

Advocates want 'atrocities' committed at Pine Ridge to be remembered

It is often said that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it, and local advocates are working to make sure the 'atrocities' committed behind the brown-brick walls of Pine Ridge, now a Provincial government building at Yonge and Bloomington, are never forgotten.

Originally built as a De La Salle College, Pine Ridge served as a residential facility for people with developmental disabilities between 1963 and 1984. In 2016, surviving residents of Pine Ridge and 11 other similar facilities across Ontario were part of a class action lawsuit that resulted in a settlement of \$36 million to those who were harmed.

It stands as a mute testament to what went on behind its walls, and recent reports leading up to its heritage designation did not touch fully upon the realities that building represents to survivors.

But that could soon change thanks to local residents who took the matter to this month's meeting of the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC).

Len Bulmer and Kathy Kantel came together this month to bring these realities to the table.

It is not the first time they have done so; Mr. Bulmer said they have presented survivors' accounts to Mayor and Council but were largely 'met with silence.'

'We know it is not easy to acknowledge difficult history,' said Mr. Bulmer, 'but we also know that not acknowledging this difficult history means repeating it. We have survivors of that institution living right here still in the community. They are among the most vulnerable among us. Not acknowledging what happened to them erases their experience. We believe in cultural and heritage preservation, not historical erasure.'

'What are we asking for? An acknowledgement of what happened in that building, a reconsideration of that designation with all of the facts on the table. We are not necessarily calling for the designation to be revoked, but we want acknowledgement and sensitivity. As part of the reconsideration of that designation and if the designation is retained, the Town could perhaps work with the survivor and advocate communities to have a display in the Town Hall entryway, perhaps the Historical Society could arrange for speakers on the topic. Perhaps Town Staff and elected officials would be willing to have a more-depth acknowledgement in June during National Accessibility Week.'

The Province, he added, 'may be open' to an acknowledgement on site.

To underscore the importance of acknowledging what took place behind the walls of Pine Ridge, Ms. Kantel read an account of survivor Martin Levine:

'They stripped me, took all my clothes off. They led you down on a stretcher, tied your body down tight across your chest, so you couldn't move. Tight across your legs. Then they rolled you down the hall, you were all tied down and they would take you right into the shower. Then, while you're all tied down, not able to move or get away, you would suddenly have the freezing cold water come down on you. You were freezing and you couldn't move. Cold. Naked. Soaking wet and restrained on the bed. Then they'd yell, 'what do you think of this now? Do you want to apologize to us now?' After that, then they put you in the side room in isolation. They would leave you just shivering. Everyone could look to the window at you all naked lying on the floor. You didn't even get fed when you were in the side room like that. That is what they did to you there. One day, staff came in. He was slurring, I could see he was drunk by the time he was talking. The Head Supervisor was the same. He was angry, he grabbed me, had me undressed and put me in the side room. It wasn't good. Some things I just don't talk about too much. I think I'll stop that part there. That's enough for now.'

HAC member Neil Asselin, who was on the Committee at the time of Pine Ridge's initial designation said he was 'shocked' in hindsight there was no mention of this at the time and agreed that there needs to be acknowledgement of Pine Ridge's sad legacy.

'I don't believe in running from the truth and I don't believe our history is clean,' he said. 'If ten people were murdered by their parents in a house, I don't care if they built this town, I want to know that something happened there too and I want to honour the people who have suffered to build this town just as much as the ones who have done great things.'

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: 'History should be included with the building. I'm aware of the atrocities that have happened there and I think it is very important to have that story told as it was.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter