

"When we don't stand up for one, we stand up for nothing"



By Brock Weir

There was once a time when Todd Jameison worked as the operations manager for a large lumber company. It was a job with heavy responsibility and certainly not one the Oneida of the Thames man ever took lightly. That world was upended, however, when his sons came home from public school one day and said, "Dad, we're not native," the image of two boys playing basketball in their driveways somehow in conflict with the idea of "native" held by their non-indigenous classmates.

For Jamieson, it was a moment, but a devastating moment, prompting him to quit his job to spearhead a program going into Ontario schools to educate students on what it actually means to be Indigenous.

"After that day, my children had trouble standing up and saying they were Aboriginal at their schools with their friends," he explains. "I want them to be proud and I want them to stand tall, but peer pressure is very big and I want to stop that."

Mr. Jamieson, now a resident of Brampton, recently shared his experiences along with a group of other Indigenous leaders from the surrounding community, including water walker Becky Big Canoe, an advocate for Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women, Cree and Metis Micmac Elder of the Wolf Clan Lauren (Blu) Waters, who currently works at Seneca College as an elder providing traditional teachings, and Collette Youngchief, a Cree student and mother.

Hosted by the Aurora Public Library, it was designed to foster a dialogue on issues affecting Aboriginal communities and looking to the future.

Looking ahead, however, all agreed that education is a keystone towards reconciliation - that is, education for non-Indigenous Canadians.

"We have so many new Canadians who have never seen a First Nations person and the first thing they are waiting for are feathers and deerskins," says Jamieson, who said the racial slurs of "Dirty Native" and "Dirty Indian" still percolate to the surface. "It puts blocks on our shoulders. Education is not on our end, education is on your end, and it has to be open. We have to be open to questions."

In many instances those questions are tough questions.

For Big Canoe, asking a simple question can lead to a tug on a tiny thread which can lead to something far more significant. Once you begin to talk about one issue facing Indigenous Peoples, you quickly see how they "all tie together."

"They go to economics, capitalism, resource extraction and things of that nature," she says. "We continue to find fronts where we need to fight but there aren't enough of us. There aren't enough educators, lobbyists and researchers; it is usually just poor folks hopping in a car and going to the scene."

"If you put your children into school and they begin to learn the truth and history that you were denied, you should be angry at your own government and education system for shortchanging you the way they did. We so badly want to teach our grandchildren their true heritage and we only have little pieces of it left. We have to be able to make a climate generally for that kind of knowledge to be valued by everyone in society."

Waters too believes that everything comes down to education.

Part of Reconciliation, she says, involves acknowledging that the Indian Act was meant to 'annihilate every indigenous person' and there needs to be accountability.

'Whether or not people were directly involved, anyone who is Canadian is accountable,' she explains. 'We are all treaty people because it takes two people to make a treaty. As a Canadian, everybody is accountable. Then it takes change in action. That change comes through further education.'

'A lot of people walk around not knowing who the indigenous people are because, as Todd says, they are looking for the feathers, the headdresses, the jingle dresses, fancy shawls, and breech cloths. We are looking at that perspective because that is what we learned from TV and history. That is not what indigenous people look like. There are blonde-haired, blue-eyed indigenous people walking beside you every day and you haven't got a clue because of a lie that you were told, because of histories you were given from one side.'

'We all have to be accountable, we all have to acknowledge what has happened in history and we all have to make changes because, as Indigenous people [we] have to sit down and say, 'I know you didn't make the Indian Act, however you're perpetuating the Indian Act by carrying on the story-tellings, by carrying on the jokes, by hearing someone else make comments that are not called for.' Whenever we don't stand up for one we stand up for nothing.'

As a young mother and college student, Collette Youngchief saw this perpetuation in action, so much so that when her children were ready for school, she registered the boys under a different last name, a move she tearfully says she regrets.

'Coming here, it was so exotic to be Native,' says Youngchief. 'I am so proud of my last name, but to do that to my sons, it hurts a lot that I chose to do that and made a choice for them. The name represents something; as opposed to them being ashamed of it, they are very proud of it.'

In addition to education, Big Canoe says in order to achieve true reconciliation land will have to be given back. Young Indigenous people, she says, are 'dying, they are committing suicide because of where they live and what they are doing is nothing to do with who they are.'

'They are using whatever is available to check out and they are in despair,' she says. 'If we don't get our land back we're looking at extinction.'

Adds Mr. Jamieson: 'For Truth and Reconciliation to be a factor, it has to come both ways. We need to come forward a little bit too. We have, for a long time in our history, given, given, given but we never got anything back. If we stop giving we're never going to meet in the middle. Through Truth & Reconciliation I hope we get that voice. We're holding big dreams.'