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The Rural Voice

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PM 4003

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Answering the call for reconciliation

• By Gary Kenny

How an Ontario city, church and university are addressing the impact of colonialism on First Nations peoples



A return of land initiative in Kitchener-Waterloo was celebrated by (top) Pastor Jenn Hund and Arthur Hills of Emmanuel United Church who attended a ceremony to transfer land to the White Owl Native Ancestry Association

(apologies for not having the names for the other two persons in the photo). Above, Michelle Sutherland, former executive director of the White Owl Native Ancestry Association speaks at Emmanuel United Church. At right, Arthur Hill displays a blanket and soapstone carving gifted to Emmanuel United Church for the land transfer.



In its landmark 2016 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Indian Residential Schools (TRC) called on all Canadians to walk the path of reconciliation and right relationship with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

"We all have a responsibility to do something about this," TRC chairperson, former Canadian Senator, and Ojibwe elder Murray Sinclair said of the debilitating impacts of the residential school system on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people across Canada.

The TRC defined reconciliation as the process of "establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful

relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country."

Unpacking that definition, Mi'kmaq lawyer at Ryerson University professor Pamela Palmater echoes other Indigenous leaders in asserting that reconciliation must include listening to the truth of Indigenous people suffering, learning about the full spectrum of harms caused by colonialism, apologizing for the wrongs done and promising never to do them again, and making meaningful reparations.

It will be hard work, Palmater added. "If it feels good it's not reconciliation."

In the six years since that initial TRC call, many Canadians – all levels of government, institutions, organizations, churches, and individual citizens – have begun the work of reconciliation, their efforts taking various forms.

One of the many ongoing reconciliatory initiatives in southern Ontario is Owen Sound's Gitche Namewikwedong Reconciliation Garden.

We had a "Spirit-led vision," said Susan Staves Schank, a citizen of Saugeen Ojibwe Nation. "Some friends and I had become more aware of the extent and the horror of the Indian residential school system and its legacy of intergenerational trauma," Schank said.

"We believed that the creation of a reconciliation garden in Owen Sound would help with healing and educate



Susan Schank
Reconciliation Garden

people about the (history of the schools and start the process of reconciliation" in the Bruce and Grey County region, she added.

So Schank and members of local Indigenous, Métis, and settler (non-Indigenous) communities formed the Gitche Namewikwedong Reconciliation Garden Committee, with Schank as chairperson.

The committee approached Owen Sound City Council asking it to set aside land for the garden. Council agreed and donated \$15,000 for the build.

With guidance from local Indigenous knowledge keepers and the design talents of landscape artist,

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Thomas Dean, who specializes in healing spaces, the committee set about developing a detailed plan for the garden.

That was 12 years ago. Today, after receipt of financial and in-kind donations from many public and private donors, the physical dimension of the garden is almost complete. Only the planting of cedar, birch, and other trees sacred to the Anishinaabe people remains.

Gitche Namewikwedong Reconciliation Garden is situated where the meandering Pottawatomie River flows languidly into Owen Sound Bay, near the site of the ancient Indigenous Nawash village. It includes a circular limestone terrace and seat wall, sacred fire pit, symbolic drystone stream bed, and footbridge spanning the stream.

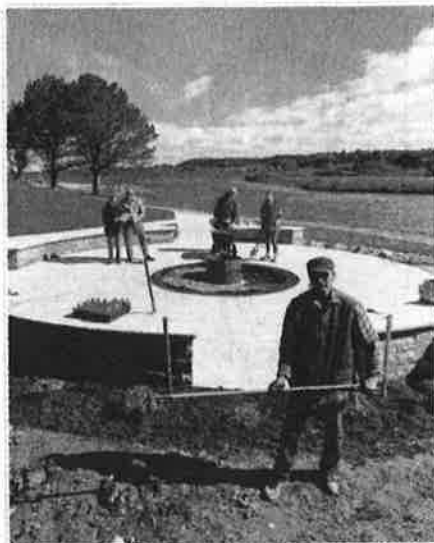
In Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabe people, gitche namewikwedong means great sturgeon. It was also the pre-colonial name for what is now Owen Sound Bay.

A focal point of the garden is a striking 15-foot-long metal sturgeon swimming in the dry stream bed. Known as Nookomis Gitche Name' Kwe (Grandmother sturgeon), its "sacred and iconic presence at the garden will serve as the physical, spiritual, and cultural link to the traditional lands and waters of the (Anishinaabe people)," committee members said.

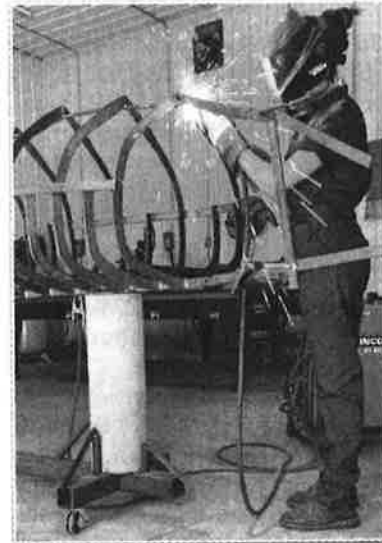
When 215 unmarked graves were found at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia last May, local residents laid 230 pairs of shoes as well as toys and poems around the garden's circular terrace in somber memory of the children who had perished.

Even during its construction, the garden hosted drumming and healing circles, sacred fire ceremonies, and various commemorative events demonstrating its planned purpose even before completion. Schank said post-construction plans will include educational programming for local Indigenous and settler communities.

The garden project will remain a cooperative effort bringing together Saugeen First Nation, the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation, non-Indigenous citizens of Grey and



Volunteer work crews plant flowers in the Gitche Namewikwedong Reconciliation garden in Owen Sound, near the site of the ancient Indigenous Nawash village. Above, right award-winning Anishinaabe-kwe artist Kathryn Corbiere, a metal sculptor from M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island works on Nookomis Gitche Name' Kwe (Grandmother sturgeon) in her studio before placement in the garden.



Bruce Counties, and the City of Owen Sound, Schank said.

The spirit of reconciliation also thrives in a collaborative effort to revitalize Indigenous languages anchored at McMaster University in Hamilton.

"When I was a kid, I heard our languages spoken all around my neighbourhood, said Rick Monture, a professor at McMaster and Mohawk of Six Nations of the Grand River. "But over time, some of those languages have gone silent."

Many of the Indigenous languages spoken in what is now Canada – and worldwide – are threatened and many have disappeared, Monture said.

Monture helps to facilitate a language revitalization project focussing on preserving Cayuga and Onandaga, two of the original languages spoken at Six Nations. He describes himself as part of a broader movement to revive Indigenous languages.

The project is a joint initiative of the McMaster Indigenous Research Institute and Woodland Cultural Center in Brantford. Woodland has 35 years of experience strengthening, revitalizing and maintaining First Nations languages, locally, regionally, and nationally.

McMaster allocated \$25,000 of funding for the project, the fourth in

a series of similar initiatives Monture has assisted.

Among fluent language speakers at Six Nations today, "only" Cayuga, four or five Onandaga, and maybe two Mohawk remain Monture said. All are elders.

"We've also lost half a dozen fluent speakers to COVID," Monture added.

The loss of languages is the direct consequence of settler colonialism, Monture said. Dispossession of land, policies of assimilation, and discriminatory laws and practices pushed many Indigenous languages in all regions of Canada to the brink of extinction, he said.

With all its linguistic pressure, "the fact that we've held on to anything of our languages in the heart of populous (and predominantly English speaking) southern Ontario is remarkable," Monture added.

Loss of their Native languages is devastating for Indigenous people. "The languages we speak are directly from and are deeply connected to the land. They are a gift to us from the Creator" and have profound spiritual and sacred value, Monture said. "If we lose them, we've lost thousands of years of human connection to our immediate environment."

Unlike Western languages li

English, Indigenous languages are verb-base, something many non-Indigenous people may not understand or appreciate, Monture said. When spoken “they reflect a world in motion” – a world in which all things, animate and inanimate, are alive in the Spirit and interconnected, he added.

“So, when they took our kids to residential schools, that took away our sacred and spiritual lives and our



Rick Monture
Language revitalization project

connection to the land,” added Monture, whose own grandfather was a residential school survivor.

The heart of the McMaster-Woodland project involves interviewing Six Nations elders in their Native languages. Their recorded stories, passed down generationally through oral knowledge keeping, as well as their personal memories and reflections, will be digitized for use for Native language training among Six Nations youth.

