

Advocates continue push to recognize Pine Ridge's dark history



The dark brown edifice of Pine Ridge, at the northwest corner of Yonge Street and Bloomington Road, has been used for various purposes by the Province for decades ? but local advocates continue to push the Ontario Government to recognize dark chapters in the building's history.

Pine Ridge, which began life as a religious seminary, was subsequently used as a facility for men with developmental disabilities, with those who survived the institution giving voice to horrible abuses which happened in this era of the building's history.

Victims were recognized by the Ontario Superior Court of Justice in 2013 with a \$35 million settlement dedicated for survivors of Huronia Regional Centre, under which banner Pine Ridge operated.

Yet, while plaques and trails on the property pay tribute to its origins as De La Salle College, there is not yet anything to recognize what these men endured ? and this has been a historical wrong local advocates Kathy Kantel and Len Bulmer have tried to right.

In 2021, their advocacy led to the Town formally recognizing the troubling history the building represents, with Council also passing a motion calling for a formal plaque to be placed there ?at the owners' cost? in the future.

Three years on, they're still waiting and were disappointed to learn last week the plaque request had been rejected by Infrastructure Ontario, which oversees the property.

Rather than shrink away from the cause, however, Kantel says they're more galvanized than ever to make the memorial a reality.

?I am astonished. I don't get it,? says Kantel, citing a similar memorial to victims of Huronia being realized in Orillia, ON. ?There is a gorgeous one there that was developed by families of people who lived there, suffered there, and I just don't get it.?

There are dozens of survivors still living, she adds, and now they're aging. She says she suspects the attitude of ?Let sleeping dogs lie? might be behind the rejection, but time is of the essence to recognize what happened while it is still in living memory.

?Horrible things happened in that building and horrible things happened in that building to people who are still alive and live around here,? says Bulmer. ?Horrible things happened in there; there are first-hand accounts that are well-researched of boys who were abused and raped in there, so I really think that if we don't acknowledge such things we are cancelling our history ? and when you start cancelling history, this is when things start happening again and that terrifies me, to tell you the truth. Usually when people start talking about ?cancelling history,' they're talking about taking Confederate statues down and stuff like that, but there is another side

to cancelling history.

?We have to be reminded that right here in good ol' Aurora men and boys were raped and abused and the reason we have to know is that it does not happen some other time again. We need this plaque to remind people that such things can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone. That's why I won't give up.?

Adds Kantel, noting the Town has done ?all it could? to make the plaque a reality: ?I just want people to know that this existed in our Town. People with disabilities are not animals and they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.?

By Brock Weir