

## Talking Stick Festival's *Fragments* grew out of survivors' stories



By [Tony Montague](#), January 25, 2011

Lara Kramer is too young to have gone to an Indian residential school. But the dancer and choreographer's mother, Ida Baptiste, is a survivor of two of those brutalizing institutions, which operated in Canada from the 1840s until just 14 years ago, when the last one closed. Baptiste's experiences, and those of other aboriginal children forcibly committed to the schools, provide the inspiration for Kramer's full-length contemporary-dance piece *Fragments* at this year's Talking Stick Festival.

"My mom was very vocal and open about living through that school system," says Kramer, who is of Ojibwa and Cree descent, reached at her home in Montreal. "I remember being aware of it from the time I was very young. She carries a lot of anger towards what happened—it still lies heavy on her. She went to two schools in Manitoba. The first one, where she was sent when she was about four, was in Portage la Prairie, the other was in Brandon."

The former school in Portage la Prairie is now the Indian Residential School Museum of Canada. Soon after its opening in 2008, Kramer obtained a week-long artistic residency to research and begin the process of creating *Fragments*. She decided her mother should come with her. "It was an intense time for my mother, but I think she also appreciated being able to go back to these roots."

Kramer interviewed her mother at length. "*Fragments* grew out of that," she recalls. "From there, I started working with four dancers. My objective wasn't to tell my mother's story but use it as a platform to inspire the work. I wanted to

find a way to pass on knowledge of these schools through art that isn't necessarily judgmental. I feel very strongly that anytime there's a discussion about the schools, especially in the media, it's viewed as still this taboo thing. People aren't keeping their minds, hearts, and bodies open to information."

At the end of her time in Portage la Prairie, Kramer presented a work in progress. Then she was offered another residency to complete and present it for the first time—at the beautiful Gesù Theatre, in the crypt of an old church in downtown Montreal. "Although it was a sacred space, there was no limitation on what I could do. The churches were closely linked with the history of the residential schools, and it was a very healing time. I brought in a few elders to meet with the dancers, and hear directly some of the survivors' stories. They would often come in and watch, and were moved by the work. It was very strengthening for us, and being in that place really grounded us in the work."

*Fragments* has been presented in three Montreal venues, but the performances at Talking Stick—the aboriginal-arts festival that runs at venues around town from Tuesday (February 1) to February 13—are the first to take place outside that city.

"All the dancers are women, so it's from more of a female perspective," Kramer says. "I wanted to show the daily routines and lives of the children. It isn't a linear piece—the title mirrors the structure of the work and is a reflection of what [the policy of] assimilation did to indigenous cultures."

Kramer herself dances in *Fragments*. The three other performers are white, which was not intentional but adds another level to this intriguing piece. "I came to realize that part of my process was to work with dancers who had little knowledge of the schools," Kramer explains. "They spent many months learning about this history. It was amazing to bring artists who were largely unaware of that part of Canadian history to the point where they were fully invested, knowledgeable, and passionate about it."

**Lara Kramer presents *Fragments* as part of the Talking Stick Festival event *Inspirations: An Evening of Dance and Theatre*, at the [Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre](#) on Wednesday (February 2).**

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