Presentation by Andrew Martindale at the spune'luxtth' (Penelakut) March for the Children, August 4, 2025, Chemainus B.C.

It is an honour to stand before you today at the invitation of the Supne'luxutth Sulxwe'en (the Penelakut Elders Committee). I want to acknowledge the work of this committee, most of whom are Survivors of Kuper Island Industrial School and other Indian Residential Schools. Many are on this stage today. The work to locate children who died and went missing from Kuper is advanced because of the vision and strength of the Sulxwe'en who began this work long before support from the federal and provincial governments became available.

As many non-Indigenous Canadians now know, Canada is not the country we once hoped existed. If we as a nation are to become the country we aspire to, it will be because of the leadership and guidance of Survivors such as the Sulxwe'en. I encourage the governments of Canada and British Columbia to assist them in this work.

The task ahead is considerable; it will outlive most of us. As a nation, we have an obligation to find the children who died and went missing from residential schools and related institutions such as so-called Indian Hospitals. The wealth of Canada emerges from the theft of Indigenous lands and resources. Residential Schools existed to facilitate that theft. The argument that there are no resources to do this work is illogical. Canada's wealth derives in part from Residential Schools.

You have heard from my colleague Ashley Whitworth on the results of the initial assessment of archives about Kuper. We have also received testimony from survivors on the conditions, events, and consequences of Kuper for individuals, families, and communities. Some of this information relates to the death of children and the places where they now rest. Our work has focused on listening to this information and searching the landscape and waters around Kuper. Today I am going to provide information of our work, a summary of our results so far, and of the work that lies ahead.

We have information that children who died at Kuper are in 6 places. So far we have examined three of these.

Penelakut Cemetery

We have identified two students who died at Kuper and are buried in the Penelakut Cemetery. We know of one other student buried in a different cemetery. These graves are marked and most date from the earliest decades of the school. From this we know that some children who died at Kuper were buried in cemeteries.

We have scanned over 3500 square meters of the Penelakut Cemetery using ground penetrating radar, supplemented with LiDAR and identified 342 unmarked graves. 111 of these are possible graves, 133 are probable graves, and 98 are likely graves based on the qualities of the GPR results. We do not know if any of these are children from Kuper, although it seems likely that some will be. Their identification would require forensic excavation at a considerable effort and expense. The Elders Committee reminds you of the spiritual and emotional cost to such work, and they have not yet decided how to proceed.

The Kuper Cemetery

The Kuper archives identify a cemetery in use in from the earliest years of the school. We have located a place where 5 Kuper staff graves are located, including the grave of the first school principal, Father Donckele who died in 1907. This area is not recognized as a cemetery in records today, but is clearly formally organized. We have scanned this location with GPR at different frequencies and using single and multi-channel systems, again supplemented with LiDAR. Behind the row of staff graves are 4 rows of GPR patterns that look like graves, 26 in total. It seems likely that some of these are the resting places of children who died in the earliest decades of Kuper. As with other unmarked graves, identification requires forensic excavation. This location is complex as the cemetery was constructed on the ancient Penelakut village of Yuxwula'us (Ya Wul Aas) and is thus an archaeological site.

The Apple Tree

Monty Charlie was a survivor of Kuper, who passed away some years ago. As part of his healing journey, he wanted others to know of his experience. He disclosed to us the location where the priests sexually assaulted him, and he related a story of a child's murder. He saw a nun push a young girl out of a 3rd floor window of the school, killing her. They buried her beside a nearby apple tree south of the mains school building. The stump of this tree remains there today and Monty showed me the precise location where she was buried. GPR revealed a clear pattern of a child-size unmarked grave in this place. Ashley and her team are working to locate this girl in the archives, but it will not surprise you that effort was made by the school staff to hide her identity and her death.

Kuper Environs

The Kuper residential school was constructed in the village of the Penelakut people. The Elders have a general concern that any new construction might encounter and disturb an unmarked grave. We have conducted numerous GPR, magnetic gradiometer, and LiDAR scans of areas that are being developed to help identify possible graves. This work is ongoing, but we have not yet identified any signals of concern. It is a reminder, however, of

what it means to live in the shadow of a residential school – any work might disturb the unmarked grave of a child.

In addition to these places, we have heard of three other area where children who died at Kuper are reported to rest.

Furnace

Elders indicated that a building south of the main school building had an underground casement with a furnace. Children, particularly infants, are reported to have been incinerated in this furnace. We have found a cement casement that matches the air photos of the location of the furnace from this building. We have not investigated it. We have consulted with forensic anthropologists who have noted that the recovery and identification of incinerated ancestral remains is very challenging. The Elders have not yet decided how to proceed.

Behind Kuper

Many stories of Kuper related to the sexual assault of girls by priests and of boys by nuns resulting in pregnancies. We have reports that these resulted in aborted fetuses and murdered infants and we know of two locations near the school buildings that were used to bury them. We have not begun our investigations of these areas. It is a complex landscape and the location of infant graves in GPR and other geophysical methods is possible, but challenging.

In the Sea

We have reports that children who died at Kuper were put into burlap bags, weighed with anchors and dropped into the ocean off the main residential school dock or during boat crossings from Kuper to Vancouver Island. The location, identification, and recovery of ancestors from underwater contexts is challenging. We have begun surveys using side-scanning sonar and drone-based LiDAR, and are exploring other technologies to advance this work. We do not know if the remains of children can be found under these conditions, but we are determined to look for them.

The work to located and identify children who died at Kuper is complex. It relies on the use of technologies that were not developed to locate unmarked graves, but which have been shown to have value in this work.

The Sulxwe'en have directed the following:

- All work is to be done in good relation and following Penelakut laws and protocols.
- All results belong exclusively to Penelakut, which is why we have not made any prior announcements of results, and why information is being released in formal legal proceedings such as this gathering.
- A key goal is to find missing children and to provide their families with information regarding their fate and resting place. As noted, we have located unmarked graves, but we have not made any identifications. We are working with the archival data and survivor testimony to identify missing children and their resting places.
- The Elders are supportive of the development of methods for this work, so that other search teams can benefit from our knowledge. Much of the best practices guidance in use across the country can be traced back to communities like Penelakut.
- The work must centre the care and support for survivors, including those from the many communities from which children were brought to Kuper.

Lastly, I would like to note that while this work continues, the model on which we have worked so far is inadequate. Survivors should not have to depend on volunteers such as myself to locate the unmarked graves of children who died at residential schools. In any other context the search for children who died at school would be a national priority, and we must ask ourselves why it is not in this case. Canada has an obligation to remediate the crimes committed against Indigenous peoples in many ways, of which support for the search for missing children from Indian Residential Schools is a small but important step.