. At least in the Toronto area.”

“The other thing - it's very prosaic and dumb when I look back on it,” he says somewhat sheepishly, “we thought, I know I did, that Indigenous people were really beautiful looking...and

particularly the kids I thought were really cute. That's really kind of a dumb reason," admits Bill, "pretty superficial, but at the time we had no idea of the challenges and opportunities we were going into."

Ceil's admission that she didn't think about any of the challenges that might come with adopting an Indigenous child is accompanied by a quick laugh. It's almost as if she can't believe she was so naïve. "You get a child, a baby, you put him in a family setting and they're fine," she said, a soft Texas drawl still evident even after fifty-some years in Canada. "It never even occurred to me. I was thinking about this yesterday and thinking, I lived in the U.S.A., I grew up in the U.S.A. and went to school in the U.S.A. all my life. Never heard the words Indian or Indigenous person in school ever. Never. And it was populated by Indigenous people first, there were tons of them around. I just didn't know any."

For Bill, exposure to the Aboriginal community and issues faced by Indigenous people had been through his work at CCAS. He'd become quite concerned about a couple of things. The CCAS had a lot of Indigenous clients in the satellite office, mainly women, and "they'd come to Toronto and they were just lost. Culture shock, racism, the whole thing," he said. Problems finding housing often resulted in their children being taken into care, voluntarily, for short periods of time.

There was another issue that concerned and puzzled Bill. "They would place the child in care, say for a three-month period, then they would often disappear," he recalled. "The kids would be there and we didn't see any reason for them to become Crown Wards. But the parents would disappear, or would be hard to find."

"So we were puzzled because they seemed like really nice people, not that they didn't have problems, but none of these kids ever came in as abused, for example." Bill started looking at the statistics and saw, "an awful lot of kids in care...of all the kids in care, they were the greatest percentage of one ethnic group."

He decided that CCAS needed to connect with the Indigenous community, a novel concept for that time in Canada, especially for a child welfare institution. "We went literally through the phone book looking for Indigenous organizations in the city because we didn't know anything," he said. "Nothing!"

Through help from the Union of Ontario Indians whose offices were then located in Toronto, they found the Toronto Concerned Native Citizens Committee. The key players on the Committee, Pauline Shirt and Vern Harper, would also later become important to the Lee family. The Committee met every two weeks to discuss how things were going in the Indigenous community and they would try to come up with solutions for problems and needs.

Three CCAS staff including the very nervous branch head attended the first meeting with the Committee. "They messed around with us a bit and sometimes really raked us over the coals," said Bill. "They pretty much gave us a history lesson and in very tough and personal terms. But they were giving us good information about the kind of fears Indigenous folk would have about a big white agency."

"One of the things they were saying was, people don't know anything about Children's Aid. It looks scary, it is scary, you've done a lot of bad things in your time. Whether it's you personally, it doesn't matter." Bill and the rest of the staff took the heat. One of the things the CCAS and the Committee worked

towards was hiring an Indigenous social worker. This occurred in 1972 shortly after Bill left the agency to go back to school.<sup>1</sup>

The relationships that Bill forged in the Toronto Indigenous community would help with the raising of their son. While no one had told them about the potential challenges in adopting an Indigenous child, one of the things they did know was the need to make a personal commitment to keep their child connected with his birthright.

Ceil said their application to adopt was relatively painless. “Maybe it was selfish,” she said, “but we asked for a child at least three months old so I didn’t have to get up at night.” She had her hands full with two toddlers who were fifteen months apart. “We asked for an Indigenous boy because we already had two girls,” she said, “but gender wasn’t really an important issue; what was important was that the child had been given up voluntarily and not apprehended.”

She remembers: “All of a sudden they called up one day and said we have a kid for you, come in tomorrow. I guess they were just waiting for him to get to three months but we didn’t have any warning.”

Jeff’s sister Barbbra recalls that time as “the day he came home.” Her voice holds the excitement of the memory: “...we were just really excited, just antsy all day it seemed like...Finally they came home and Mom was holding him and he was wearing a blue sleeper, a onesie and he was so cute and we were just so happy to see him. It was so exciting. We were so glad.”

