

Sept. 30 marks Orange Shirt Day, honouring residential school survivors

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Orange Shirt Day, an annual project held on Sept. 30, spreads awareness of Canadian residential schools while also honouring residential school survivors and their families, spreading the message that Every Child Matters.

"The Orange Shirt Days are a remembrance for the indigenous residential schools, for the survivors," said Debbie Sipkema, co-founder of Dufferin County Cultural Resource Centre (DCCRC).

In May of 2013 former residential school students and families were brought together for the St. Joseph Mission (SJM) Residential School (1891-1981) Commemoration Project and Reunion events that would create the annual Orange Shirt Day. The name of the day is inspired by Phyllis Webstad, who at the age of six, attended her first day at St. Joseph Mission wearing an orange shirt bought by her grandmother. The shirt was taken by the school. The date of Sept. 30 marks the time of year that children were taken from their homes.

"It is an opportunity to create meaningful discussion about the effects of Residential Schools and the legacy they have left behind," writes the Orange Shirt Day organization on their website. "A discussion all Canadians can tune into and create bridges with each other for reconciliation. A day for survivors to be reaffirmed that they matter and so do those that have been affected. Every Child Matters, even if they are an adult, from now on."

Intergenerational trauma has been one of the effects left behind by residential schools and, starting this year, Sipkema says will be the focus of the project and fundraising locally.

"When we're looking at residential schools, the children were taken at such a young age and so they were never taught the proper skills for taking care of children because they never got that when they grew up. Some of them had horrible things happen, and it's repeated again through the families," said Sipkema.

Proper counselling, Sipkema says, is a necessity for healing as well as centres such as healing circles.

"It's through culture that healing is found and a lot of these intergenerational people haven't had that opportunity. I think that needs to be done and the funding needs to be provided," said Sipkema.

She added, "Healing circles are where you have elders and counsellors and those that are affected and it's an opportunity for people to get together and work through a lot of the issues that they may or may not have experienced."

As it has with many organizations, COVID-19 has impacted and limited the amount of fundraising DCCRC has been able to do. Sipkema says that now they've had to rely on government funding that doesn't always cover the costs.

"It is through funding that we're going to be able to get the supports needed for the Indigenous community, especially those suffering with intergenerational trauma," said Sipkema. "It's the only way we're going to them the support that they require."