

Truth and Reconciliation should be about 'Reconcili-Action,' say leaders



Gathering to mark National Day for Truth & Reconciliation is an important step, but the day should lead to 'reconcili-action,' says Indigenous educator Jan Beaver.

Beaver was a keynote speaker at Town Park last Friday as the Aurora Cultural Centre and the Town of Aurora hosted two back-to-back observances to mark the second annual National Day for Truth & Reconciliation on September 30.

The poignant events began at 3 p.m. with the Cultural Centre's program, which was co-presented and hosted by Jared Big Canoe, featuring performances from Shining Waters Ceremonial Drum, traditional dancers and Inuit throat singers, and more.

Speaking to a crowd in front of the band shell, Beaver shared the impact the Residential School System had on her own family, but also outlined the changes that need to come in order to achieve real Truth & Reconciliation.

'Why are we setting aside a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation?' asked Beaver. 'This day gives everyone ' Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples ' a time to learn the true history of Canada with regards to Indian Residential Schools, for example, and reflect on the ways we can build mutually-respectful relationships. It gives time for Canadians to hear from Indigenous peoples about their experiences with that system and about the impact of that system on families and subsequent generations, which we are still dealing with today. It's still an impact today, it's still a trauma, there's still PTSD rampant in communities because of what happened.

'As a result of the Call to Action #72, which recommended a death register and a public-facing memorial register with regards to these Indian Residential Schools and the number of children who actually died there, it has been determined that as of September 29, 2021, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation has documented 4,118 children who died at Indian Residential Schools and that is after going through only one fifth of the records that are held by the National Centre for Truth & Reconciliation. I can't even imagine what that number is going to end up being. I shudder to think about that.'

As of this past May, Beaver said 2,207 unmarked graves had been discovered outside of Residential Schools since the 1970s and that these sites 'should be treated like crime scenes.'

Speaking on what people can do to truly embrace reconciliation, Beaver said the first thing one can do is 'listen to the stories of

survivors still dealing with the crushing effects of this trauma.?

?Put yourselves in their place for this moment,? she continued. ?Think about your own children and how you would feel if they were taken away in this cruel, inhuman manner, never to be seen alive again. Those children, the first thing that happened to them, was they had their hair shaved because they were afraid of bugs in their hair, then they took all of their clothing and gave them whatever clothing was to be worn by the students so they all look the same. They were given numbers and their names were taken away. They were called by numbers. Many other things of which I will not speak.

?After the Truth and Reconciliation commission ended, there was no funding for healing supports and I can say this without a shadow of a doubt: there will be no reconciliation as long as the government continues to think of it as benevolence rather than human rights. We need to commit to changing actions, to changing attitudes, behaviours, and thinking about Indigenous peoples, in ways that are based on truth and relationship as opposed to bias and stereotype.?

Without addressing the realities ?truthfully and honestly? and addressing them, ?We're going to get nowhere.?

Opportunities can be found through changes in ?education systems, in power structures, in laws, in authority and control of money, so that life can be more equitable? for Indigenous peoples.

?We, as a society, must speak up when we see things happen that are not fair, just or respectful to Indigenous peoples. That is our responsibility, all of us. I am happy to see more and more that people are learning, they're seeking knowledge, they're seeking understanding, they're developing relationships with Indigenous people. They're listening to stories. I see it more and more and that gives me hope, that gives me a lot of hope, that on days like today, this is happening in many, many cities and towns across Canada. I am happy for that because finally, to me, once we bridge to each other as human to human, person to person, friend to friend, that's where change is going to happen, and I am really, really hopeful about how we're moving forward on this.?

In many ways, it's action ? but there needs to be more.

?We have had so many studies of Indigenous peoples in Canada. All of these studies, studies, studies and now we have the TRC (Truth & Reconciliation Commission) study. It is one thing to study but it's another thing to actually act and affect change and that is desperately needed in Canada right now. That is my most important message with regard to that.?

Following the Aurora Cultural Centre's presentation, the Town of Aurora hosted an event of its own, hosted by Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kin Wheatley, Elder Pat Floody, Ancestral Knowledge Keeper Raiden Levesque, and, once more, Shining Waters Drums.

Here, around a sacred fire, Wheatley shared many of the sentiments related to spurring action from Reconciliation.

?We experience endless dispossession, racism, diminishment, dehumanizing acts ? let's be real here, the Indian Act is the most racist piece of legislation on Earth but it's still a tool used against us to control us, identify us, divide us. That has direct ties to the Doctrine of Discovery,? said Wheatley, before discussing the Pope's recent visit to Canada during which he apologized to victims of the Residential School system.

?He just continued on his tour around the country, saying, ?I'm sorry, please forgive us,' and he left with all kinds of gifts and the sole gift he left us was, ?I'm sorry, please forgive us.' I think he could have done better. Changes big and small are many and they can seem very daunting but it is possible. That possibility comes through the actions and choices that you embrace, take up, champion, nurture and sustain going forward. The challenge is what will you do? What call of action are you most aligned with and will champion, speak about, learn about and commit to and breathe life into? Which one?

?I hope in my lifetime I get to witness real, meaningful, sustainable, rooted, long-living changes that benefit us and, when they benefit us, they will benefit you as well. This is a win-win. It's not a burden. It's not all tied to money. It's tied to choices you make

on a daily basis because you have a very powerful tool in your life: it's called free will and through free will you can choose what kind of person you're going to be, what kind of thoughts you're going to hold, what kind of emotions you're going to emote, what kind of words you might speak. I encourage you to choose wisely, to be very deliberate on both that? to be very clear about that, because every decision you make today is going to affect those that are going to come long after you, good, bad and ugly.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter