

Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother hails 'incredible moment' of rink board unveiling



As she prepared to speak from the ice of the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex's west arena last Tuesday afternoon, Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley was momentarily at a loss for words.

Arriving at the recreation centre and seeing orange edges popping out from behind a curtain that would, just a few minutes later, be lifted to reveal a rink board bearing the motto, 'Every Child Matters,' it struck her as a moment that was 'so hugely impactful, so healing' and something she said should be emulated across the country.

Wheatley was a guest of honour at the SARC last week as she helped Mayor Tom Mrakas unveil the rink boards, which will now be featured in all five of Aurora's arenas. The latest step on the Town's path towards Truth & Reconciliation, Wheatley says it was 'an incredible step forward and an example for sure.'

'Ice rinks, skating rinks and community centres like this are places of belonging and our children belong here, too,' said Ms. Wheatley, referencing the thousands of children whose graves have been uncovered on land associated with residential schools in the last few years. 'Our children are exceptional athletes with exceptional raw talent who don't oftentimes get the access and the ability to be in a place like this, as nice as this, but their spirit is here.'

First Nations, Metis and Inuit have, she said, 'undergone cultural genocide and that's really hard for Canadians to absorb and digest and feel comfort with,' but it's important to feel uncomfortable because 'cultural genocide is wrong and what's even more wrong is to attack the most vulnerable segment of our communities, which is the children, and this is what happened with residential schools.'

'Our children were harmed at unprecedented numbers. Across the country there is still this mindset that there have been only 215 children's bodies discovered. When I hear that word, 'Only,' I cringe. One, because the number is well over 12,000 and we don't hear about that in the papers anymore. It makes Canadians uncomfortable to hear about the rising numbers. 12,000 is where we're at. Justice Murray Sinclair talked about 50,000 to 60,000 children's bodies being unearthed across the country and as you can see the numbers are climbing dramatically. I have no words to express how hard that is.

'I think about all the names we don't speak and I think about all the families that were fractured, and I think in my own family what

it's like to speak publicly about this and it's hard. And it's sad and there's no getting around that. But today we have a moment to celebrate and people wonder how we can celebrate. We have to celebrate the resilience of our communities, the refusal to let go of justice, and the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) report helped us to remember that there is a way to right the wrongs. We can't bring back the lives of these children. We may never know all their names and we may never know what gifts were lost in the world because they didn't get to live a full life, but what we can remember is to never press the repeat button on something like this again.

?Individually you might feel like you can't make a change or reparations but that's not true; every small step that you take, every small choice that you make, every moment of remembrance makes a difference to us, individually and collectively. If you've never thought about it like that, I encourage you to do it today. We're all change-makers and we have to do something; we have to walk our talk. Talking is shallow without the follow-up with action and the action I see here today is such an honouring.?

Before singing a song in honour of the children who were lost, Wheatley gave thanks to the First Order of Creation, which she described as ?the space and place that received the bodies of our children, the one that have an earth blanket to carefully hold their bodies until we can find them?; to the Second Order of Creation ?who beautified those spaces, the plant beings ? maybe grass grew, maybe flowers grew, maybe trees grew, but there was something to honour that space and place from creation.?

Thanks were then offered to the Third Order of Creation ? ?the swimmers, the crawlers, the flyers, the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, those that live up in the sky that are older than those beneath the earth? ? and finally to families impacted by residential schools.

?Families who have suffered so greatly and continue to persevere and step forward and honour their memories by not giving up and saying, ?They are there, please find them.' They have been found, some at least, and there are a lot more to come.

?I want to thank the allies and the growing circle of allies who continue to shine in spaces and places that we can't get do and share the truth and encourage reparations and restitution and activate the word ?reconciliation' meaningfully. This is a powerful time and a powerful gesture. It's not just symbolic for me, a bit of our hearts are now publicly on view and hopefully it will trigger more allies, more awareness, and a constant reminder that we will never forget. And we will never forget. With those words, I honour the children on this day.?

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