

Third annual Indigenous People's Day educates and celebrates Indigenous culture



By Bill Kilpatrick

On June 21 members of the community including classes from North Hastings High School, York River Public School, members of the Bancroft detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police, Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins, among many others converged on Millennium Park to celebrate the 27 annual Indigenous People's day, which first began in 1996. The event, in its third year locally, ran from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and was put on in conjunction with North Hastings Children's Services, the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre, the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation, the United Way, and the Province of Ontario.

Those in attendance were treated to multiple activities and learning opportunities regarding the Algonquin culture including a Sunrise Ceremony that began at 6 a.m., games, drumming, songs, and story-telling featuring the Shawashkong Ikwe singers, members of the Faraday Drumming Circle, Big Drum Whispering Winds Singers and Dancers. There were also stories and speeches by Melanie Ross/Flies with the hawk, an Indigenous Veteran of the Canadian Forces, along with Diane Hanna/Martin, Grand Mother Judi Montgomery, and many others.

Martin, who gave an emotional opening speech, talked about how important it was for her to be able to openly share her culture with others. "Seeing all of these children here today taking part in my culture means so much to me," because, as Martin points out,

due to colonization and stigma she was not able to learn about her Indigenous culture when she was a young child. "Being able to come back to my hometown and be able to provide these teachings to all of you in my community is so overwhelming and it fills me with such joy." Martin, who is the Indigenous cultural coordinator at the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre, travels to schools throughout the area teaching about the Algonquin language or Anishinaabemowin and she sees this as a significant piece in order to revitalize the Algonquin language and an important step towards Truth and Reconciliation.

A brief history of colonization and stigma in Bancroft

To understand why Indigenous day is so important to the Algonquin Nation it is important to understand some history of the area. Since the early 1800s the lands around Bancroft were not recognized as traditional Algonquin lands, only recently have the lands been recognized as the traditional territory of the Algonquins. In 1961 Bancroft held its first Old Home Week from August 6 -9, which according to the Bancroft and District Old Home Week book that was published to celebrate the occasion, the book itself was "dedicated to all of those who at one time have made the community of Bancroft their home." However, nowhere in the 128 page book are the Algonquins even mentioned. The book does mention people who were Algonquin such as the Baptistes, but it only mentions them in general terms as "Indians" stating, "[In the early days] There were still Indians living [in North Hastings], some at L' Amable, Lake and others at LaVallee Rapids, with the famous Baptiste, Benoits, White Ducks, and Bernards at Baptiste Lake. The Indians were always friendly and eventually all moved to the reservation at Golden Lake except the Baptistes who still live on the shores of their homeland waters." It was believed at the time that the lands around Bancroft were the traditional lands of the Mississauga the Chippewas as they are the Nations that the Government of Canada signed treaties with surrendering the land in 1819 and 1823 respectively. This has since been proven incorrect which is why the land is now considered officially unceded Algonquin territory.

Part of the stigma that Indigenous people have had to endure was being labelled as "savage Godless heathens" in need of conversion to Christianity by many of the Christian inhabitants, not only of Bancroft, but all across Canada. This thinking is what led to the foundation of residential schools and all the harm that has been a result of their implementation. One particular passage of the Home Week book that outlines this thinking well is a paragraph that was postulating about who the first white man to visit the Bancroft area might have been. The passage asked if it was possibly Lieutenant Walpole in 1827, or David Thompson in 1835, or possibly Alexander Murry some years later. The passage goes on to admit that due to the fur trade there was most likely a white man who came to this area long before any of the above mentioned people, but the paragraph goes on to admit they we will probably never know, but "we can be allowed to speculate." The passage hypothesizes that members of the "courier de bois" were a possibility adding, "Or we like to think that the first white man here was a man of God, the ubiquitous "Black robe", who in his indefatigable zeal to teach the savage and win his soul for God, made his way up the York River to this district." The view that the Indigenous people were savages and whose culture was inferior to European culture thus making them in need of "white Christian" education and to be converted to Christianity has been a source of tremendous shame and stigma for Indigenous people for many years.

The number and variety of people who attended the third annual Indigenous Day on June 21 is hopefully a sign that the shame and stigma of being Indigenous, that was so predominant in Canadian culture for many years, is finally being put to rest in the interests of a better future for all Canadians. As the Old Home book proclaims, "Let us try to understand the present world by looking into our past, and by doing so prepare for a better future," and this can only be done, as the introduction to the Truth and Reconciliation report states by, "coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward."

What does Indigenous Day mean to you?

