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LOCAL : LIFE

'A thing of hope': The dedication of Queen's Platinum Jubilee Treaty Forest in Waterdown

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By **Julia Lovett-squires**

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Standing next to a white pine at Joe Sams Leisure Park in Waterdown, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation Chief R. Stacey Laforme tells a story.

Just as the dedication ceremony of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Treaty Forest was set to commence, the Commonwealth delegation from the United Kingdom visited with Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation Councillors and Elders at which time one of the British guests tripped and fell and scraped his head.

"I said that that's almost symbolic of the relationship we've had with the Crown over time. It hasn't always been friendly and calm, there's been bloodshed, there's been pain and suffering," said Laforme.

"The act of falling and spilling that blood on the ground, you know, I thanked him for doing that — for taking one for everybody here. That symbolism that he created for us was very strong," he added before honouring Queen Elizabeth II on her 70 years on the throne.

The event that brought elders, local dignitaries, community members and an official Commonwealth delegation together in Waterdown was a culmination of a months-long collaboration between the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, City of Hamilton, Rotary Club of Waterdown and Waterdown Lions Club, and Waterdown District High School's treaty studies class. The goal: to honour Waterdown's relationship with its treaty partner, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, by planting 70 trees at the Centre Road Park that now serves as a permanent monument and signage explaining the treaty territory Flamborough is a part of.

"The purpose of the treaty forest was to honour our relationship with the land and our treaty partners by creating a space to educate our community about its responsibilities in treaty," said Waterdown District High School student Marissa Iozzo.

Students worked alongside the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for the last four months to design the monument stones, planned a Sacred Fire and selected the trees — all species indigenous to the area. They were planted by Environment Hamilton volunteers.

"The Crown is the original treaty partner and has responsibilities that we all share in. This is a space to polish the silver covenant chain of friendship and a space that Indigenous people in the community can use to host ceremony," said Iozzo, adding the signage and monuments serve to educate local residents about the treaties.

According to the Prince's Trust Canada CEO Sharon Broughton, The Prince of Wales, who is founder and president of the charity, "made sure that the story and importance of treaty is brought to life in our work."

Students Evan Lepp and Fabiha Ruthmila read a statement at the June 18 ceremony on behalf of Ontario's Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Dowdeswell, who was unable to attend the treaty forest's dedication ceremony due to an illness.

"Today's ceremony, and this project, are one of the many acts of symbolism we will make in the healing process. But these symbols tell stories. They teach lessons; the imperative of reconciliation, the history of our country, and the future of humanity."

For Laforme, the dedication and its symbolic nature means a lot.

"I'm thankful that we're doing this with the planting of trees because we're all aware of the uncovering of the children at residential schools and there was one witness to all of that, that was our mother, the earth," he said. "She accepted those children in, and she held them until we can retrieve them and so I think so much symbolism is occurring, and I think the planting of the trees says a lot in that regard."

WDHS teacher Nathan Tidridge remarked on the learning, "particularly for the delegation because the best parts are the organic parts," he said, referring to a teaching given earlier at the sacred fire by elder Carolyn King.

"Now it's this kind of space — reclaiming space," said Tidridge, adding, "To me that's the most important thing."

Laforme described the dedication as humbling and said he was proud of the students, their grace and poise and he hopes that they continue their journey of learning.

"It's an honest, heartfelt attempt to do the right thing and that's where we have to start with reconciliation," he said.

"Certainly, we're all starting to learn the history and the atrocities and the things that have happened in the past, but this is a thing of hope and I look forward to continuing to work with this region into the future."

The residential schools crisis line is available 24 hours a day for anyone experiencing pain or distress as a result of a residential school experience. Support is available at [1-866-925-4419](tel:1-866-925-4419).

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