“Both Barb and Mary Jo loved him,” said Ceil. “He could have been any race. It didn’t matter except that he was a baby.”

Indigenous culture and its importance as an essential element in the life of an Indigenous child was never discussed by the adoption worker. “Not a word,” recalls Ceil. “But immediately,” she said, “because of Bill’s experience, we started getting Indigenous artists’ prints and sticking them up on the walls, getting Indigenous-themed books though there were not very many.”

Their first attempt at exposing their son to his culture was less than successful. When Jeff was about three or four, they took him to the TD Centre downtown. They had a gallery with an exhibition of Indigenous artifacts and pictures. It’s an outing the whole family remembers.

“I laugh and I cry at the same time,” when I remember this story, Ceil said. The five of us, we looked at the artifacts, and we said to Jeff, “this stuff belongs to your ancestors. He said, “who are my ancestors?” I said, “they’re all dead now, but this is stuff they’ve left behind. And he started to cry because they were dead. We felt awful.”

Jeff has a memory of the outing: “We went downtown underneath the high rises, under the TD Centre specifically, and there was an Aboriginal exhibit on in the underground walkway. [It was] to support me, saying, hey Jeff, you’re adopted and this is who you are and this is what your culture is.”

---

<sup>1</sup> As a result of the connections formed during this process, the author was hired in the fall of 1972 as the Indigenous social worker for the CCAS west end office.

“When we got there, and the interesting part was, I remember going to the glass, almost like literally put my hands on the glass and I don’t know if I started crying, but I certainly got emotional and I said, they’re all gone. Those were your people. The context of which must have hit me because I was like, oh no, am I the only one left? I got emotional, anxious. I don’t know what happened, but I kind of got the feeling of sadness, anxiousness. And they’re like, no, no, no, we didn’t mean it like that. We didn’t want this, we were trying to make this positive.”

Listening to his son sobbing, Bill thought, “[o]h, God, what did we do? Out of that, we said to each other, this isn’t the way to do it, and out of that, we started looking around for living, breathing Indigenous folks.”

“We learned by doing,” said Bill, “and often by mistakes.”

Their search led them to the local friendship centre where they learned about the Little Beavers Program, a children’s social, cultural and recreational after-school program that ran in most friendship centres across the province. The woman running the program at the time, Bill said, was very positive when they took Jeff there. He’d go to the program once a week where they did crafts and things, “so that was the beginning of things,” said Bill.

Jeff never felt his parents forced him to participate in cultural activities: “I would say they were very well balanced because my experience was things were always offered to me. I always tell folks around my adoption, around our family, is that they did it very well. They didn’t overdo the things around the house, the illustrations, books, paintings and all that,” he said. “Nor did they force me to look a certain way, either clothing or grow my hair long. When I got a bit older, they offered if I wanted to go to the after-school program at the friendship centre. I said yes. They offered if I wanted to go to the First Nations School and I said yes. And we went to things, gatherings around town, Pow Wows, large events at the friendship centre.”

Bill and Ceil had just the right touch when it came to culture, Jeff feels: “How did they acknowledge and support my Aboriginal side? By just offering and making it available. Say yes or no and not be critical of that, or not try to force that.” Jeff never felt his parents were saying to themselves, “[h]e’s not being Indigenous enough. He’s not engaging in his own culture enough.”

If they had forced him, Jeff said, “I think it may have actually had a negative impact, [I’d have] been probably a little defiant – you turn me right off completely and now I’m taking a sabbatical from my culture just to wind you up.”

“It was done tastefully and I’d say appropriately and not in large quantities,” he said.

After they enrolled Jeff in the Little Beavers Program, both Bill and Ceil started to feel they needed a way of being indigenized. It was one thing to have Jeff connected with his culture, said Bill, but they also needed to expand their own understanding of what that was and what it meant.

“We didn’t really get an opportunity to do that seriously until we sent him to Wandering Spirit Survival School,” said Bill.

Ceil said they broached the subject of the school when he was nine years old and going into grade five: “We just suggested, would you like to go? It might be a good idea to meet some Indigenous people,



get to know some of the – I didn't use the word culture, but that's what it was about.”

When they took Jeff to the school, they were told, “one of the things that's really important is that you guys become part of the community.” The school had a Parents Council and they were told membership was mandatory. Jeff's grandmother, Bill's mother, also became part of the community. They took her to the lunches, feasts and potluck dinners at the school and Bill remembers, “she loved it.”

Ceil said, “That's when we really started connecting more with the Indigenous community as a family, when he was going to school there.”

Jeff's sister Barb said there was a feast or two that she went to but that was it. Her parents, she said, “tried to help him connect to the Aboriginal stuff, but I guess now it would make sense if you have an Aboriginal child to take all of the family to it, but this was the 70's.”

The founders of the school, Pauline Shirt and Vern Harper were acknowledged leaders in the Toronto Indigenous community. Bill had first met them when he was working for Catholic Children's Aid. They complimented Ceil and Bill for their commitment to the school and said, “you guys have been really faithful, it's been really great to have you.”

“It was pretty much the beginning of our Indigenizing experience,” Bill said.

Bill remembers talking to Vern, “way before the school” about their adoption of an Indigenous child: “He just looked at me - I wasn't sure what he was going to say – this is after we worked together for a while – [and Vern said] ‘I'm not really in favour of white people adopting Indian kids, but if somebody's gotta adopt them, you guys are one of the people I'd say is okay.’ I think it's because we seemed to have a sense of, I guess solidarity is what we would call it now, were interested in Indigenizing, and he accepted us.”

One thing emerged for Jeff during his time at the School and to this day, he still can't explain it: “It was a weird experience because for some reason I carried shame or guilt of having white parents only when they came to the school. When we as a family were anywhere else, out in the community with other families, going to the mall, going to a sports game, I had no shame or embarrassment. And I don't know to this day why that is, and it was just a weird thing and it wasn't the entire time. It was just when they initially showed up for the feast or something, I got a little embarrassed and felt that separation thing.” There were other students who'd been adopted by non-Indigenous parents, he said, and he doesn't remember the other kids making any disparaging remarks to him.

“I don't know what it was,” Jeff said, “but it didn't lessen my bond with them. It was just something in the back of my quirky head here. Something set that off. I'll probably have to put a little more thought into that.” He probably mentioned it to his parents, he said, but neither Bill nor Ceil made mention of it.

Jeff, however, was very definite that he never mentioned racism that he experienced, not at the Wandering Spirit School, but at other schools he attended. It wasn't something that was discussed openly in those days, he said. It happened in the schoolyard, lasted for two or three minutes, and that's where it stayed: “I'm sure it definitely left an impact. It left a layer on you, but in the moment, you said, okay, it's over and done with...Bell rings and you go inside. As a child, you just kind of dusted it off. The effects

came through probably over the next several years.”

Reports in the media about kids getting hurt because of racism can act as triggers later on, he said. You make a connection based on an experience you had, and, “it gets you right in the stomach with the little moment of how it felt. You’re just like claustrophobic, you’re like fearful, anxious, you wanna escape. I never got to the point where I felt cornered in so much to where you would physically fight back.” This made him think that maybe he did mention it to his parents once or twice, “because I remember, this memory’s coming to me of them probably sitting down and saying, still be proud of who you are...they’re saying not to fight back...defend yourself but don’t retaliate...”

Bill wishes he’d been more aware of the racism that Jeff was experiencing. It wasn’t something they talked about although Bill and Ceil knew he was subjected to anti-Indigenous slurs when he played hockey, and that he was carded several times walking up their street. “It’s not that we denied the idea of racism, but we didn’t prepare him,” he said. A good approach might have been to reach out to someone in the Indigenous community to share their experience of racism with him and Ceil, and, more importantly with Jeff, and how to deal with it.

They told Jeff about his adoption early on. “It was so obvious he was different from the rest of us,” said Ceil. “I was walking down the street one day with him in a stroller and the two girls beside me and some lady stopped and wanted to look at the baby, and she said, oh, he’s very dark, looking at all the fair people. Very dark.”