1- "It's a day for Indigenous people to come and rediscover their traditions, their songs, their drumming, and their heritage and culture. The Algonquin people are part of a diaspora and we are spread all over the place. We are not on reserves and we have blended into the larger culture and because of that we have lost a lot of our traditions and we need to rediscover our heritage and our culture. Indigenous Day is one of the ways that we can come back and begin to reconnect and reconstitute our culture."

-Robert Hunter, Algonquin Negotiation Representative for Kijiocho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation

2- ?I want to be here because my family is Mohawk. I've always believed in what they believe in. It makes sense and it makes me happy when I think about it. Being here is a cool way to learn about all of that.?

-Taryn Feeney ? 11 years old

3-?Indigenous Day to me means having a opportunity for Indigenous people to come together and celebrate who we are openly. We don't have to worry about prejudice or oppression as no one who is here is here with bad intentions. My favorite part of Indigenous day and the part that is so meaningful is having to me is having all these people come and share their stories and cry, and laugh, and get upset. The whole sense of community and bringing it all together because we can share stories of similar lived experience and learn together from those stories and support each other. My dad used to say that we have a responsibility to ourselves to be open and honest to others, but also to ourselves. We need to ask ourselves what can I do for Indigenous people today and if you're Indigenous what can I do for myself to reconcile so we don't continue to share these negative stories about oppression and racial segregation. Indigenous day to me is an opportunity reconcile so that maybe my kids won't have to reconcile any more.?

-Zendon Hunter- program coordinator for the Algonquin Inòdewiziwin Child and Family Centre and son of the former Chief Stephen Hunter.

4- ?I look at it from two perspectives. As an executive director of an organization [in terms of] what can I do to that is in my ability to persuade, to influence or encourage people to look at Truth and Reconciliation in their roles. I support my staff who are indigenous and the community to make it happen. The Bancroft police have been very supportive as they have a very strong Indigenous presence on the force. They are not just allies they are Algonquin community members as well. Algonquin children can see that you too can be a police officer and be Indigenous. I also look at it from the perspective of a parent of Anishinaabe children and I see these events as an opportunity to learn about their culture and their language and it warms my heart because it was never able to happen when they were younger and it was not able to happen for their father. It's very encouraging as a parent. An event like this is a chance for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and their children to relearn the culture together.?

-Jessica Anderson- Executive Director of North Hastings Children's Services

5-?Indigenous People's day for me is a day where Indigenous people can celebrate who we are, be with family be with friends, and be on the land. For non-Indigenous people, Indigenous People's day should be about examining your privilege and how they can risk that a little bit to make life better for Indigenous people and try to acknowledge the realities of history, which is a hard thing to do. Looking out at the people who are attending the event I see a really nice blend of community. Bancroft has gotten so much more involved in joining and appreciating Indigenous activities and culture. We have people here from another Indigenous community nearby and they are very impressed that there are police officers and the Mayor involved and that doesn't happen everywhere.

-Robin Tinney- Algonquin artist

6- ?I think that we have a tremendous amount to learn from Native ways of life and in fact if this expands and we are humble enough to take in the learning it might just be what saves the planet. Just being here today and hearing some of the songs and seeing the dancing [has been moving]. There's a venue for all the kids to get up and participate. Where in our society do we have that, where people can actively participate as opposed to just sitting passively and watching. It's great to see all the people here, indigenous and none, including the police who were here as participants.

-Eric Wiener

7 -from left, ?It's really important that we have gatherings like this because we meet family. People who have been adopted, people who have been in the foster care system and they need to connect with people of their nation and to their families. I've been able to help families reunite at gatherings like these. That's why we travel and that's why we try to get to as many gatherings as we can. Being here as a Cree Metis woman and embracing the love for the people and getting them connected gives a sense of belonging. It's

a time to celebrate and show who we are so we can pass some teachings on to others.?

-- Lorie Young/ Heart Woman a Cree/Metis residential school survivor from the Deer and Bear nation of Fort Smith Northwest Territories.

?[At gatherings like these] the culture gets shared and everybody is learning something for future's sake. What we wear and what we do will be remembered and they [the kids] will tell their kids and grandkids the story of what they witnessed today.?

-Broderick Gabriel/ Turning Bear a man of the LiLwat Nation from the Bear and Frog family of the Interior Shalish British Colombia

8- ?Number one it's fantastic. The thing that impacted me the most was seeing all the kids here because if we start educating all the kids at an early age [about different cultures] it becomes engrained and hopefully the kids will teach the adults and then events like this just become the norm. I think this has been successful for those who want to learn. It's a great day and I'm happy to see all the kids out, but now we just need to get more adults out.?

-Paul Jenkins ? Mayor of Bancroft