



Nishnawbe Aski Nation

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Manitoba Keewatinowi  
Okimakanak Inc.

## NEWS RELEASE

Friday September 9, 2016

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **NAN, MKO SUPPORT GORD DOWNIE'S 'SECRET PATH' PROJECT**

**MARTEN FALLS FIRST NATION:** Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler and Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson are pleased to support a new project by famed Canadian artist Gord Downie to reveal the tragic story of First Nation youth during the Indian Residential School (IRS) era in his own unique way.

Announced today, "Secret Path" is a multimedia project that will include an album, graphic novel and animated film depicting the short life of 12-year-old Charlie "Chanie" Wenjack, who died in 1966 while trying to return home to Ogoki Post after fleeing Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in northwestern Ontario.

"What started as a personal journey for Gord to bring the tragic story of Charlie Wenjack to a national audience will surely become a call to action that will resonate with all Canadians. We are deeply moved that Gord has travelled to Marten Falls First Nation this week to meet with members of Charlie's family and we are honoured to join with the family and community to support this project," said NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler. "We are grateful for Gord's efforts to shine much-needed light on this dark chapter of history and his humility, sincerity and artistry is matched only by his determination to tell the story of Charlie Wenjack and all youth from the Residential School era youth who never made it home. We are confident that this project will spark national interest in our shared history and help move all Canadians towards the path to reconciliation."

Representatives from NAN, MKO and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation were pleased to accompany Gord Downie and filmmakers during a two-day visit to Marten Falls this week. The singer visited the grave of Charlie Wenjack and met with surviving family members.

"I am honored and humbled to support the "Secret Path" project on behalf of the MKO First Nations and all of our citizens who have been directly and inter-generationally impacted by the legacy of the federal Indian Residential Schools policy. Our MKO First Nations and

citizens across northern Manitoba have experienced similar historical tragedies as a result of the IRS policy, such as the tragedy that happened to young Charlie Wenjack,” said MKO Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson. “The NAN-MKO Accord on Health, which we formally adopted last month during the NAN Keewaywin Conference, binds our organizations together in partnership on health and healing initiatives that are of mutual importance to the First Nations across Northern Manitoba and Ontario. The Secret Path Project represents such an initiative towards justice and healing, and to have an iconic artist such as Gord Downie take a personal interest in the plight of the former IRS students and in the healing process of our communities is truly remarkable. On behalf of the MKO Chiefs and community members, I would like to offer sincere and heartfelt appreciation to Gord for his tremendous efforts, and recognize him for his vision of reconciliation and for his commitment to helping the IRS survivors and their family members across Canada achieve a lasting justice through the Secret Path project.”

Gord Downie was well-received during his visit to Marten Falls by the family and entire community. A ceremony was held in his honour where he was presented with a beaded vest by Marten Falls First Nation Chief Bruce Achneepineskum, an eagle feather by MKO Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson and a blanket and beaded medallion by NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler.

Next month marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Charlie Wenjack, who died on October 22, 1966 near Kenora, Ontario. Travelling on foot in an attempt to make the 1,000-kilometre journey home, his body was found on October 23 along a rail line approximately 60 kilometres from the school.

His tragic story received national attention with the publication of the article “The Lonely Death of Charlie Wenjack” in Maclean’s magazine in February 1967. One of thousands of Aboriginal children who died due to Canada’s Residential School system, his story has inspired many artistic and creative tributes, and was the subject of a moving Heritage Minute by Historica Canada released this summer.

Proceeds from the Secret Path album, book and film will be donated to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation is dedicated to honoring the experiences of survivors that endured the schools, of exposing the impact and legacy of the residential school system and helping move the country further down the path of reconciliation.

More information on the Secret Path is available at [www.secretpath.ca](http://www.secretpath.ca)  
To view the Charlie Wenjack Heritage Minute please visit [www.historicacanada.ca](http://www.historicacanada.ca)

**Nishnawbe Aski Nation** represents 49 First Nations in James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario portions of Treaty No. 5 – an area covering two thirds of the province of Ontario in Canada.

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**Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.** is a non-profit, political advocacy organization that has represented 30 First Nation communities in Manitoba’s North since 1981.

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