

## Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls remembered in Red Dress Day vigil



Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls were remembered in Aurora on May 5 as the community took part in its inaugural Red Dress Day Walking Vigil.

Organized by the Aurora Museum and Archives and the Town of Aurora, and led by Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, the Walking Vigil attracted dozens of residents, and the participation of Mayor Tom Mrakas, former Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Member of Parliament Leah Taylor Roy, and more.

Participants set out from Aurora Town Square in pairs and, led by Wheatley, stopped at points of interest along the way for songs and reflection, heading north on Yonge Street to Wellington, heading eastward toward Town Park where participants were welcomed by Fire Keeper Raiden Levesque who had stoked a sacred blaze in front of the band shell.

When she was first approached by the Town to take part in this first Walking Vigil, Wheatley said she was not sure what to expect, but, at the conclusion of the event where participants were invited to leave an offering of tobacco in the sacred fire, she said she wouldn't change a thing.

?I was thinking about what I should say tonight, mindful of my own personal feelings and my connection to this ? and all of our communities are connected in some ways,? Wheatley reflected. ?I feel like this country has failed us and continues to fail us, so when the Town of Aurora stepped forward of their own initiative [and] they approached us and asked if we could do this with you, I was unsure. I was unsure if community would come out ? not because I don't think you care, but just that there's such a huge lack of awareness of the ongoing struggle that we are experiencing.

?This day is being recognized across the country for a reason: our reality is we are Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Two-Spirited-Plus, and I really look forward to the day when we don't have to have these vigil walks anymore because justice is being served equally and fairly for all.?

Red Dress Day is a nation-wide observance to bring awareness to Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirited People (MMIWG2S+).

The empty red dress is its evocative symbol, representing those who should still be with us today, was introduced by Metis artist Jaime Black.

Participants were encouraged to wear red in honour of MMIWG2S+ and they more than answered the call, their red hues illuminated by hand-held candles and other votives along the way.

“I know that there was a lot of silence, but that was to give space and time for the women's voices we no longer hear, whose names we can no longer speak, for the communities that are suffering and struggling, for the families who are experiencing the tremendous loss we've been generating,” said Wheatley at the event drew to a close. “Every life lost matters. Indigenous women across this country are extremely vulnerable, and our strength and resilience allows us to step forward on a day like this collectively and individually to speak our truth, to connect our hearts, to remind you all that we will never forget the ones that we love, the ones that are part of our family?”

“This can bring a great deal of happiness and sadness. And we should have that. We should feel those things. We should feel sad. We should miss them. We should learn their names. We should reach out to the communities, both on and off reserve, that are struggling with this ongoing injustice ? and that's what it is. It's an injustice. The people who cause these harms when caught are often not punished. It's not punishment we're looking for. It's justice.”

As participants prepared to depart, Wheatley asked them to think about the “resiliency of our people, our communities, and our families who have experienced cultural genocide?” in the country, a country where “there's no policies or laws that really protect us.”

“Canadians at large are kind of afraid [of] talking about it. They're afraid of us, and they say this is wrong, and if anybody should be afraid in this country it should be us, but we've come,” she said. “We come anyways, we speak up, and we speak out and we continue to stand in truth. I thank you for standing in truth with us. It is so encouraging, it is so healing and it's also so beautiful to see you come out.”

Added Levesque: “Us men need to do better ? all of us ? to take better care of the women and honour and really understand that call, for that understanding, for the matriarchs who lead us in that beautiful way, all the way into the future and for times to come. For us men, the violence needs to stop, especially against women and children, and anyone for that matter. We're a proud warrior nation? but we have to be humble and gentle warriors. There's many ways of being a warrior and being kind is a very important teaching. I do my best ? I'm far from perfect, but I try my best to reflect as a man how to do better [and] how to be just a kinder, gentler man. I invite those indigenous men for us to gather around those fires more.”

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