

Truth & Reconciliation gathering will offer learning and reflection around sacred fire

Following the shocking discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children in unmarked graves on land associated with a Kamloops residential school, Town Park was a place for healing as the community came together to underscore the point that 'Every Child Matters.'

Now, to mark the National Day for Truth & Reconciliation this Thursday, September 30, from 6-8 p.m., Town Park will become a place for gathering, learning, and meaningful reflection in a ceremony and presentation led by Anishinaabe grandmother Kim Wheatley, elder Pat Floody and Ancestral Knowledge Keeper Raiden Levesque.

'As the whole nation was rocked and shocked by the findings of the children at the residential schools, this isn't a time where we just apply cookie-cutter tools and figure out programming aspects, this is for all citizens, regardless of background. This is our time where we stop, we pause, and we respond to the guidance we ask for,' says Shelley Ware, Special Events Coordinator for the Town of Aurora.

'There is a huge emotional journey as to why we need this day, a day that wasn't just quickly thrown together - it has been much-needed for decades. In doing so, our program is the start of a catch-up to figure out why we are here. So many people like myself have responded emotionally and are reflectively seeing what they see on the news. Our approach to September 30 is to give us the foundation [so] we can talk about meaningful reconciliation, but we need to focus on what those two words mean and we need a better foundation. It comes from soul searching, reflection, and guidance and the guidance will come from ancestral stories, and actively seeing some of the Indigenous cultures being active.'

It is impossible, says Ms. Ware, to get a 'handle' on reconciliation simply by skimming the surface. That is why she stresses the presentation at Town Park this week is a 'gathering' rather than an 'event.'

Around the sacred fire, which will be kept by Floody in the role of Sacred Fire Keeper, participants will be asked to step up and accept a tobacco tie and, in doing so, introduce themselves and state why they are there.

'[Wheatley] wanted to make sure we had different voices guiding us,' says Ms. Ware. 'Because we have a sacred fire, it is not a bonfire, it is not a campfire, it is likely not what most people will envision as you don't go there to warm your hands. Rather, it is to help guide us and what we need to be learning at this point in time. Floody is a residential school survivor and he will be sharing firsthand what his years were like from a personal experience.'

'[Ms. Wheatley] is going to lay it on the line as well and teach us some hard truths that maybe haven't been revealed or come to the surface in the forefront. These are truths as they know it. Many First Nations rely on oral histories and it is through storytelling but the definite focus is on the residential school children, the tragedies that went with it, and how we can work together to honour the survivors and families affected. The families affected can be generational [and] that generational healing has to happen.'

'We're all going on this road to reconciliation. We're all going to be of varying amounts of knowledge that we have interpreted or understood. I really hope people walk away with something new they didn't know, and to walk away believing in their heart there is more to work on.'

Preceding the 6 p.m. gathering will be a showcase from the Aurora Cultural Centre, which will take place at Town Park from 4 ? 6 p.m.

'Honouring the Children' is a program in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, where the Cultural Centre has partnered with Chippewas of Georgina Island's Jared Big Canoe leading the recognition and acknowledgement of the historic day through 'traditional ceremony, reflections, song and dance.'

Activities on site include the creation of a healing card to send to Indigenous neighbours on Georgina Island.

The ceremony will run from 4 ? 5.30 p.m., followed by the Healing Card Activity from 5.30 ? 6 p.m.

For more information on the National Day for Truth & Reconciliation this week, visit aurora.ca/truthandreconciliation. Additional information on the Aurora Cultural Centre's programs can be found at auroraculturalcentre.ca/event/ndtr2021.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter