

One City Many Voices ~ April 2023

The City of Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

Please note that the views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the authors.

Education, Partnerships and Connections Will Make for a Stronger Thunder Bay.

By Sheena Campbell

I was born and raised in Shawville, Quebec, a small English speaking town in the Upper Ottawa Valley. Like most, I wasn't taught about Canada's history and since I was living within a population of only 1500 people, I wasn't exposed to a lot of diversity. I was however taught about the importance of community and making sure everyone felt valued within the circle.

I arrived in Thunder Bay twelve years ago, in April 2011 with the intention of continuing on to the Rocky Mountains for a summer adventure. But something within told me to not go any further.

I didn't know what I was going to do, but I found a job and a short-term place to live in order to find my bearings. As I began to explore my new city, the divide between Non-Indigenous and Indigenous people was obvious, but I didn't understand why. I was regularly told that all the problems that Thunder Bay had was "because of the Natives" and that they were not trustworthy. What people were telling me made me nervous. I didn't

want any trouble, so I kept to myself and was forced to question whether or not staying in this city was the right thing to do.

After a few months, I hadn't found another place to move to and my short-term stay was expiring. I asked the delivery driver at my job if he knew any places I could live. He told me I could live in his house out on Fort William First Nation, while he lived in his mother's house. I didn't realize he was Indigenous, and I didn't know if he knew I wasn't. He told me, "It doesn't matter. You need a place to live. I am inviting you. You are welcome to live there."

During the three years I lived there, my eyes were opened to education everyone should learn. I also quickly realized that everything that people told me to be leery of was so wrong.

Over the last twelve years, it was Indigenous people that welcomed me into the city first, without judgement that I looked differently than them; and without any care that I had no roots within the region. They opened doors that allowed me to further my education, grow a network and further my career. They invited me to learn about their culture and made sure I felt valued within their circles. All they want is the same in return.

And that shouldn't be so hard. While Thunder Bay has seen growth since my arrival, with ceremonies, cultural events and orange shirts becoming the norm, it hasn't exactly rid itself of racism either.

Indigenous people are still getting followed in stores, are having their credentials questioned while struggling to get jobs and they are still blamed for problems within the city. I hear, on an ongoing basis, the stories from community members, people I've worked with and I see how my partner is treated differently than me.

So, I remember my roots and I look to the example I've learned from the Indigenous people in my life to build communities.

They are vital to human connection and thus overall wellbeing.

I strive to bring this in both my professional career and personal life in order to make our beautiful city a little more welcoming place.

I don't have the answer to break down the systems, but we all have a capability to combat racism. I challenge everyone to go out of their comfort zone, and start by saying hello to someone you normally wouldn't; read a book that will help you understand our history; go to an event to expand your horizons. Knowledge is power and kindness will change our city for the better. Partnerships and connections will make for a stronger Thunder Bay.

Sheena Campbell is a Recreation Therapist and a Nutrition Support Worker.

She has spent the last decade building communities through hula hooping events and currently through food and cooking classes with her currently place of employment. This is her story.

Views are her own.

