

## **Reconciliation Circle**

By Yannick Jourdan

In Canada, 1.6 million people identify as Indigenous. These 1.6 million people are divided into First Nations, Metis\* and Inuit. For centuries relationships between these peoples and settlers have been fraught and Indigenous people's traditions have been ignored, criminalized and desecrated. This is part of the reason that in Fairfield Gonzales neighbours came together to form a Truth and Reconciliation Circle.

To learn more about the circle, we first spoke with Vanya McDonnell. She is the Co-Executive Director of the Fairfield Gonzales Community Association and, one of the founders of the circle. The Reconciliation Circle is a group of Fairfield Gonzales neighbours. They work towards acknowledging the harm that has been done by settlers over the years, and they have the desire to make those things right.

It was important to Vanya to talk about this topic before taking action. "Our first goal was to build a circle, it means a way to be together in community, and talking about what exactly is Reconciliation. I think action is not the most important piece. Together with Diana Smith, Fairfield resident at the time the circle began, we wanted to find a way to carry forward the actions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, specifically the Commission's Calls to action".

"Reconciliation" is a key word, but Vanya wants to insist on the term of "Truth". "I think sometimes we forget about the Truth part and we go straight to the Reconciliation. We try to make things better, but it's important to remember what has happened, and share that understanding".

We asked Vanya about what would be her speech if she had to motivate someone to be involved "It's a really important issue for Canada, we have to learn to live together. I think it's important to act locally. It's also a way to build a community, and to make the neighborhood stronger. It's important to explain, because of the history, it's not the Indigenous people's job to make things right, but the job of the rest of us".

We also decided to give the word at three members of the Reconciliation Circle. Find out below!

Susan

I wanted to be involved because many members of this Circle are of a similar age to me, we are “boomers”, and we learned almost nothing about Indigenous people at school. I just felt responsible to educate myself. I am proudest to have participated in of our 2018 activities which we called 'Celebrating Indigenous Stories'. There are so many great Indigenous artists of all kinds but particularly writers, it was wonderful to have 3 Indigenous authors to present their work and show how great their accomplishments are, and what rich contributions they are making in so many ways into Canada's culture.

Bob

Involvement in this group is a valuable experience to me for both personal and collective reasons. I think Canada can be a better country if Indigenous knowledge, values, ecosystem, culture, and language become more familiar to Canadians and are included in our identity, culture and laws. As we are in a climate crisis it is of immeasurable value to have the extensive, integrated, local knowledge about the Earth that Indigenous peoples can provide. And we have the responsibility as settlers who have benefited economically and in many other ways from this land to directly support Indigenous people in their survival and in thriving culturally.

There is also the political reality. Politicians are generally led by what people vote for, and if the people are not aware of our local and national colonialism history, and current possibilities for including Indigenous knowledge and wisdom in how land and ocean resources are used and protected, we will continue to have the same collective problems we face today. We can affect political decisions by educating ourselves.

Of personal note, I am involved in this work because members of my family are Indigenous. When I was a child my parents took in a foster child, a girl who is now my sister, who had spent 10 years in a residential school. On leaving school she could not return to her family because they had become sick with tuberculosis, one of many introduced diseases. Also my first wife was Cree, and I have children and grandchildren from that marriage who are Indigenous. Canadian improvements in how Indigenous peoples are respected, and their cultural contributions to Canada valued and included in the development of our country, is an ongoing direct matter to me.

Nancy

I believe that eliminating discrimination and prejudice can only be dispelled through an understanding of another's reality. Coming from eastern Canada, my exposure and awareness of First Nations people was very limited. The process of educating myself about their culture, history, and arts has led to an appreciation of Indigenous values and aspirations. Trying to find ways to support the evolution of respectful, healthy relationships seems to be one way that I can constructively participate in my community. Facing the multiple barriers and obstacles that exist is a slow and sometimes discouraging experience but a challenging and stimulating journey.