

Reconciliation begins with each and every one of us?



As Elder Pat Floody tended the sacred fire blazing in front of the Town Park Bandshell on Thursday evening to mark National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, he did so with a body, mind, and spirit very close to the atrocities committed in residential schools.

Both his mother and aunt were taken from their homes as children and placed in schools located in British Columbia. Having come down with diphtheria, his mother was given the last rites by a priest, but remarkably survived.

His aunt, now 95, lives with the knowledge of what happened to them every day but, understandably, sometimes finds it too painful to share her truth.

So was Floody as he prepared to take part in last week's gathering, initially reluctant to share truths of his own, but with more than 200 people in attendance who, in the words of Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, came out with open hearts, he bravely shared his very personal connection to the tragedy.

Floody, along with Wheatley, and Ancestral Knowledge Keeper Raiden Levesque, led the community in an evening of learning and reflection to mark the first annual National Day for Truth & Reconciliation.

Preceded by a presentation led by Jared Big Canoe of Georgina Island in conjunction with the Aurora Cultural Centre, many turned out wearing orange shirts in solidarity with Every Child Matters, and many eager to learn how they might be able to help move Canada forward towards the ultimate goal of Truth & Reconciliation.

"This is a sombre day but one where we can as individuals and as a community take the next steps in learning and growing," said Mayor Tom Mrakas, welcoming elders, leaders and residents to the community space.

In turn, Ms. Wheatley, whose traditional name means Leader of the Fireflower, said "the sacredness of what we're doing is not a light load for us."

"We want to encourage you to leave better than when you came," she said. "This is a heavy day. This is a hard day. This is an emotionally triggering day."

?Collectively, we have a different cosmology and understanding than perhaps Christian ways of knowing, perhaps far different from what you believe in, but there are many ways of knowing on the planet that are all equal or valuable,? she continued. ?Our communities were built in circles of protection and in the centre of the circle was our children. Children were considered a gift sacred to us. All of the community members would make circles of protection around them and a child's sole role was to experience joy. They had the freedom to explore our relatives, freedom to learn about the world as they were ready. They were given our language, the creator's language. They were given ceremonies, they were given our ancestral teachings on a daily basis. It is not something just to pause and do today because we're honouring National Day for Truth & Reconciliation; this is our way of life, things that are important to us, ways we communicate with the unseen world, ways we reinforce our relationships with each other. This is what we would have taught our children and continue to teach our children, just as you in, perhaps, faith-based practices, teach your children what values are, what's important, what your places are in creation? Relationships are at the core of our understanding, the core of our teachings. Through those relationships, we have passed down that wisdom, that knowledge, intergenerationally for time and memorial.

?We human beings can make choices that change the course of our lives and indeed others. That is what has happened in this country. As more and more settler nations came to our shores, they wanted space for their families and we tried to welcome them in a good way and create space. The idea of treaty making arose but the understanding from the settler nations was that these were forms of land surrender. We never surrendered the land. A treaty agreement, and you are all treaty partners right now in case you didn't know that, the treaty agreement was to share peaceably everything creation provides for a good long life. We know that is not happening today. As the need and greed arose in this country, we were relocated and displaced repeatedly. This is a true full part of history. It is a painful part as well. The colonial history of this country was conducted on the blood of our ancestors and when we didn't move enough, when we didn't give up enough, the idea came about for assimilation: kill the Indian in the child.

?They looked at the most vulnerable sector of our communities and made it law to remove them from our care, from our culture, from our communities. Whether we wanted to or not. As some of you may not know they took children as young as three years of age and kept them up until they were 16. The government paid many faith-based groups to run residential schools. They were supposed to be places of learning, but what did our children learn? Cultural genocide happened in this country and that might be uncomfortable for some of you and I can't apologize for that because it is the truth. With that truth comes some sort of responsibility to restore the harmony and the balance we intended initially when we started welcoming people to our shores.?

When she began considering the message she wanted to deliver in Aurora, Ms. Wheatley said she wanted to speak from her heart to the hearts of each person in attendance. It might have been uncomfortable to some ? ?we need you to hold places of discomfort, we need you to feel what it is like to be in our shoes? ? but discomfort can, in turn, spur action.

?We need you at this time more than ever and I know that you heard the call,? said Ms. Wheatley on the nation-wide outrage that followed the initial discovery of 215 children in unmarked graves on land associated with the Kamloops residential school, and numerous further discoveries since. ?I know that you feel that call because you're here; you're here sitting, waiting patiently to witness, to learn, and perhaps to enact one of those 94 Calls to Action (that came out of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's report). Even when we leave this dark time, the memory of those children will never be forgotten. No amount of money can be enough compensation from the lives taken from our communities across this country.

?I want to challenge you tonight to read the Truth & Reconciliation Report. Read it all. Read all 94 calls to action and see which one resonates with you. Which one will make the most sense for you to try and enact? In your personal circles, in your professional circles, challenge those who are in there. Do not accept inappropriate behaviour, racist thought, stereotype comments. Stand up for us even when we are not there. In that way you are honouring our communities, you are honouring our ancestors. You are honouring the children. You are facilitating true healing.

?I know many of you must have a lot of questions. You must be wondering, what about this? Do some research. Try and find an answer. I am one humble grandmother who does my best to share what I can. I can't cover everything, we have a short time frame here, but I am going to do my best to nudge you, to challenge you, and to uplift you so that you can hold some hope and when our hope starts to flicker you can reignite our hope through the actions that you choose on a daily basis. We don't need one day in the

year to remember this, we need 365 days of the year, 24 hours.

?We have spent the last 150 years being silent and invisible and now it is our time. In that time, many voices will step forward to speak; some you will really resonate with, some you may be uncomfortable with, some you might not hear at all, but we're all trying to share our way of knowing. We're all trying to encourage you to take that hand of friendship that we extended, originally, and that we still continue to extend. We're not here to make you feel guilty or bad; we're here to support you so you can support us in all the way that we need, ways we may not have even found word clothing for at this time, but we're working at it.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter