

Aboriginal Perspectives panel to go well beyond Canada 150



By Brock Weir

Many Canadians are getting ready for a summer of celebration to mark Canada's 150th anniversary this July ? but for our country's First Nations, the meaning of the milestone differs from person to person.

It is not, after all, just 150 years for them ? they have millennia of history and tradition and, for better or worse, experiences in the land now known as Canada.

Next Thursday, May 11, four First Nations community leaders will gather at the Aurora Public Library to share just such perspectives.

?The idea for this panel came before Canada's 150th year,? says Reccia Mandelcorn of the Aurora Public Library of the suggestion that stemmed from the Library's first One Book One Aurora campaign four years ago. ?Of course, everybody now is talking about Canada 150 and our history, the good and the bad, and I think it is a very good conversation to have. So many of the conversations are about all the really good things about Canada, but we also have to acknowledge some of the more difficult issues.?

First among the panellists is Becky Big Canoe, a member of the Chippewas of Georgina Island, who is an advocate for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and for a Grassroots Enquiry led by Indigenous women, as well as serving as a Water Walker who does spiritual journeys around Lake Simcoe to raise awareness and pray for the waters.

?For me, she is an inspiration,? says Ms. Mandelcorn. ?I have heard her speak several times and she is one of the strongest and proudest women I have ever met. Whether I look to her as somebody representing an aboriginal community, or whether I look to her as somebody representing women, I just find her such an engaging woman and she kindly agreed to be a part of the panel.?

A member of the Oneida of the Thames First Nation, visual artist Todd Jameson is bringing an artistic perspective to the panel discussion. Todd is active in researching native artefacts, according to organizers, as well as ancient crafts. He regularly presents on Aboriginal culture in local schools and his art is representative of the early native one-dimensional drawings recovered throughout North America.

?Todd is a very fine artist who has exhibited here in our Library,? says Ms. Mandelcorn.

Coming from closer to home is Laureen (Blu) Waters, a Cree and Metis Micmac Elder of the Wolf Clan who currently works at Seneca College and the Peer Aboriginal Network as an Elder providing traditional one-on-one counselling. She has also served as the National Caucus Representative for the Toronto Urban Aboriginal Strategy.

Panellist Collette Youngchief, a Cree college student and mother, was perhaps the most difficult panellist to secure for this event. Actively involved in Ninoskomtin York Region, where she works on a project for seniors and youth, bringing them together for support and teachings, she brings a youthful perspective and a perspective set firmly on the future ? integral to the success of this panel, says Ms. Mandelcorn.

?We want to have this conversation with people of different ages coming out, from Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, we

want artists because [discussing] the appropriation of art is important, and we want someone coming at it with a fresh look to the future," says Ms. Mandelcorn. "We're going forward. I think most Canadians know there has been a history of injustice to Aboriginal peoples. We can have Truth and Reconciliation and we can apologize for things that went wrong, but we can't just live in the past. We have to listen to what people say and we have to look forward to making things better for everybody. I wanted someone to come who has the whole future in front of her."

Never one to limit the topics the Library's panellists might bring to the table, Ms. Mandelcorn says she is looking forward to hearing the discussions generated by the panellists and audience members alike after a few questions by moderator Tahirih Naylor to get the ball rolling.

"Some people will be looking at this as being a part of Canada's 150 and some people will say, no, this does not reflect, I am guessing," she says. "I have heard on CBC, for example, there are many First Nations people who say it is not 150 for us, we were here thousands of years before. There are many communities and there are many different viewpoints, and that is why it is important to have the conversation so all of us come away more educated and responsive to what the needs of our community are."

"People should come because as global citizens and Canadians, we share responsibilities for the past and together we hold hopes for the future. This conversation is important for anyone interested in history, in politics, in social justice and in learning about a cultural perspective that is rich in dignity and respect. It's an opportunity to listen, to engage and to grow understanding."

To register for next Thursday's panel, which will take place from 7 - 9 p.m. in the Aurora Public Library's Lebovic Room, call 905-727-9494 x275 or visit www.aurorapl.ca. Admission is free.