Jeff’s features are stereotypical of what some expect of North American Indigenous people – jet black hair, dark brown almond-shaped eyes and dark copper skin. His family is fair-skinned with fair hair, except for his dad who has black hair. There were several other incidents that reinforced this physical difference from the rest of his family.

Ceil worked at Jeff’s school and she remembers one little boy in the classroom who said, are you his mother? “I said, yes I am, but he didn’t believe it.”

His sister Barb remembers being out with Jeff, and “people would ask what ethnicity he was, or whatever they said back then. At the time, the answer was Canadian Indian and so that’s what we would tell people.”

There’s another time in particular that stands out in Barb’s mind for obvious reasons. She was nine and Jeff was five: “Someone said, ‘who’s that?’ I said ‘that’s my little brother.’ So they said, ‘but he’s so different from you.’ I said, ‘he’s adopted.’ Then Jeff asked what that meant and I said, ‘it’s time to go and have a talk with Mom and Dad.’”

Barb didn’t think about the adoption much, “in between when he came home and that day [when he was five]. He’s my brother and that’s always just the way it’s been. He’s just my brother who’s a pain.”

“I’ve heard of situations,” Barb continues, “where people would say, these are my children and this is my adopted child and I just think that’s appalling because they’re your child. Why would you separate them out like that? Of course my parents, they never did that...Just, these are our kids, which is the way it’s supposed to be.”

“The adoption story evolved in a sense,” said Bill, “but again, we didn’t know what we were doing.



At that time, there were two kinds of myths. One, that the adopted kid was 'not your own' (not born to you), and the other was, 'there is really no difference.' We, I think, were in the second, but a lot of folks were in the first and it hurt and angered us. In either case, there was certainly no instruction manual that we knew of. We were just on our own and I think it was only bloody-minded love that kept us going!"

Both Bill and Ceil said they used positive terms when they told Jeff he was adopted. "We chose you' or something like that," Ceil recalls.

Taking him to the Indigenous exhibition at the TD Centre gallery was easier, Bill and Ceil thought, and a way of trying to say, "you're here, we love you, but you have this other identity, though we didn't use that term."

"The difference of colour was certainly there," Jeff said, "but the bond, I should say, of a real mother and son, of a real father and son was never in doubt in my heart space. Maybe that's why I can't specifically remember [being told I was adopted]. Because we already had the actual bond connection. To me, it wasn't a big impact to say, you're adopted and you have parents. What're you talking about? You are my parents."

By far, the biggest challenge for Bill and Ceil was understanding and dealing with Jeff's anger, anger that stemmed from his sense of abandonment, first by his birth mother and then later, by his First Nation community.

The anger started to show up around the time that Jeff was 7 or 8 years old, Bill remembers, or maybe even a bit earlier: "About every four months although it wasn't like clockwork, he would get really, really angry, not at us in particular, just angry. And what it was – it was the feeling of abandonment. It was always, why was I given up?"

Bill remembers one day that was particularly heartbreaking. Jeff was around 11 to 13, and, "...after we had spoken a bit about Viki having to give him up because she was young and had no way of caring for him like he needed, he said, 'I was a mistake. She didn't really intend to have me.' So it was all really around that. Ceil got the brunt of it being the mom, so she got it more than I did."

"That whole abandonment feeling, which we found out about much later, it must be in every adopted kid's head," Ceil said. "Why did they give me up?"

"We didn't really understand abandonment issues," said Bill. "The anger and not really understanding the cause – we didn't really get it." They spoke to a psychiatrist friend who told them, not everything has to do with adoption. Maybe it's some other issues, "[s]o he didn't think about abandonment issues...and in a sense, it's not all about adoption. It's about abandonment and about Jeff (and all Indigenous folks) being 'othered' by Canadian society. But of course, you can't exactly tear them apart. And in any event, we were so up to our ears in it, we didn't much think of it."

In his periods of anger and sadness when he was little, Jeff would tell his parents, "I hate you." When they'd give him time out in his room, he'd throw his toys out, not at anyone, just out of his room. "He was big at throwing his toys down the hall," said Bill. "Interesting his son does the same thing now when he's angry. He's a toy thrower when he's angry like his father. We think it's kind of cute, but for Jeff, the anger was coming from a different place than simply not getting his own way in something."

