

Artists look to the future for Truth & Reconciliation



By Brock Weir

Never again.

It is a statement Canadians hear often at this time of year as Remembrance Day approaches.

It is a time for reflection on soldiers lost, battles one, and salute those who serve.

For artists from York, Durham and Simcoe Regions, however, Saturday also marks the end of a poignant chapter in their journey, one which has also made them say, "Never again?" with a focus set squarely on the future.

Saturday will be your last chance to see Call To Action #83: Quest for Truth & Reconciliation.

An exhibition encompassing the work of several artists, Call to Action #83 answers the recommendation in the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's report to use art as a means of fostering healing. As such, the concept of the exhibition brought together prominent Indigenous and Non-Indigenous artists from surrounding communities to inspire each other.

Created in a process described as "Wildfire," the creative process began with an original piece from an Indigenous artist. This finished piece was then passed over to a non-Indigenous artist who used an element of the previous work to inspire their own piece. This second work was passed to another Indigenous artist, and so the process went with each successive artist only being able to see the one immediately before it.

The result is an active conversation intended to foster an invaluable dialogue on healing.

One participant is Newmarket Metis artist Nathalie Bertin.

When she received her piece from a non-Indigenous artist, she was inspired by the painting of nature overtaking a residential school. While the building crumbled, ravens took over and intertwined in the landscape were wild strawberries, a traditional "first fruit" for Indigenous people.

This inspired Ms. Bertin to create what is ultimately the smallest piece in the exhibition, but one with a big impact "a painting of a single wild strawberry.

"I have the smallest piece with the biggest flavour," she said.

Ms. Bertin says she came into the project with a specific idea on what she wanted to create, but that went completely out the window when she saw the piece she was to use as inspiration.

"I realised that I don't know everything there is to know about reconciliation; not that I thought that, but my original idea would have jarred the process," she says. "It would have been like talking over everybody. It wouldn't have been my view and that is not what this is about."

When she saw the previous artist's depiction of the "Mush Hole" residential school, she was brought back to memories of her own. While Ms. Bertin herself did not go to a residential school, her mind was brought back to Grade 2 at her Catholic school where her teacher, a nun, was forced by the principal to deliver corporal punishment to a student.

"I remember that day vividly," she said. "I don't know what he had done, but I remember the colour of his shirt, his glasses, and how he stood there and took the two rulers on his hands stoically. I remember the discomfort the teacher felt at being forced by the

administration to do this. Not long after that, he left the school completely and I thought about that recently, thinking his parents took him out, they moved him to a public school and that is the big difference here. In our Western culture, we have that choice. We had that choice. Those kids in residential schools did not have the choice.?

Indigenous artist Paul Shilling, however, came into the project with a more immediate perspective on the Residential School system. While he was not forced to attend a Residential School himself, many of his elder siblings, as well as his parents, were not so fortunate.

Their experiences caused many insurmountable rifts in the family he said he hopes this exhibition, which wraps Saturday after a year of touring across Ontario, will go a long way to healing these wounds for future generations.

?There is a little child here, a beautiful little bundle, and no one has the right to say that little bundle doesn't have the right to speak their language and they shouldn't learn all the songs,? he said, drawing attention to little Roli Singh, who caught many an eye crawling around the exhibition's official opening.

?We all have a spirit, we're all sacred, and we all have to understand who we are. There is a lot of talk saying get to know the First Nations people. I say, No, you don't need to get to know the First Nations people. You need to get to know yourself and ask yourself and understand why you carry the anger, hatred, prejudice ? why you feel so ashamed sometimes, why you are lost, why you are the way you are.

?With residential schools the trust was broken and once the trust is broken, we lost our voice. We couldn't speak. We all have to wake up. Education by itself is not the answer. We have to really understand who we are. Everyone here is extraordinary and we can be strong. Just like that little one. We have to know who we are.?

Call to Action #83 wraps up Saturday, November 11, at the Aurora Cultural Centre.