

Canada still needs to address its 'historic amnesia,' says Elder ahead of National Day for Truth & Reconciliation



Saturday, September 30, marks National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a time to remember victims of residential schools, those who did not come home, the survivors and their families.

For the past two years, the annual observance has been led in Aurora by Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, whose poignant story, and the history she has curated, moves and inspires everyone able to hear it.

They are words, she says, that come from the heart, 'never prepared, transmitted as they arrive,' and although they are not prepared, the message remains remarkably consistent and deliberately so.

'The message I share is a consistent message that will be shared until this no longer requires healing, until this is no longer part of Canada's historic amnesia,' she says.

Aurora's third-annual observance of National Truth & Reconciliation Day will take place at Town Park this Saturday, September 30, beginning with an interactive Reflective Activity from 10 a.m. to 12 noon, before a formal ceremony and community gathering led by Wheatley and elders starts at 6 p.m.

It will be a welcome return to Aurora for Wheatley, who says she is always struck by Aurorans' eagerness to walk on the road of reconciliation with her and all Indigenous people.

'Fresh out of COVID was our first year and we had huge attendance with the restriction of still being six feet apart. The entire park was filled because we had to accommodate that space restriction. What I have found between the first year and the second year is the number of community members who come out is quite diverse and consistent. I don't know what preconceived notion I had about the Town of Aurora and its citizens, but their interest level in showing up surprised me.'

'I think I am a little bit jaded about Canadians' response to the atrocity that we have endured as native people and people really don't

care because I don't see many meaningful strides forward where the government is concerned; I hear a lot of talk, I hear a lot of promises, we have heard a lot of apologies, but nothing has really changed in terms of movement forward.?

At Town Park, however, Wheatley says ?people listen respectfully, interact with us, with care and compassion that doesn't feel like pity.?

?They show their solidarity visibly,? she says, underscoring the sea of orange shirts in the audience that have become a potent symbol of Truth and Reconciliation across Canada. ?It is validating and healing to see there is some sort of understanding? they show up and they bring their whole families, bring little ones, their babies, toddlers, children and teens.?

When Wheatley speaks at events like these, she does not shy away from addressing what she describes as the ?elephant in the room,? and that is the application of the word ?genocide? to what happened to Indigenous peoples.

Some are ?uncomfortable? with that term, she says, ?but that is what happened? and is still happening, in her view, with the penal system, child care system, and the ongoing issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

A key part in collectively addressing ?Canada's historic amnesia,? she says, is working through the 94 Calls to Action that were part of Canada's Truth & Reconciliation Commission's final report.

?They are all change-making nudges for any business, individual, citizen, corporation, church, school to embrace,? she says. ?There is no area in Canada where these cannot touch, be absorbed and have life breathed into them. The intention behind this is not to have pity; it is to have meaningful action moving forward that is not diminishing, divisive, and colonial in its approach. It is not decolonizing a colonial country, but it is asking people to be a bit more expansive in how they think about things, that is more in tune with what our values and needs are. We don't need Canadians to tell us how to heal; we need to reclaim our healing through our ways of knowing, being and doing. Our way of life. That is connected to our lands, it is connected to our territories, it is connected to Canadians having some sort of cultural sensitivity and awareness to allow that to happen and to grow.

?These are undernourished seeds at this point that really need an opportunity to thrive and survive because Canadians have read it, have accepted it as the truth, and are doing their little bit. Nobody is expected to do them all but every citizen in this country is expected to champion at least one of those calls to action as much as possible ? consistently and deliberately with the mindset that they can and they will ? all those efforts collectively become the change we need to see and happen. It is not going to happen in a short amount of time. It took 150 years to get here and according to Justice Murray Sinclair he said it might take 150 years to actually manifest true healing. It started in the school system and maybe that's where we need to start.?

If that ?basic truth? hasn't been accepted by Canadians, it's impossible to move forward with the calls of action, she cautioned. They were based on the witness testimony of thousands impacted, but there are thousands of more stories that have not been told.

?We're talking about stories that will never be told because those children died in care, or were killed, starved or raped to death or beaten to death, buried in these mass graves where they are forever silenced. I think about all of this when I come to Aurora. I hope Aurorans will come out with the same good hearts and minds they have in the last two years, bringing perhaps new people and bringing people who perhaps are a little bit resistant to learning so they can have an immersive experience in a public, invitational ceremonial remembrance and gathering that allows them to hear an authentic voice, to participate in an interactive way, and to stand in visible solidarity with us as potential allies or already are allies.

?I believe in the grassroots change rather than the kind of government funnel-down waiting games of change. The government will never get it right as far as I'm concerned, but people can ? people do things with their hearts, from their hearts, by their hearts, that are sustainable. It comes from a place of great care and that is how we make change. People need to care about it.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter