

South Algonquin memorial garden honours the 215 Indigenous children

By Mike Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Holly Hayes, the former CAO of South Algonquin Township, has set up a memorial garden in Galeairy Lake Memorial Park in Whitney to honour the 215 Indigenous children whose unmarked graves were found at the site of the former Kamloops residential school on May 27. She has extended an online invitation to the community at large to come and plant a flower in these garden boxes in memory of these Indigenous children who were taken far too soon.

The unmarked graves of 215 Indigenous children, who had been students at the Kamloops residential school, were found by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation using ground penetrating radar on the grounds of the former residential school a couple of weeks ago. Some of the children had been as young as three years old when they died.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its final report, estimated that up to 6,000 children had died in residential schools, which works out to one in 25 children that attended them. The TRC also released a way forward for Canada to atone for their part in the residential schools and navigate a way forward to address their continuing legacy of injustice, with their 94 calls to action. According to the Yellowhead Institute, a First Nation led think tank, in a special report from December, 2020, only 8 of those 94 calls to action have been implemented by the federal government as of the end of 2020. In light of the tragedy of these discovered Indigenous children, it has spurred calls for the federal government to put the other 86 calls to action into place with a minimum of delay.

In a June 1 posting on her Facebook page, Hayes, who now works as the executive director of the Algonquin to Adirondacks Collaborative, said that she had prepared the gardens at Galeairy Lake Memorial Park and had planted one flower in each garden box. She invited anyone interested to plant additional flowers in memory of the 215 children whose graves were discovered at the former residential school in Kamloops, B.C.

An online photo post from a friend gave Hayes the inspiration to honour the 215 Indigenous children.

?When I got home from my run, a friend had posted a photo of a sidewalk with 215 feathers drawn on it and many people were commenting how beautiful and thoughtful it was. I thought why don't we do something like that in Whitney? At first, I thought painted rocks, but I wasn't sure where we could put them. The more I thought about it the more planting seemed more therapeutic and respectful,? she says.

Hayes says that the boxes had already been prepped so she just invited people online to come and plant a flower. She says she provided none of the flowers, the community brought their own.

?Some planters brought things from their gardens or dug up beautiful wildflowers from the roadside. As for the types of flowers, they are all different, which contributes to the impact of the activity. Every child that we are acknowledging is different and every member of our community has a different level of understanding and feeling toward this tragedy and we all mourn differently,? she says.

Providing this planting opportunity, according to Hayes, is about allowing people to act and hopefully start a conversation about this tragedy. She says someone asked her how she'd make sure the flowers were planted in a nice pattern and she replied to them that it was not about controlling the outcome but about a community working together to contribute whatever feels good to them. Christine Luckasavitch was raised in Whitney and is part of the Omàmiwinini Madaoueskarini Anishinaabekwe (Madawaska River Algonquin people), belongs to the Crane clan, and is of mixed settler ancestry including Irish, Swedish and Polish. Her ancestors have called the area home for over 10,000 to 12,000 years. She says that Hayes messaged her asking if going ahead with the memorial garden would be a good idea, to which she said that is absolutely was a good idea.

Lukasavitch is the executive director of Native Land Digital, owner and executive consultant at Waaseyaa Consulting and Waaseyaa Cultural Tours and is currently studying for her Master of Arts in Indigenous Studies at Trent University. She feels that what Hayes has done in the community is an example of what non-Indigenous allies need to do.

“It goes far beyond one off gestures and being active on social media, but to actually make a change to encourage learning and consciousness and creating space for Indigenous people for their voices to be heard,” she says.

Lukasavitch recalls that many times in years past Indigenous people had said to check the grounds of these residential schools for the approximately 6,000 missing children who had attended those schools, but to no avail until recently. Now, she says that for the first time ever, she thinks, non-Indigenous people are really listening.

“It's a good first step, but where does it go after this?” she says.

Lukasavitch encourages non-Indigenous people to take the onus and really educate themselves about Indigenous issues and combine actions with that new knowledge.

“There's a lot of sources out there, about the lives, the cultures, the history and the continued impact of colonization,” she says. Lukasavitch says she went out to plant some flowers at the memorial garden with an Elder in the community right after Hayes had been there. She also planted some flowers on behalf of family and friends who were unable to do so in person.

“I texted [Hayes] after and said you did a good thing. You really did a good job! It's an example of what people should be doing, making a visible change in the world,” she says.

South Algonquin Township Councillor Bongo Bongo thinks the garden is a wonderful act of community building and sincerely thanks Hayes for taking the initiative, calling it an example of a small rural community coming together in a meaningful way. “One small volunteer contribution can affect so many people. A community is stronger with volunteer leaders like this” and it's 100 per cent COVID-19 safe. It's important for us to be aware of the history of residential schools and my heart goes out to everyone who has been subjected to this kind of systemic racism and social injustice,” he says.

Bongo says that the Township of South Algonquin is located on the traditional unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people, and while that acknowledgment appears in tiny letters in the bottom left corner of the township's new wayfinding map, he feels that as a society we need to really begin to soak that in and confront this nation's complex past, noting that our colonial history is brutal and its negative effects are still being felt today.

“The township will also be acknowledging Indigenous People's Day on June 21, 2021 and although these actions are largely symbolic, if we are to see tangible change through the pursuit of Truth and Reconciliation, we need to start somewhere. Indigenous issues need to be prioritized as we cannot stall any longer from facing the past. This is how we create a better future, but a lot of work remains to be done. Thank you to everyone who visited Galeairy Lake Memorial Park to participate in this community activity to commemorate the 215 deceased Indigenous children found at Kamloops residential school,” he says.

Hayes says she has come away with a more fulsome understanding of Indigenous peoples, the issues that affect them and the cultural genocide they've gone through and continue to go through, not only through her professional endeavors as the former CAO for South Algonquin and the executive director of the A2A Collaborative, but through her own reading on the subject. She feels that if we've learned anything from COVID-19 it should be that individuals need to do things that they believe in and that waiting for politicians to give them answers is not the right course.

“As Canadians we are outraged, ashamed, saddened and although we can't change the past, we can use the uncovering of this tragic finding to force change and make this country the amazing place that we want it to be. That means learning and growing and changing,” she says.

It is Hayes' sincere hope that this little project of planting some flowers in the garden boxes in Whitney will start conversations and help people from all cultures do some research in their past and come up with their own perspective and perhaps even a tiny project within their own community. She also hopes that the flower gardens will become an annual tradition because these Indigenous children, and all those who've been lost, deserve to be held in everyone's hearts forever.

?I am going to take this opportunity to challenge my community to be outraged enough to make this an annual event,? she says. ?We should never forget how we feel right now and that we need to continue the work to prove this is not who we are.?