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Stories Woven Through Fabric reclaims Indigenous identity ? one ribbon at a time

Written By BROCK WEIR

Co-executive director of the Dufferin?Caledon based Indigenous led not-for-profit, the Brave Canoe, Sharon Rigby, is a student of Indigenous Community and Social Development at Georgian College. During her studies, she saw how proud many of her peers were coming to class wearing a distinctive garment.

Rigby, a Mohawk/Ojibwe artist from Akwesasne Reserve in Quebec, who now lives in Mississauga, was keen to learn more about her culture and its histories, but she did not have a ribbon skirt of her own ? and, with some fabric and needles, she set out to reclaim this vivid part of her sartorial culture.

The results of this journey can now be seen on walls throughout the Aurora Cultural Centre as it hosts Rigby's first solo show, Stories Woven Through Fabric.

On now through Nov. 30, Rigby uses the medium of ribbon skirts to ?share the lived experience of Indigenous individuals impacted by the Sixties Scoop and residential school systems,? says the Centre.

?Ribbon skirts hold deep cultural significance for many Indigenous communities across Canada and North America,? says the Centre. ?While their meanings vary between nations, they are recognized as symbols of identity, connection to heritage, and the land, and tools for healing. Through her art, Rigby creates a space for truth and reflection, inviting members of her community to share their stories and, in doing so, foster a sense of healing and understanding surrounding National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.?

Choosing ribbon skirts as a medium has allowed Rigby to collect threads of her own story, one that was and continues to be impacted by both residential schools and the Sixties Scoop.

?They are works of art ? a lot of creativity goes into them, a lot of story, and I wanted to tell my family's story within a skirt, and all of that came together while I was in the program at Georgian College,? says Rigby. ?Initially what I wanted to show through my ribbon skirts was my matriarchal line. I have one ribbon skirt that is dedicated to my family and in that I have three prominent ribbons that go vertically?. One of them is for my grandmother, one is for myself, and one is for my mother. My grandmother was a part of the residential school system, my mother was part of the Sixties Scoop, and in the middle is myself, stepping forward to reclaim our culture and our history.?

Coming out of the residential school system, Rigby says her grandmother had ?no concept of showing love? and had never told her daughter that she loved her. Her mother, in turn, as a result of the Scoop, grew up disconnected from a feeling of familial belonging.

?My mom was very strict and very disciplined with me and it took a lot for her to start talking about how she grew up and some of the things she was having a hard time doing when she was raising me,? says Rigby. ?It took a lot for my mom to finally step forward and start talking to me about our history.

?When she recognized that I was on that path of going to school, being involved in the community and engaging, she started to open up. The whole concept of this Ribbon Skirt exhibition was, for many years, Indigenous people were not willing to talk, and for the same amount of years, the non-Indigenous weren't ready to listen. What came about because of that is a lot of people trying to reclaim their culture, having grown up surrounded by trauma, and having to step forward out of that and be these strong Indigenous individuals reclaiming their histories. It's very difficult to do, but what I was really hoping is through my artistry and through listening to others who felt the same way I did, that by having that story on their skirt would help them find healing. Through that medium myself, I find healing as well.?

It has been a journey of healing, reclamation and growth for the family, and now Rigby's children have continued on the path of cultural interpretation, fire-keeping, and furthering the Ojibwe language.

?My mom was overwhelmed,? says Rigby of her family's reaction to the exhibition. ?My sister-in-law was reading to her a portion of the stories that were on the skirts and my mom said something that many people came up to me and said on the opening day, ?We recognize a similar thread through each and every story.' For people trying to find their connection and trying to find their footing, it's a little bit of an eye-opener and it also makes them realize they're not the only ones.?