

Solidarity fundraiser for Wet'suwet'en draws 40 people



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By Chris Drost

Although there was a last-minute change in speakers for the event on Sunday, March 8, the solidarity fundraiser for Wet'suwet'en still kept a crowd of about 40 people captivated with song, food and speakers who shared everything from the general history of Indigenous people in Canada, to the situation in Wet'suwet'en, to a personal account of days spent at the blockade in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory.

Marsha Depotier opened the event, which took place at the office of North Hastings Community Trust on Bridge St. in Bancroft, with an outdoor smudging ceremony, prayer, drumming and song. "Whether we have Indigenous blood or not, someone near to us does. We need to stand together," Depotier said. From there, she spoke about the importance of it being International Women's Day and about the coming Spring, which she described as a gift. "Remember kindness. We are unique. Live day to day and help others out," were Depotier's final remarks of the opening ceremony.

Inside, Ko-Ko gave the land acknowledgment which included a description of how the unceded land of Algonquin Park, including ancient burial ground and petroglyphs, were taken over from the Indigenous people.

Ko-Ko's mother, Krista Flute, who recently moved to North Hastings from the Kingston area, provided an in-depth description about the Wet'suwet'en history and what led up to where things are today. She spoke about the importance of the Royal Proclamation of 1863 and the Supreme Court decision of 1997 *Delgamuukw*, which she described as "the backbone of what Wet'suwet'en is standing on as they uphold above title and traditional governance." She added that it is the traditional governance of Wet'suwet'en that is in opposition to the pipeline and that the Wet'suwet'en have never signed a treaty at all. "The elected chiefs and council are not a creation of a treaty, but of the Indian Act," she explained.

More specifically, Flute noted that after the Royal Proclamation under King George III in 1863, following the Seven-Years War between Britain and France, the act included a portion about Indigenous lands that had not been ceded or sold. The Proclamation states the Indigenous receive all lands not ceded or purchased and that aboriginals should not be disturbed. There was recognition that treaties were to be made but if there was not one, the lands were to be left as Indigenous land.

As described by Flute, it was through the Indian Act that the governance through elected bands and chief councils was created. In places like Golden Lake, "people were put on the reserve without a treaty," she said. Flute also said that the government wants the Indigenous people to use the elected bands as it makes it easier to sell land. She said that sometimes this was brought in by force or by making it so they have to sign in order to get funds under the Indian Trust fund. Flute further explained that electoral turnout is typically low as people don't recognize the elected bands, but rather the hereditary system.

Flute shared the importance of the Indigenous "laws of the land," the need to protect the land and water and all living beings for the next seven generations. In the case of hereditary chiefs, if they act against those laws they can be removed from office. She

explained that this has been done in Wet'suwet'en.

Based on the Supreme Court decision in 1997, oral evidence is equal to other forms of evidence. Flute said that the Wet'suwet'en have remained on their land throughout time and so they are to have explicit rights to their land as per the Royal Proclamation.

'Colonialism was thought up in the States,' said Flute. She described it as all about capitalism, assimilation and selling of land, residential schools and 'the scoop.' According to Flute, 'this left a lot of Indigenous people deeply scarred.'

With regard to some Indigenous people wanting the pipeline, Flute said, 'it is caused by 150 years of assimilation.'

She added that some think Indigenous rights have been ignored and just not brought up until now. It was illegal for Indigenous to hire a lawyer until 70 years-ago, according to Flute.

Turning to the rail blockades, Flute said they were done in support for the other Indigenous nations. She further explained that 'in Canada, resource extraction is a huge part of the Canadian economy. Rail lines and highways have been put on the Indigenous land as a way of taking more Indigenous land,' she said. She added that in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, land was lost to Hwy 2 and the railway and those lands were taken without a treaty. 'The Mohawks didn't hurt anybody. They chose to impact railways as symbolic of the colonial state of moving Indigenous people off their land,' she said. She added that the tire fires were intended to block vision from guns and tear gas.

Flute's daughter Ko-Ko has been spending time at the blockade in Tyendinaga. Flute, like other parents, 'sent our kids as it is our job to protect the next seven generations,' said Flute.

Ko-Ko reiterated that she has a responsibility as an Indigenous person to protect the next seven generations to keep the balance of life. She described her anger when she saw what was happening in Wet'suwet'en with people being arrested. 'I am glad to see people coming together and saying that this is not okay,' she said.

When she arrived at the blockade in Tyendinaga, Ko-Ko says, 'I was so welcomed ' people came from all over, the U.S., Six Nations, North Hastings ' all over.' She explained that 'when six people got their heads kicked, it made her cry and made her angry.' But, after the raid, which she described as emotional, they kept talking and building community.

'Young people know the history of standing up against Canada,' Ko-Ko added. The tires were lit on fire to keep the police away. People from all walks of life brought them food and blankets and checked to make sure they were okay.

'This is not just about the pipeline ' it is about our land and water. Look at all the climate change marches ' the youth are getting ticked off. Things can't continue as they are,' she said.

'It is hard to stand up for all of this when you are poor,' Ko-Ko explained. She moved back here to North Hastings to get back to the traditional ways and her community. 'The government doesn't care about people at the bottom and the Indigenous people,' she added.

Ko-Ko explained that when the trains started to run again, many were empty. 'It was a power play by the government. Then today, they were shipping the pipeline through ' it was a slap in the face,' she said.

Ko-Ko concluded her presentation by saying that she will not step down or be compliant about it as it is the right thing to do. She did offer her thanks to everyone who attended and for offering support.

Following a light supper, the group watched the film, 'Invasion,' a short film about the Unist'ot'en Camp, Gidimt'en Checkpoint in the larger Wet'suwet'en Nation that shows the community standing up to the Canadian government and corporations that want to build a pipeline through their territory. The film is been screened in communities across Canada. 'Invasion' is available for viewing on YouTube.