'People are too scared to talk'

Injured by police violence, Simon Moccasin advocates for Indigenous rights

BY ALBINA RETYUNSKIKH



IN DECEMBER 2014, Simon Moccasin was walking to a Christmas party in Regina when two police officers stopped him, thinking he had stolen a TV. They were wrong, but they pinned him to the wall and one shoved him into a police car, leaving him with injuries to his face and shoulder. "I could feel the racism," says Moccasin of the moment the police started speaking to him. "Living as an Indigenous person, you can just feel it. It's weird, you know, how you have those survival instincts?"

The incident fuelled Moccasin's activism. It happened just after the protests in Ferguson, Mo., where Michael Brown was fatally shot by police. Moccasin decided he needed to stand up against police brutality in Canada, too, so he filed a complaint with the Public Complaints Commission (PCC). Moccasin, who is Nehiyawak (Cree), spoke from Regina with Albina Retyunskikh about his experiences and his desire for change.

AR: You are a Sixties Scoop survivor. Can you tell me a bit about that?
SM: My mother was forced to sign me away. The police threatened to hurt my late father. I was raised by a rich white family. I didn't know my culture. This is what was happening in the Sixties Scoop. We weren't connected to our culture, and we weren't part of this white society. But I'm resilient. I managed to go to university; I got those credentials, and I believe I am successful in the white world. But there is always that thought at the back of your mind: who are you really?

AR: You first met your mother in 1993. How did that happen?
SM: She got my information through the band office when I applied for school. She was in town and called me to meet downtown. We met, and I cried. It felt like I never left. It was that powerful. Thank goodness that happened. I don't know what I'd do without her now. I owe her everything. Even now, she's my rock.

AR: What happened after the police stopped you that night in 2014?
SM: I told the first officer that I knew my rights, and I was going to a Christmas party. As I was talking, I saw this other police officer sneak up on me. I used to work for the police college as an actor, playing a thug, and I helped them with their training. I learned about this triangle thing, where there's the perpetrator and then two officers form a triangle with that person. So as I'm looking at this guy talking, I thought, "There's got to be another officer." And all of a sudden, this guy pinned me against the wall. He couldn't get my arms together. Then they both tried to put my arms together to put the handcuffs on. That's abuse.

AR: How did you feel?
SM: I just couldn't take it anymore. It was enough. I told the officers, "You're on my ancestral land. You're trying to arrest me on my own land, and I didn't do anything." I knew this one officer was racist. I told him straight. I gave him a history lesson on the treaties, too. He didn't want to hear it. He slammed me to the side of the car, and then he slammed me to the back seat where I hit my face on the plastic seat.

AR: You filed a complaint with the PCC, which ruled that the officers used excessive force but that it wasn't a case of racial profiling. What happened after that?
SM: The service implemented some sort of cultural training — that's what they told me. I don't know what happened with those cops. I imagine they are still working, because nothing gets done around here.

AR: What is the relationship between Indigenous people and the police in Regina today?
SM: It's an ongoing genocide. If there were more people like me standing up, they wouldn't be brutalizing us, but people are too scared to talk. It's like "Saskabama" — the Alabama of the north.

AR: Did that incident change the way you think about police?
SM: Yes, it did, because I trusted them. And now my trust is gone. They apologized, and I said I forgave them because I just wanted it to be done. I have to move on from that. But it keeps happening. I don't have anything against white people, by the way. I am against people who use their privilege to undermine people of colour and keep us down. I think they are just scared.

AR: Do you think change is possible?
SM: I do, but we have to get rid of the leadership — the patriarchy. Once we do that, things will get better. People need to start listening to Indigenous people instead of their ego and stupidity. That's what is killing everything. If Indigenous ideology and thoughts could be implemented in the system, it would help get us out of this predicament. Our way of life is completely different from that of white people. We need to push hard to make change happen.

Albina Retyunskikh is a Broadview *intern from the graduate journalism program at Centennial College.*

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PHOTOGRAPH BY TROY FLEECE/REGINA LEADER-POST

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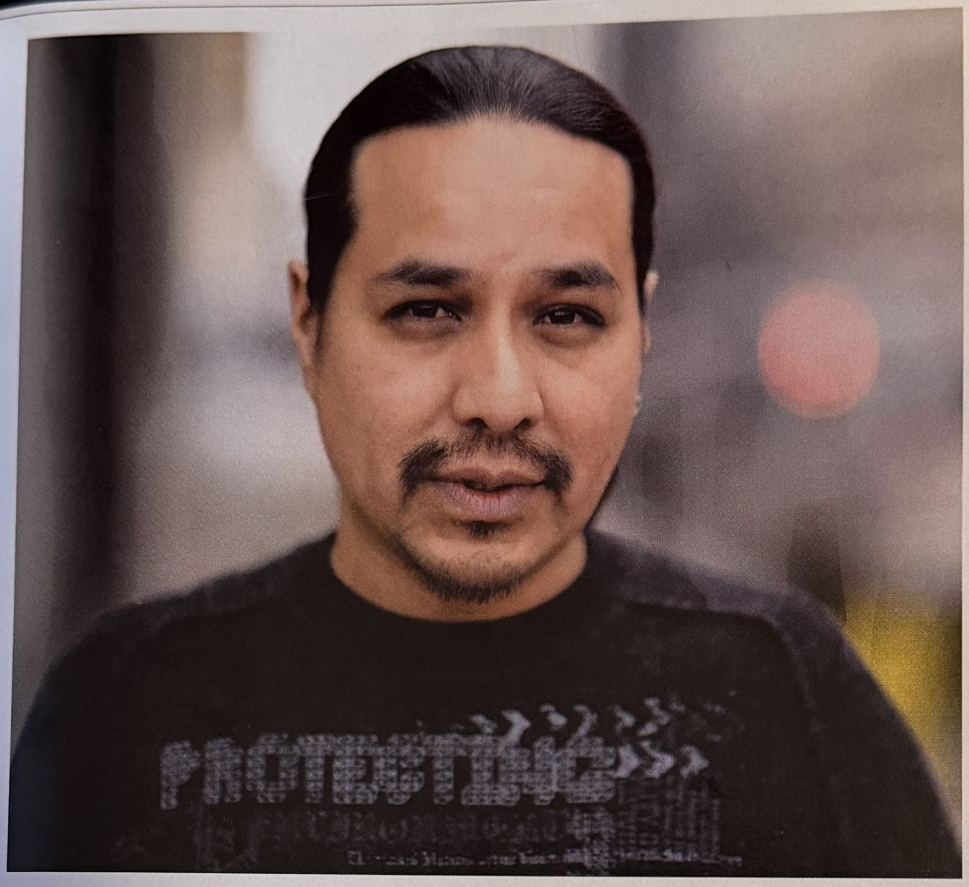
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