Kuujjuag woman brings back symbol of the Inuit past

"How can you be proud of yourself when you don't understand where you came from?"

SARAH ROGERS

KUUJJUAQ-The Eskimo identification discs once used by the Canadian government to track Inuit faded in the early 1970s as Inuit across the country adopted surnames.

But a young Nunavik woman has revived that symbol to tell a part of her history.

The inside of Olivia Ikey Duncan's right arm tells a story about her family's past: that's where she bears a tattoo of the coin-shaped disc, held in place by a thinly-inked string.

"I always wanted a tattoo," said Duncan, 24. "But I didn't want a butterfly or a star, and I wanted it to say something about who I am."

Earlier this year, Duncan, who lives in Kuujjuaq, where she works for the Kativik Regional Government, attended a reconciliation workshop for Aboriginal youth in Toronto. There, she learned about how Inuit and other groups were colonized.

"I cried so much that day - I couldn't believe that my people had gone through that and survived," she said. "How they were categorized, and how they were treated ... that's when I said 'that's my tattoo.'" Similar to the original, Duncan's disc reads Eskimo Identification Canada, E8-XXXX. The E8 denotes the Ungava region, which would normally be followed by a four-digit identification number.

Duncan said she's only ever seen photographs of the discs, although both her grandmother and father used them until the early 1980s.

"I've talked to family members who told me how their cheques used to come in addressed to their disc numbers," she said.

Before she decided on her tattoo, Duncan researched the history of the tags, and how Inuit were administered-a history she wishes was more available to Inuit youth today.

Duncan learned that the first changes to Inuit names happened in the 20th century with the arrival of missionaries to the Canadian Arctic.