

## National Day for Truth & Reconciliation underscores the importance of listening and doing the work



Sarah Lewis' son looked carefree as he made his own fun on the steps of the Town Park band shell on Saturday evening.

As he played among the clothes and shoes left at the foot of the stage in memory of children lost to residential schools, too young perhaps to fully appreciate the meaning of National Day for Truth & Reconciliation, his mother's poignant words held the crowd spellbound and solemn.

"Today has been especially tough," said Lewis, a spoken word artist, who took the stage alongside Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, Elder Pat Floody, and Ancestral Knowledge Keeper Raiden Levesque. "I have struggled a lot with intergenerational trauma. My grandmother went to residential school and the ramifications of that travelled through my aunts and my uncles and we struggled with addiction and mental health that passed down to me. That's a continuous healing journey I am going through myself.

"Today, it hit extra hard, so I am just working through those emotions and I am honoured and grateful to have Kim, the Elders, the Fire Keeper and the folks in Aurora who have invited me to be here to just be able to cry and express those emotions because tears are medicine and I always have to remember I don't hold them back ? especially on days like today."

Hosted by the Town of Aurora on September 30, the Town's third-annual evening observance of National Day for Truth and Reconciliation didn't bring out the same numbers as the first two years, but Saturday's audiences were no less rapt as they listened to the poignant messages delivered by all of the speakers who spoke to the past and the present, but with an eye to the future as well.

"It is so much more than just one day of reflection," said Levesque, speaking to generational trauma. "The affects [of residential schools and colonization] are past, present, and will be forevermore. It's very, very important we educate ourselves consistently and, as an Indigenous person, I acknowledge my settler blood. I grew up privileged, in a good way, and I didn't learn the traditional ways I had. I was yearning for community all my life.

"When I came back to the community, when I sought traditional healers, I never felt so at home than I did when I went into that first sweat lodge? I am forever grateful for those ceremonies, forever grateful to our ancestors, our grandmothers, First Nations people, and the Inuit and Metis for sharing?. It's all about action and reconciliation. Part of that is just everyone showing up tonight. It's part of action and reconciliation to hear about that truth. Everyone in the community now has a responsibility, hopefully, to educate

others, too, and talk about different ways of educating and different ways the community can engage. There is a lot of work to be done, still.?

Part of that work was outlined by Wheatley, who said ?Canadians keep renaming us, they keep telling us who we are, they keep not listening to who we say we are.?

?Canadians are resistant to using the names that we use for ourselves,? she said. ?I am not Canadian; I'm a human being, I am Anishinaabe, I come from a long line of resilient, strong, kind, loving, articulate, sacred people. You're all my relatives. We might not be genetically tied, but we're all human and in the human family we're all equal, no matter where you come from, no matter what language you speak, what religion you practice, what gender you identify as ? you're still part of the human family and we're so grateful to you.?

?The children's clothing reminds us why we have gathered. This is National Day for Truth and Reconciliation because of what happened in this country, because lives were taken and, for us, there is a bit of labour. It costs us something to come here because we could be doing our own thing but it feels good to come here and share it with you because we don't feel like we're alone in our journey. We feel like we've got some allies, some genuine care. We have friends out there who are trying to figure out what to, how to do it, when to do it and to be there whether we know it or not. We're grateful for you.

?I grew up without my language ? deliberately. My mom was a fluent speaker, it was my first language. As we got ready to be educated in the public school system, my mom took us off reserve and into cities. Maybe to protect us from that system because when I started school it was still very active. She also made sure that I was never identified as Indigenous, so I was never registered as an Indigenous student and she didn't speak to me in our own language. I resented that so much as I grew up because I could hear her talking to my great grandparents who raised her and it seemed so special.?

One of the things she most remembers about these conversations is the volume in which they spoke. They spoke in hushed tones, sometimes ?erupting in laughter,? sometimes punctuated by what she described as pregnant pauses. In contrast, she said, it feels that when ?settler nations engage you can't talk loud enough.?

?Sometimes you just have to bear witness and sit with the discomfort until we're ready for the next stage,? she said, of the importance of listening to the messages that are part and parcel of National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, and in stops on the road to Reconciliation no matter the day. ?You should be a proud Canadians, but you should demand justice for all. We ask for change. We demand change. We can just de-subscribe from things and do the right thing because we have free will. Free will is very powerful. The plant, the mineral, and the animal world?don't have free will. We do.?

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