Kaniehtenhawi Deer, Woodland’s language and cultural coordinator, and also Mohawk, said Native language speakers she works with are “invigorated” when they have an opportunity to speak their languages.

Because of the personal trauma of colonialism and residential schools, Deer said, a lot of people in her generation “feel a disconnect with the generation before them. It creates a kind of shame, I guess, because people grow up not knowing their

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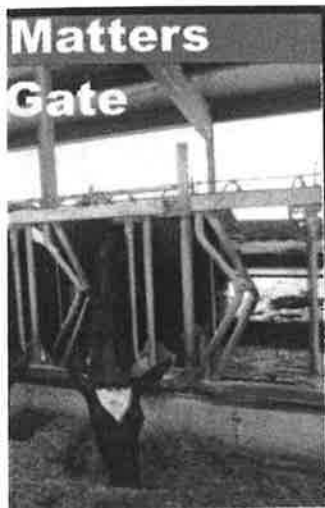
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languages and ceremonies.”

“We have to bridge the gap between those generations” with the language revitalization project, she added.

As Schank and Monture know well, reconciliation must go beyond apologizing for past injustices, renaming buildings, removing statues of racist historic Canadian leaders, and stating land acknowledgments.

Pastor Jenn Hind gets that. Last year Emmanuel United Church in Waterloo, where Hind is minister, lies at the very heart of meaningful reconciliation — it facilitated the return of some stolen land.

The congregation’s youth group had raised \$2,000 for the White Owl Native Ancestry Association, an organization in Kitchener that offers counseling and land-based teachings and programming for urban (off-reserve) Indigenous people.

White Owl’s then executive director, Michelle Sutherland, was invited to a Sunday service where she was presented with the funds. In conversation at coffee hour afterwards, Sutherland lamented that White Owl had to rent outdoor space from the city for its sacred fires.

In the cultures of many Indigenous peoples, the sacred fire is an important part of spirituality and communication with the ancestors. It’s a hallowed practice meant to help individuals feel open, grounded, and connected.

Emmanuel congregation member Arthur Hills overheard Sutherland’s comment. “An immediate connection was made,” Hills said.

As it happened, Hills sat on the board of a regional United Church Council and knew of a 10.5-acre plot of forested land in south Kitchener that the Council owned. Because of the presence of the endangered and protected Jefferson salamander, no building on the land was permitted and it had sat unused for 40 years.

As it also happened, the woodlot is part of the Haldimand Tract, a contested strip of land that runs the length, and 10 kilometres on each side, of the Grand River from Lake Erie to its source.

The 950,000-acre expanse was granted, in perpetuity, to Six Nations

allies of the British Crown in 1784 to compensate for territorial losses suffered in the American Revolutionary War.

But Six Nations says the Crown didn’t honour the agreement. They claim most of the lands were improperly sold, leased, or given away by various Canadian governments. Only five percent of the original land base remains under Six Nations stewardship.

Hills went to work. He persuaded the regional council to transfer the land to White Owl for \$1 in legal tender. About a year later, representatives of the United Church turned over the land in a ceremony on the property, followed by a service at Emmanuel.

“We wanted to walk in the spirit of reconciliation in a much deeper and more meaningful way,” Hind said, “and (the land transfer) was one of the ways we thought we could do that.”

Hind and Hills said they consider the land transfer to be an “act of reparation.” Reconciliation “means it’s time we start looking for opportunities to return land,” Hind said.

White Owl’s current executive director, Dave Skene, explained that urban-based Indigenous people don’t have a land base like those living on reserves, and connection to the land is spiritually very important for all Indigenous peoples. “So for us to have land in the city, 10.5 acres, that’s very significant,” he said.

Skene, who is Métis, said the woodland is used by urban Indigenous folk for educational and ceremonial events throughout the year. That includes annual Maple Moon festivities when the forest’s sugar maples are tapped the traditional Indigenous way and “when we give thanks” to the maple tree, the forest, and the Creator for the renewal of life that comes with spring, Skene added.

A reconciliation garden, an Indigenous language revitalization project, and the return of stolen land — three reconciliatory efforts that demonstrate that the movement for reconciliation is advancing among Indigenous and settler peoples. ♦

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