

Reconciliation efforts reach Whitney

This week I travelled to St. Martin of Tours Catholic School to see its new playground. It was cold. Later I would drive home in a blizzard, but what I saw at the opening ceremony would keep me warm.

After an opening prayer by the vice principal at the ribbon cutting ceremony, the floor was turned over to Margaret Haskin of Whitney and Area Algonquins and her grandson Kaden to say an Algonquin Prayer of Thanksgiving. The school faculty recognized and respected that their school was on Algonquin land. Haskin and her grandson turned in each direction of the compass asking for blessings and thanks.

Let's put this on pause and think about what this actually means.

There has been a lot of talk about Canada reconciling with its Aboriginal peoples. Quite frankly, until now it has all seemed very far away.

The Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation was founded in 2007. In my experience this was the first real recognition I can remember by the Canadian government to admit yes, we did terrible and awful things, let's try to repair what we did.

According to the ministry's website, Ontario is investing \$250 million in reconciliation projects. Its current project focuses on the province's 13 residential schools. The ministry is working on "understanding the dark legacy of residential schools." According to Minister David Zimmer "by addressing the legacy of residential schools, we can ensure their terrible history is remembered. Today's children must grow up with a shared understanding of our true history so that they may make informed decisions for our collective future together."

More recent and another big step forward, is Canada's national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, which started earlier this fall. Different media outlets have reported that the number of missing or murdered women could range from 1,200 to 4,000. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been quoted for saying "indigenous lives matter."

Even more recently, I have covered consultation projects in Alberta and here in Ontario where the Canadian government has given back Aboriginal lands to the First Nations, the Metis and with steps forward last week with the Algonquin land claim. The consultations give rights to Aboriginal people to object to government use of their lands and work with the government to protect them.

I can't remember indigenous rights being a concern of the Canadian government in the '90s. It's condemning to say, because Canadians owe so much to Aboriginal peoples, but we've only just begun cleaning the infected wounds of our histories together. It's easy to hear about things going on in the world and forget about them in a community of 3,500 people. We are a tiny little community surrounded by many communities just like ours. Sometimes it feels like the province forgets about rural Ontario. Hearing an Algonquin prayer at a Catholic school seems to show that the ripples of the country's efforts, and the larger world as a whole, are starting to trickle through.

After a history of trying to eradicate and assimilate Aboriginal culture into predominately Anglo-Saxon culture, which included altering religious beliefs "Catholicism was and remains the most common religion in Canada" seeing both on the same plain was inspiring. Both cultures stood on the same playground and one wasn't trying to bully the other. There was only respect.