



Late last year, they took the shape of a petite 10-year-old Anishinaabe girl from a First Nation in eastern Saskatchewan whose heart was broken by the insensitive remark of a teacher's aide.

The fallout of what happened after Isabella Kulak was shamed for wearing her ribbon skirt on formal day in December at the Kamsack Comprehensive Institute has "gone all the way around the world," says her father, Chris Kulak.

"It's quite an event for us, and for Native women, Native men, and Métis families," says Mr. Kulak. "We're getting so much positive feedback. I wish this didn't ever happen to my girl. But I think that she's been chosen to be a representative of her culture and people. And we feel very honoured to be part of that."

Isabella's experience has prompted calls for a Ribbon Skirt Day to be held in Canada every January 4. It has elicited messages of support from

Indigenous leaders across the country. It prompted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to call on Canadians to stand "with courageous young people like Isabella Kulak."

One hundred and forty years after the Indian Act attempted to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into European-based society by outlawing spiritual ceremonies and traditional symbols, Isabella's confrontation with intolerance has generated awareness, understanding, and an appreciation for diversity and cultural self-expression.

Isabella and her family are from the Cote First Nation, and she attends school in nearby town of Kamsack. Although she is most comfortable in sweatpants and tee-shirts, Isabella and her older sister decided to wear their ribbon skirts on December 18 when their school said they should dress in special clothes.

The skirts had been made by their Aunt Farrah. Bella's was covered with flowers and pretty blue and green ribbons.

"She was so excited. She wanted to look perfect. She changed her shirt three times to make sure everything matched. And she went to school," Lana Kulak, her mother, said in an interview.

But the excitement did not last the day. "When she came home later that day, I noticed she was not wearing her ribbon skirt anymore," says Lana Kulak. "There was a sad look on her face. She was pretty quiet."

Later that evening, Isabella snuggled in beside her mother and, with some coaching, was convinced to explain why she was upset.



“A teaching assistant had told her that her clothes didn’t match, that what she was wearing was not formal at all, and that maybe next time she should wear something like another girl in school was wearing. And she then pointed to another little girl in the classroom who was probably wearing a Walmart-store-bought dress,” says Lana. “So it was pretty sad. It broke her heart.”

The following morning, Lana Kulak told her husband what had happened. And Chris Kulak was not happy. Although it was a Saturday, he telephoned the teaching assistant who lives just down the street. The woman did not deny making the comments.

“I told her, ‘I am not trying to get you fired. I’m trying to tell you that you’re wrong, and it shouldn’t have happened, and we should talk more about this,’” says Mr. Kulak.

The following day, he received a call from the deputy director of the Good Spirit School Division, which operates 28 schools in east-central Saskatchewan. Mr. Kulak can only presume that the teaching assistant had explained the situation to her principal, who had taken the matter to higher authorities.

“We had about an hour-and-a-half conversation. And she [the deputy director] was very, very aware that this was very wrong,” says Mr. Kulak. “I didn’t have to do a whole bunch of explaining. I think she had already come to the conclusion that something had gone on, and that it was a tremendous error.”

That was followed by a phone call from Quintin Robertson, the division’s director of education. He “committed right away that there needed to be some serious education done, and some more involvement with Indigenous people here, and that the school division maybe wasn’t utilizing the way they should,” says Mr. Kulak.

That could have been the end of the matter, as far as the Kulak’s were concerned. But it was just the beginning.

Lana Kulak told two of her sisters about the interaction between Isabella and the teaching assistant, and her sisters were irate. Of them told her half-sister, who told another family member, who posted the story on Facebook.



“I received a call probably less than 24 hours later, and it had gone viral,” says Lana, adding that she and her immediate family are not on Facebook or any other form of social media and were unaware of the attention that Isabella’s ribbon skirt was generating. “Our story was everywhere and there were people getting in contact with us. And it hasn’t really stopped since and it’s almost a month now.”

The Cote First Nation got involved, as did Chief George Cote. Isabella started receiving calls from leaders of national Indigenous organizations.

“Then it just became a bigger social issue. And it’s just gone all the way around the world,” says Mr. Kulak.

The Kulak family reached out to the school board to say that, despite the attention the issue was getting, they did not want to cause any harm to the teaching assistant’s career. But by then, the young woman had already resigned and could not be convinced to return to her job.





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"We tried to reach out to her. I think she was very embarrassed and ashamed, and maybe overwhelmed as well—and maybe couldn't come back for personal reasons," says Mr. Kulak.

But Isabella was learning that it is OK to be proud of her ribbon skirt.

The next time Isabella Kulak wants to wear a ribbon skirt, she will have many from which to choose.

Ever since her story went viral, ribbon skirts have been arriving from across Canada. "They all just came in the mail, and some people came and gave them to me," says Isabella.

Isabella has also been sent ribbons so she can create her own garment. And she has been given frankincense oils, pictures, heartfelt letters, and even \$100 from a retired RCMP officer who now lives in Germany.

"I think that we can see this as a teachable moment," says Chris Kulak.

"We didn't want blood over this," he says. "We just wanted some awareness, we wanted reconciliation, and all these things that had been talked about for so long. And now we're

getting some movement, and it's very positive."

The colourful skirts have been worn by First Nations and Métis women in Canada since the 1700s. Historically, skirts worn by Indigenous women were made from animal hide and decorated with natural paint. The silhouette of the skirt comes from a sacred place and follows the outline of the Mikikiwaap (Cree) or Tipi (Dakota). The bottom of the skirts would touch the earth's medicines; as the women walked, Mother Earth would know who it was that was making their presence felt on her back and her prayers were answered.





After the introduction of trade goods from Europe, Indigenous communities began receiving ribbons through goods exchanges with European settlers. The ribbon skirts were made of cotton calico and ribbons, and continued the historical tradition of carrying the meanings and teachings of the original skin skirts.

Ribbon skirts started becoming popular in communities around the Great Lakes, then spread across the prairies and into the northwest.

The skirts are a symbol of womanhood among Indigenous communities. They tell a story of adaptation and survival—emblematic of the ways in which Indigenous women adapted to the new reality of colonization. Sacred and spiritual, the ribbon skirt holds centuries worth of history between its seams.

Today, they are both a spiritual symbol and a political statement. They speak to the ways in which Indigenous women have survived attempts to wipe out their heritage.

Lisa Marie Bourque is a Métis woman who lives in Fort McMurray, Alberta and runs a store called the Fort McMurray Trading Post, which sells Indigenous apparel. She says ribbon skirts are worn during ceremonies by Indigenous women of many different First Nations and Métis backgrounds.

“It’s a statement of surviving a cultural genocide,” says Ms. Bourque, “And a lot of women will also wear them just to feel proud of their indigenous roots.”

There have been significant awakenings among Indigenous young women in recent years about their culture and the need to embrace it, said Ms. Bourque. It wasn’t that long ago that there were pressures to appear to be white, “but nowadays they’re fighting over who is more Native.”

NWAC held a ribbon skirt competition in 2020, which attracted over 200 submissions from Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people from across the country. A selection of ribbon skirts were purchased for NWAC’s new Resiliency Lodge. They are displayed on the walls of the “medicine hallway” that leads to the medicinal bath and other healing spaces at the Lodge.

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