

Power of change lies with us, say leaders on National Day for Truth & Reconciliation



The power for change in Canada's struggle towards Truth & Reconciliation lies with the individual ? and stories of residential school survivors can serve as seeds towards a better future.

That was the message delivered at Aurora Town Square on Monday evening by Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley as she led the Town in observing National Day for Truth & Reconciliation.

The annual observance, formerly known as Orange Shirt Day, began Monday morning at Town Hall with a flag raising ceremony, and continued into the evening with events led by Indigenous elders, speakers and performers in events hosted by the Town and the Aurora Cultural Centre.

A Ceremony and Community Gathering was held in the Town Square space with Wheatley, alongside Elder Pat Floody and Ancestral Knowledge Keeper Raiden Levesque and, later in the evening, in conjunction with the Cultural Centre, Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimeaux hosted musicians Zeegwon Shilling, Jeff Monague a.k.a. Myiingan Minanaakwhe, and Even Redsky in concert in the nearby Performance Hall.

Speaking to nearly 200 people assembled outside, Wheatley spoke on the discovery of 215 Indigenous children buried in mass graves associated with a residential school in Kamloops, BC. While this discovery captured the nation's attention, subsequent discoveries, now topping 12,000, have merited less and less news coverage, she said.

?Canadians are uncomfortable hearing the facts,? she said. ?Bodies are still being discovered. We always knew our children were missing ? they have names, they have families, they have communities, and they deserve respect. A mass grave is not respect, period?. Former Justice Murray Sinclair spoke about the journey; he spoke about the deaths, he spoke about the stories because the Truth & Reconciliation Commission was tasked with that role. For over six years, they travelled from place to place to place to bear witness to the stories and to collectively come together with a springboard for all of the treaty partners to begin making reparations.

?Those are complex but these 94 calls to action cover every area of your life: they are broken up by categories?. How many of you have chosen one and are championing it? Just one? The government is not doing a good job. We have to go about being the seeds. I saw this beautiful saying, ?They tried to bury us, but they forgot we were the seeds.'?

Following the report, Sinclair said it took Canada 150 years to get to this point, but it will take ?another 150 years to get to where we

want to be.? This, said Wheatley, covers a seven-generation period. Despite that length of time, she questions what kind of change will be realized.

?I don't have the confidence of the pace we're going, the speed that we're travelling, that I am going to see restitution and reparations fully-rooted. I do believe we're headed towards a bit of change ? I don't want to sound hopeless, but at the rate we're moving, it's going to take a lot longer than 150 years. It's not just about healing, it's about education. It's about relationship-building. It's about treaty partnerships. It's about justice ? and we, individually and collectively, have yet to experience justice in this country. Nine years in [from the report] we're still waiting.?

Wheatley asked community members what they're willing to commit to ? and, in doing so, it's important to take the time to learn.

?Can you stop asking us what to do? We're already carrying an enormous burden,? she said. ?We've cried a million tears across this country. We're still standing in front of you as best as we can, sharing the best words we can, in the kindest of ways, and we're still being harmed. We are not safe in this country and it is our home.

?We have been here a long time and we have done our best in the time that we have been here. We have accommodated all those who have come to our great island to call it home. Even with the continuous harms, we still accommodated, but where's the reciprocity in that accommodation? Where is the consistency in that reciprocity? Where's that due diligence in that reciprocity? It is not our job to educate anybody about the cultural genocide, about genocide, period. We know that is a wrong. It is a crime. But we come to remind you tonight, to empower you to be change-makers?. All of you, any age, have the power to manifest change meaningfully. I am trusting that's what you're going to do.

?I am trusting this message does not fall on deaf ears, but falling as seeds into your heart that are beginning to root permanently. That is what I am trusting in. Those are the kinds of seeds I am sharing tonight. They come from my heart and it is hurt. It's especially hard for me this year. I don't know what has changed but I don't feel safe enough to stand in front of you and cry ? but I want to, because I'm still really angry and resentful that we're not seeing the change that we need to see?.

?It is my sincere hope that some of the seeds we've planted, some of the truths that we have reminded you about, some of the permissions we've given, the stories that we've shared, will resonate strongly enough in your heart space that you will now leave here better than when you came. You might be carrying a load, you might be feeling in a very emotional, vulnerable space. We're in that space all day every day, 365 days a year. We don't get to leave that space, but we're not walking along with just our baggage of doom and gloom; we're celebrating, we're joyful, we're contributing to the Canadian economy, we're not a burden on Canadian society. We do not need a hand-out, we need hand-ups. Switch your thinking about that. We still extend that hand, so will you accept it? Will you take it? Will you join us in the journey of reconciliation? Will you draw up your personal courage to just do something today and every day moving forward? Whether we learn about it or not, we will feel that.?

By Brock Weir