

Saturday's Powwow will signal new beginning



By Brock Weir

Footprints often show where we've been but this Saturday footprints will show where we're going as Indigenous Leaders converge on Aurora to usher in a new beginning.

As Indigenous elders, dancers and singers prepare to make their Grand Entrance at 12 noon for the New Beginnings Powwow at Lambert Wilson Park, youngsters will be putting their creativity to work creating their own set of footprints. For Powwow organizer Rod Nettagog, it is symbolic of walking together and a way forward on a healing journey that is long overdue.

The June 3 Powwow, a hallmark of Aurora's Canada 150 Celebrations, was initially proposed to mark the sesquicentennial of Canada's celebration, but it has taken on a much deeper meaning, one of Truth and Reconciliation led by Canada's First Nations. "It is a dark past and this powwow is about moving forward," he explains of New Beginning. "Now it is time to move forward with reconciliation and bringing that understanding and awareness about our people and to learn and appreciate who we are as First Nations because this is Canada. I think everyone needs to know the true history of this country before European contact. Part of that is the powwow.

"It is a celebration, a time of singing and dancing and expressing who we are as indigenous people and welcome people into the circle to dance with us, to celebrate with us. That is what this time represents: a time to move forward. We can't forget about the past, but we need to move forward and to learn to forgive. We need to accept each other as brothers and sisters on Mother Earth." When asked what Canada 150 means to him, Mr. Nettagog answers the question with a question: 150 years of what?

Canada, he says, was founded on genocide and the forced removal of their land and trees. Now, he says, they are left with about two per cent of the land with boil water advisories in their own communities.

"Where is the equity in that?" he asks. "These issues need to be addressed and talked about [so] Canada has an understanding of where indigenous people are and still being treated today."

Fostering this understanding is a key component stemming from the report of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission, which was intended to be a comprehensive response to address the Residential School system, the effects of which are still being felt today. One such effect was the attempted suppression of indigenous culture, forbidding traditional languages, traditions and celebrations. Since then, there has been a concerted effort to re-learn these traditions and, most importantly, re-claim identity.

That being said, along the way, there have been "and continue to be" significant misconceptions to address, one of the most evident of which is cultural appropriation. You only have to look as far as a festival to see non-indigenous people walking around with makeshift feather headdresses to get a flavour of cultural appropriation, which Mr. Nettagog says is a "mockery."

With that in mind, it was important to set the right tone in deciding Saturday's craft program. Working on a theme of inclusion, organizers settled on creating footprints to represent the path moving forward, along with representation of the traditional medicine wheel to show "the different races of Mother Earth and how we all have those gifts we bring within that circle, we are respecting each other, and walking together."

"We are all human beings," says Mr. Nettagog. "We need to treat each other as human beings, and I think not a lot of people are aware of that."

Surveying where this relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians stands after 150 years, Mr. Nettagog said he

would like to see more awareness generated over the next 50 years ahead of the 200th anniversary of Confederation. It is going to take a long time, he says. They say it will take a lot of years to get back to where we were as Indigenous people and take those responsibilities back of learning the ceremonies, the songs and the dances because a lot of that was lost through the residential school system and it affected everybody in so many different ways. There are a lot of people out there who aren't even aware of the effects it had on a lot of us.

There needs to be that understanding of why we're out there still fighting for our rights as Indigenous peoples because we want to have clean drinking water as everyone else does. We want to have the same healthcare and education as everyone else across the board. It doesn't really matter how many people show on Saturday; [success is] the fact that this is happening for the first time in Aurora and that is success. It is getting that word out there. It's a time of celebration and a time of song and dance.

The New Beginnings Powwow will take place at Lambert Willson Park (135 Industrial Parkway North) this Saturday, June 3, from 12 noon until 9 p.m. Events get underway with the Grand Entry at 12 noon, festivities and activities from 1 ? 5 p.m., a feast from 5 ? 7 p.m., and closing ceremonies beginning at 7 p.m. The Powwow will feature craft and food vendors each with Indigenous roots. Admission is free, but attendees are asked to leave their pets at home (Service animals exempt). For more, visit aurora.ca/powwow.