September 18, 2017

Orange Shirt Day: Healing the spirit of residential school survivors and their children

Edmonton – The residential school system is one of Canada’s darkest chapters—and something that hits home for Terri Suntjens. Suntjen’s father is a residential school survivor. “He experienced abuse, and didn’t have an easy life there,” she says. “As the daughter of a residential school survivor and an Indigenous woman I see there is both intergenerational trauma that comes with grief and loss that my family experienced.”

The legacy of residential school survivors—and those who did not survive the experience—is honoured every year at Orange Shirt Day. “Orange Shirt Day began in 2013, but it’s origins are based on an incident that happened to Phillis (Jack) Webstad in 1973,” said Suntjens, MacEwan University’s director of Indigenous Initiatives and kihêw waciston. “Phillis 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 residential school. Today we wear it to show support that every child matters.”

The event keeps the discussions on all aspects of the legacy of residential schools alive, and is an opportunity for First Nations, local governments, schools and communities to come together in the spirit of reconciliation and hope for generations of children to come.

While coordinating plans to mark Orange Shirt Day at MacEwan, Suntjens decided she wanted a shirt specially designed for the staff in kihêw waciston to wear. As fate, would have it, she met Keely O’Dell, a first-year Theatre Production student whose brother Keestin works as a student advisor in kihêw waciston. O’Dell met Suntjens and she agreed to design the shirt.

“When I was designing the orange shirts for MacEwan, I was thinking a lot about my grandparents—my kokôm and mosôm—who were both in residential schools,” said O’Dell. It’s something I’ve grown up knowing about.”

O’Dell says that the circle of sweetgrass in the shirt design represents the idea that healing is a continuous journey. “My grandparents’ journey of healing continues on all the way from them to us. It makes me happy that people are finally acknowledging that these things happened and that it wasn’t okay. We can’t forget.”

Suntjens and the staff in the kihêw waciston Indigenous Centre invites the public to join Elder Alsena White, to share her story through a circle and the video Gently Whispering the Circle Back commissioned by Blue Quills First Nations College.

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When:  Friday, September 29
Where: Robbins Health Learning Centre, 10810 – 104 Ave.
Time:  9:30 a.m.

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