Before Jeff had even reached his teens, when he was around 10 or 11, he'd stay out late, recalls Bill. "He was relentless about it." This behaviour coupled with his periodic rages, "we just couldn't figure out what it was about."

"But invariably, he would break down after maybe a day or two and say, "I'm sad about my mom...it always involved a version of, why did his mom give him up. And that's when we tried to explain, Jeff, she didn't have a place for you...and that's when he said, and just laid there and sobbed, I'm just a mistake. And that just tore the guts out of us. Oh God, it was awful," said Bill. "Why couldn't I have said something different?"

In his mid-teens, he started skipping school more and, "he got into alcohol and some weed, and he got into a number of scrapes with the law," Bill said. He got involved with an Indigenous gang in the neighbourhood, cutting ties with them only when a gang member was killed. Things would turn around from time to time, and he'd go back to school and do really well, Bill said. But then he started stealing cars and getting involved with other illegal activities. Fortunately, even though he got caught, Bill said, he got off.

When Jeff turned 18, he decided to find his birth family. This was initiated by him with support from Bill and Ceil. He called the Adoption Registry and was told there was a seven year wait:

"To ask an adoptee who's been waiting 18 years and now they're age of majority, for you to say, you have to wait – to me it was almost insulting...it wasn't a rejection, but it almost felt like that. That feeling in your gut. It's like, oh my God, I'm not important."

He and his dad got the adoption papers and managed to figure out Jeff's birth name. Jeff wrote to Indian Affairs in 1990 - the letter "... a long story of who I thought I was." He received a reply letter from them with the name of his First Nation, telling him to contact them to register his membership.

Another long autobiographical letter went to his Band and six weeks later, "I got all excited," he said. "Something from my Band in the mail. I opened it and all it had was a blank sheet of paper with a status card, non-laminated, that said, please sign and return. THERE'S NOTHING ELSE IN THE ENVELOPE! What happened to my big long, I'm adopted, I think this is my reserve letter?" He didn't receive the expected confirmation of his family and a welcome back to the community.

Jeff said: "That was a huge letdown. It was just like I'd gone through another system like the government even though it was my own Band."

He asked his dad to handle any calls from his family. He wasn't sure he was ready to talk to them. One of his aunts called and spoke to Bill, sharing some of Jeff's family history, including the fact he had three siblings. A couple of months later, Jeff was home alone when his older sister phoned. She had also been taken into care and adopted.

She told Jeff that their mom, Viki had died in Toronto several years previous after getting some sort of beating. Recalls Bill, "[h]e wasn't devastated, but he sure was shaken. We went out for a very long walk (I remember it was damned cold and there was a lot of ice on the streets), and we talked back and forth, both of us processing it all."

"It was horrible," Ceil said. "He was doing really well in school, it must have been Grade 11, and

then after that...everything went downhill and he eventually quit.” Jeff started drinking and staying at his girlfriend’s, not bothering to tell his parents his whereabouts.

The death of his sister Mary Jo in 1994 would prove to be a turning point for Jeff: “Though her death hit us all hard, for Jeff it was quite a particular blow. They had always had a strong relationship and he kind of went off the rails for a while,” said Bill, “he did have a relapse. He had been really progressing with his life, interested in getting his education. When he came out of that though, there was no stopping him.”

During Mary Jo’s illness, Jeff had been, “a tower of strength,” said Bill. He’d made arrangements for his sister to see a Traditional Healer in Minnesota and travelled there with his mom and Mary Jo who was by then, quite ill. After a few days of healing ceremonies for her, they returned home. When she passed, Jeff lit a sacred fire and kept it going for her.

He returned to Mohawk College in Brantford for his second year in the Social Services Program. One night he came home and told his parents, “I need to get treatment.”

“By this time,” said Bill, “he had a child, he and his girlfriend...so that means he was about 25. But he did it. That’s the important thing and all we could do is say, okay, you’re gonna go to treatment. Okay.”

