

Empowering Indigenous voices: Centre Dufferin observes National Truth and Reconciliation Day



By **Danielle Williams**

At Centre Dufferin District High School (CDDHS), a significant commemoration unfolded as the school observed National Truth and Reconciliation Day, fostering a deeper understanding of Indigenous history and the path to reconciliation.

Orange Shirt Day and National Truth and Reconciliation Day took place on Saturday, Sept. 30. CDDHS spent the prior week engaging in activities and lessons to honour the survivors of residential schools and commemorate those who went through residential schools.

"This is a day to recognize Indigenous voices, look at Indigenous history and actually what I think it should be about is more about making significant changes and steps forward to the way we approach those voices and people in general," said Damon Ealey, CDDHS principle.

This year's goal was to give the high school students more time to reflect and discuss what happens during the week of activities. Given Truth and Reconciliation Day took place on a Saturday, CDDHS organized a variety of activities and subjects for each period block over the school week leading up to the day.

The week started with a Canadian activist, Cindy Blackstock, and an interviewer discussing what Truth and Reconciliation Week is all about, as well as watching a video about the residential school timeline.

"There was an activity that was optional, that teachers could do with their students that involved highlighting Indigenous heroes in their community," said Lela Mckee, CDDHS vice-principle. "Although the week is a sombre week and we honour survivors and families afflicted by the residential school system. We also want to recognize the strength and resiliency of Indigenous Peoples."

Throughout the week, students were provided with various videos and facts that gave informative and enlightening insights into the experiences of residential school survivors, with an extra focus on Phyllis Webstand, the founder of Orange Shirt Day.

Phyllis Webstad's story involved the loss of her new orange shirt upon entering a residential school, which sparked the annual commemoration of Orange Shirt Day on Sept. 30. When the shirt was taken and never given back, it marked the beginning of

Webstad's traumatic separation from her family, culture and heritage.

Phyllis's traumatic experience inspired Orange Shirt Day, raising awareness about residential school harm and reconciliation. It serves as a reminder for Indigenous children who have experienced similar suffering.

Canada's residential school system operated from 1867 to 1996. Orange Shirt Day was started in 2013, and Truth and Reconciliation Day was officially recognized in Canada in 2021. This remembrance day highlights the suffering endured by over 150,000 Indigenous children during the residential school era.

The National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up by the Government of Canada in 2008, heard from 6,750 witnesses over six years and estimates at least 4,100 children had died or gone missing in the schools. In a 2015 report, the commission concluded that the residential school was a form of "cultural genocide."

"I can't imagine a situation where ten people are sitting around a table coming up with residential schooling," said Ealey.

Ealey stated a wish for the school to develop continual participation rather than relegating Indigenous problems to just one day of the year ? on Truth and Reconciliation Day.

Throughout the week leading up to National Truth and Reconciliation Day, CDDHS made a sustained dedication to recognizing Indigenous Peoples' strength and resilience, as well as their ongoing journey towards a more inclusive future.