

Area students promote diversity in our pockets through Change the Bill challenge



Until Viola Desmond replaced John A. Macdonald on Canada's \$10 bill, most of Canada's money has featured a historic Prime Minister, politician, or the Monarch of the day.

Area students, however, would like to see more diversity in our pockets and recently answered the call from the Native Women's Association of Canada to take part in the Change the Bill movement, a call to action that aims to promote reconciliation through art by commissioning Indigenous artists to reimagine what the \$20 would look like if it featured heroic Indigenous women.

Grade 8 students at Newmarket's Pickering College turned student-historians as they combed through Canada's history to research and identify women who fit the bill, so to speak, as well as other heroines and heroes from 19th-century Canadian changemakers.

'The Canadian bills have had almost 150 years of history, but an Indigenous woman has never been featured on the \$20 bill,' says student Claire Zeng. 'We think there are many Indigenous women who have done very significant things and they do have a right to be a part of the bill.'

Setting out in groups of two, the students researched historic persons and made the case on their behalf.

Claire's group shone a particular light on Indigenous water advocates, including Josephine Mandamin, an Anishinaabe elder, and Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe.

'Josephine carried a bucket of water to walk around the Great Lakes to spread awareness of how important it is for us to protect water from pollution. It was shocking to me because she did that in her 77 years and walked over 25,000 miles,' says Claire. 'For Rita Joe, she was a very strong Canadian poet who wrote many poems and songs to speak about her culture, especially when she also attended residential schools when she was a child. She just really wanted to speak about the truth.'

As the students explored history, they also had a chance to connect with professional artists who had answered the Native Women's Association's call as well, and last month had the chance to bring their work together, alongside those of the professionals, to share their findings with the Pickering College community and to Newmarket-Aurora MP Tony Van Bynen as well.

'We had a survey and people could choose two bills they wanted by the actual artists, two bills that we made, and then we got feedback,' says student Alexis Youell. 'We were then able to take that feedback and improve.'

As he watched his students take charge of the challenge, teacher Ethan Bishop said one of the things he was most proud of was how engaged they were with Canada's historic tapestry.

“Alexis, for instance, when she was researching her design, she was able to look into the importance of braids as part of Indigenous culture and that research and interest kind of sprung up organically from the project and there are many instances of that,” says Bishop. “Hearing Claire talk about Josephine Mandamin and acknowledging the nations these women are part of was really an important learning experience. As well, I think it inspired them to learn a lot more about Indigenous culture, whether that has to do with braiding or the beadwork that was featured on some of the bills, or the history of residential schools?this was a really organic opportunity for students to learn more about Indigenous Canadians.

“To integrate both history, art, and language arts was really invaluable and?I think the response from the school was amazing. We had almost the entire Junior School, most of the Middle School classes, and many students from the Senior School ? it was a school-wide event and it also reflects some of the work the school is doing toward Reconciliation. We have a Truth and Reconciliation group that meets regularly and discusses how we can address issues related to Truth and Reconciliation, so I think this was a tremendous opportunity for us to live some of the work that we have been doing and for students to play a leading role in that as well.”

The project, he adds, is not yet complete with the class looking at the next steps, including making recommendations on banknote design to Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland.

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