There was, “pretty much no looking back,” said Bill. “He became much more comfortable in his Indigenous self, became very seriously involved in a number of aspects of the culture, became a Pow Wow dancer, all sorts of stuff. So it took that long.”

One of the things that causes Jeff to get emotional is the cold reception from his home First Nation. He’s had subsequent visits with family there and he describes the visits as a, “non-item...It wasn’t like, sit down and tell me your life story. We’ve known all about you and we were hoping you’d come home one day, or at least come back to the Band and make contact. It wasn’t any of that elaboration and excitement. Oh yeah, just another one of the family members who’s come back, who were adopted out.”

“I know that our community was affected by Residential School and those intergenerational effects,” he said, and he has an intellectual understanding of the dysfunction and behaviours in Indigenous communities. He tells other adoptees, if going back to your community doesn’t go well for you, “hey, it’s not you. It’s a reflection of your community and the damage they’re still going through.”

Jeff is particularly concerned for adoptees, “...coming back to the community after being hurt and damaged and they’re just given not exactly the cold shoulder, but a flat non-response. They’re almost going through that trauma, reliving it to a similar degree,” he said. “Me, I coped with it okay,” he said. “I have a loving family and we all got through it just fine.”

Communities should have a Welcoming Back Ceremony, Jeff suggested, “to honour that member coming back, either through their annual Pow Wows or through a specific event once a month or year where they say, hey now, we’re gonna bring in the community, invite everybody, feast, ceremony, whatever else is entailed in that, basically to complete a rite of passage [...] I’m tearing up right now visualizing it, to see what it would bring for somebody. What that would bring for me.”

There was never any question that Bill and Ceil loved him, said Jeff, no matter the challenges he presented: “I never felt like they thought, he’s too hard a case and we can’t handle it.”

“When I got to the cognitive level, 10, 11 or 12, they said, ‘Jeff, it doesn’t matter how angry you get at us, or what you say to us out of anger and frustration, we’re still gonna love you’...they would just come back with unconditional expression of, we’re gonna love you no matter what. Nice try, we’re still gonna love you. You can try again next week. We’re still gonna love you.”

It’s what Bill called, his and Ceil’s “bloody-minded love.”

“I’ve never regretted a moment of our adoption of Jeff,” Bill said. “I understand the complexities of it in terms of community, I understand why somebody would look sideways at us, but I think we did the right thing. We could have done better of course.”

“But I still think the issue’s not so much the adoption issue per se,” continued Bill. “It’s the crappy racism and colonialism of the state that puts Indigenous kids in the system. Many, many just should never have been taken in the first place, and those that were taken, they and their adoptive families should have had some particular help available.”

“One thing that Ceil and I gradually figured out over the years,” said Bill, “was that our family was not a white family. We had started out as a white family, but with Jeff as part of our family, we couldn’t be white. I think that was part of what led us to being open to becoming part of the community as much as we could.”

A final note to this story that is, of course, not finished, is that Jeff lives out west. He originally moved there to be near a daughter who moved to her mother’s reserve. His first child who has significant disability issues lives in a group home near her mother in Akwesasne Territory. Jeff is now happily married, has two children with his wife and works as a social worker with the government.<sup>2</sup>

*Bill is a retired associate professor from McMaster University and continues to be involved in community development particularly with Indigenous communities. Ceil is a retired editor and researcher. Barb is an editor and researcher and lives with her husband and family. They all live in Toronto.*

*Barb Nahwegahbow began her career as a community organizer and cultural activist in 1972 with the Catholic Children’s Aid Society in Toronto. Her focus there was working with Indigenous families and developing culturally-specific services for them including foster homes and a group home. Since those beginnings, Barb has worked with and in the Toronto Indigenous community as a vocational rehabilitation counsellor, policy analyst, and Executive Director of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and Anishnawbe Health Toronto. She now works as an independent consultant, writer and photojournalist and continues to be based in Toronto. She is Anishinaabe and a citizen of Whitefish River First Nation in northern Ontario.*

---

<sup>2</sup> The interviews took place in July 2016 when Jeff and his family were in Toronto visiting his parents and sister.