Orange Shirt Day is meant to help heal residential school survivors

Edmonton – The residential school system in one of Canada’s darkest chapters. Between 1884 and 1996 thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their parents and placed in residential schools across the country.

“As I reflect on the significance of Orange Shirt Day and what that day means to our people, it’s about honoring those children who lost their lives in residential schools and embracing those who survived,” said Terri Sunjtjens, director, Indigenous Initiatives, MacEwan University. “It’s a reminder of how resilient and loving our people are because despite what has happened, my father, a residential school survivor is kind, nurturing, loving and alive and well. It’s about creating opportunities to educate those who have little knowledge about the history of residential schools. This day brings people together in an collective effort to learn, love, heal and build relationships across this country.”

“Orange Shirt Day began in 2013, but it’s origins are based on an incident that happened to Phyllis (Jack) Webstad in 1973,” said Sunjtjens. “Phyllis was six years old and her grandmother let her pick out a new shirt for the first day of classes—one that was bright orange—but the Oblates at St. Joseph Residential School stripped her of the shirt and made her wear the school’s institutional uniform. The orange shirt was a reminder of how worthless and alone she felt at her time in the residential school. Today, we wear it to show support that every child matters.”

Brad Crowfoot, a second-year student in the Arts and Cultural Management program designed the orange T-shirt to commemorate Orange Shirt Day. “I was inspired by the regalia of powwow dancers, and the many geometric patterns, so my Orange Shirt Day T-shirt design features a series of geometric shapes, mostly stars and teepees,” says Crowfoot. “Overall, the design is meant to honour the past, while pointing to a hopeful future.”

MacEwan University’s Indigenous knowledge keeper Roxanne Tootootis will lead a sharing circle in the gathering room of MacEwan University’s kihêw waciston Indigenous Centre.

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