

Behind The Bricks: AHS kicks off fall Speaker Series with Dr. Alison Norman and the Mohawk Institute

The Aurora Historical Society is kicking off the fall season of its Speaker Series with a closer look at the Mohawk Institute, Canada's oldest and longest-operating residential schools.

Dr. Alison Norman, a historian working at Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, will present Behind The Bricks: The Life and Times of the Mohawk Institute, on Wednesday, September 17, at Hillary House National Historic Site at 7 p.m., and virtually on Zoom.

The Mohawk Institute, located in Brantford, was a model for the larger residential school system and Norman, an editor of the recently-published book ?Behind The Bricks?, will speak not only on the institute itself, but its lasting impact on Indigenous education.

?I've been a historian in Indigenous history for the last 20 years and I will talk about my chapter in the book, which is about how the residential school identified children who would be good teachers and trained these kids to become teachers, and then went on to teach in day schools on the reserve and in other First Nations communities,? says Norman, who describes herself as a ?settler historian.?

?I'm not Indigenous myself and I'm aware of the role I can play in reconciliation and learning and helping the general public by bringing this history. I am sharing stories that aren't my stories. It's not my community or my family. I'm not from Six Nations, but now having done research for 20 years in this community, I've learned a lot, and I feel it's important for me to contribute and to help share this history, especially as this project was initiated and led by Rick Hill.?

Rick ? Richard Hill, Sr. ? is an elder from Six Nations and Norman says he's the man who made this book possible. He's worked for the Woodland Cultural Centre, as the Mohawk Institute is now known, and has dedicated himself to working with survivors, and reached out to others who had been examining what went on behind its walls from a historical perspective.

?We didn't come together for a book, but we came together to bring together knowledge and try to think about ways to share it,? says Norman. ?We created a blog, we brainstormed, and we contacted other people who had written things [for collaboration]. The book includes research by Haudenosaunee and non-Indigenous scholars, and also by Haudenosaunee community members in a variety of ways. It was important to have all of these voices in the book. Rick has been doing interviews with survivors for probably decades and his chapter in the book is really selections of interviews with survivors who have agreed to have their stories in the book.?

And it's not just stories ? it includes memoirs penned by those who lived it, poems, and even visual art.

Norman has long had an interest in education and that's part of what led her to dedicate her chapter to teachers who came out of the Institute.

?In the early 20th century, there were a lot of day schools in the community run by the Department of Indian Affairs at the time and a lot of them were being taught by Haudenosaunee women,? she says. ?In the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, that's quite out of the ordinary. I was curious about how that happened. In other reserve communities in Ontario and Canada, it's very, very rare to have Indigenous teachers and other residential schools were not producing Indigenous teachers to go work at day schools. Higher education wasn't a goal for residential schools generally beyond Grade Eight. But, in this school, it definitely was.

?At the time, the school became known as the Indian Normal School and Mohawk Institution. There's this period when they're creating certificates, kids are graduating and they're going on to teach in both reserve day schools and then also other reserve schools in Ontario, which is pretty interesting?. When we think about residential schools, they are not places that lead to higher education, but occasionally they are. It's a place that, for a select group, a minority of the graduates go on to higher education and have

impactful careers in education and it continues today. The community has been in control of their education for decades now.?

For the Aurora Historical Society, bringing Dr. Norman in to speak on the subject of residential schools was a perfect way to mark National Day for Truth & Reconciliation on September 30.

?It's important to make sure we're hitting on different aspects of history, and especially on different aspects of history that haven't been focused on a lot,? says Kathleen Vahey of the Aurora Historical Society. ?I think it's important to highlight Indigenous stories and stories of minority communities. I feel our Speaker Series is like a beginner step. It's an introduction, it's a local, easy way for people to step into history that maybe they don't know, they're not as familiar, and they want to get a little bit more.?

For more on Dr. Norman's upcoming talk and how to book your tickets, visit aurorahs.com.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter