

Red Dress Day Walking Vigil will honour Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Two Spirit people

Members of the community are invited to honour Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit individuals on Tuesday, May 5, as the Town of Aurora hosts its first Red Dress Day Walking Vigil.

Set to begin at 6.30 p.m. at Aurora Town Square, participants will be invited to gather at the Square before embarking on a reflective, guided walk to Aurora Town Park where a closing ceremony will be led by Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, with the participation of speaker Sharon Rigby, a sacred fire tended by Firekeeper Raiden Levesque, and songs by the Cedar Singers.

Those taking part are encouraged to wear red in honour of MMIWG2S+.

Red Dress Day takes place annually each May 5 to honour these lives.

It's intended to recognize the families and communities forever impacted by the tragedy.

The symbolic empty red dress was first introduced by Metis artist Jaime Black to symbolize loss, remembrance, and the need for change.

The Town's embrace of Red Dress Day is the latest step on the road to Reconciliation they have been travelling in recent years along with Wheatley and the event is one of the many initiatives that have come out of Aurora's Indigenous Relations Committee, which meets monthly with Wheatley and others.

"We work towards the path of Reconciliation under the Calls to Action for Truth and Reconciliation, so we're slowly building various initiatives towards that," says Nichole Campsall of the Town of Aurora. "Last year was the first year we officially recognized Red Dress Day. We had a film screening of Highway of Tears at Town Square in Brevik Hall which was very well-attended [and] it showed us that this community is very much engaged in that. Under the guidance of Grandmother Kim Wheatley, she suggested a walking vigil [this year, and] from there, we began planning."

Beginning at Town Square was a natural first step, and picking Town Park as the ultimate destination was suggested by Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum & Archives, who also serves on the Indigenous Relations Committee.

The park, says Campsall, is seen as a "grounding space" that lends itself well to the sacred fire, while the walking route along Yonge and Wellington was chosen to have a maximum visual impact on the community.

"We're really centering on the current tragedy that is still unfolding and the historic tragedy of those missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls," says Johnson. "Sometimes when there are these big reports with many Calls to Action, progress can seem very slow and I think on this issue specifically it's just very hard to understand why the progress is so slow with this and it's heartbreaking. Just having that full understanding that this is part of our history and it's part of our current reality, I don't know that many people necessarily identify this as an ongoing issue happening right here, right now."

Adds Campsall: "Maybe some people think this is just historic, but it's not - it's ongoing, it's still going, and these are real people, these are real lives that are being touched, affected and taken. It's an incredible injustice, again, at how slow it's moving. I think it's important that everybody is aware of this and knows that it's not just history - it's still going, it's something we need to continue to bring awareness to, we need to talk about and there needs to be more given to this for sure. It will be a reflective time to listen and learn."

As they prepare for the May 5 event, both Johnson and Campsall underscore the importance of the relationship they, and the Town

of Aurora as a whole, have developed with Wheatley.

?I find our relationship with Kim? is really integrated in so much that we do, especially from the Museum & Archives side,? says Johnson. ?Kim has entrusted us with some of her items on loan and we're able to bring them out and display Indigenous items alongside some of the items from our collection to help bring in different perspectives and show the community the different material culture and beliefs surrounding some of these items, as well as the different connections we've been able to make with many different Indigenous community members.?

For more information about the Red Dress Day Walking Vigil, visit aurora.ca/RedDressDay.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter