

## Iftar dinner provides food for thought on Canada's future



**By Brock Weir**

If we don't move forward together as a community, we're not going to build bridges to create a better future, according to Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, a member of the Governing Circle for the National Centre on Truth and Reconciliation.

For Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux, an intergenerational survivor of Canada's Residential School system, it is important for somebody to take that first step in opening up that all important door.

'If we don't work together, if we don't learn about each other, appreciate and respect each other's ways, we're not going to get there,' she said, before adding with a laugh, 'People don't invite Aboriginal people to their homes' and trust me, Aboriginal people don't invite other people either.'

This Thursday, Muslims around the world mark the end of Ramadan, a month of fasting intended to provide spiritual reflection and renewal, and, more recently, to foster a sense of community at fast-breaking Iftar dinners held each night at sundown.

These doors were thrown wide open in Aurora at one such dinner, hosted by the Aurora Cultural Centre, in conjunction with the Intercultural Dialogue Institute of Toronto, which attracted a wide cross-section of the York Region community, including local leaders and cultural advocates.

Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux, one of 90 honorary witnesses taking part in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, brought this message to the dinner as keynote speaker. For her, education and community are key in moving forward together, regardless of culture.

'The question was what are we going to do now that the Commission has finished the initial part of its mandate?' she said. 'We spent a whole lot of time working on the 'truth' component because there were so many stories that needed to be told across Canada and it was very difficult to get to 'reconciliation.' It has been left in our hands.'

Canada's First Nations have many practices similar to Ramadan with the purpose of 'revisiting our spiritual practices', commonalities which can be found across the board.

'We certainly don't have the edge on it, but we did have a lot of different kinds of experiences that made it challenging in this country when laws were made by the Federal Government that prohibited spiritual practices from being done by Aboriginal people. People went to jail in this country.'

Jail, however, was not necessarily a bad thing, she added, tongue-in-cheek. Relaying the story of an elder from Manitoulin Island who was jailed for observing his spiritual practices. Once in jail, however, he found many other spiritual leaders found themselves in the same boat, which fostered many conversations and ultimately strengthened their practices in the end.

"Canada was once a peacekeeper on the world stage and that comes from the aboriginal influence," she said. "I think we need to understand that. We need to move backwards to move forwards. We need to go back and look at the kinds of things we understood to be true between us and we need to pull some of those things forward because they have great utility for the health of this nation."

Asked by Councillor Wendy Gaertner what her ultimate wish would be for a "next step" following the Commission's report, Dr. Wesley-Esquimeaux said out of the 94 recommendations in the report, only one pertained to young people. Canada needs to support young people, but particularly through the Canadian Roots Exchange, which brings together youth from every single background across Canada fostering vital dialogue.

"There are other groups across Canada who are really struggling to get what they want to get," she said. "If you could do anything at all, it would be pick one of those [youth] organizations the next time you do a fundraiser. They are really trying to build the kind of country you guys want ? [the kinds of things] when you were young and idealistic, before you got married, had kids, and all that stuff. They are trying to do that and they want you to be a part of it."