



Red Dress Day May 5, 2023 Lethbridge, Alberta



(From: Lethbridge Herald, May 6, 2023)

The Red Dress is symbolic for all of the missing and murdered women that continues to arise in Canada. It is necessary to bring more education and awareness about the importance indigenous women have among their societies. As part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRC), calls for inquiry were made to the Canadian government into the numerous cases of missing and murdered indigenous women [1]. It has been proposed that the European colonization of Canada included the genocide of the indigenous people by decimating a culture, language, spiritual beliefs, food security of buffalo, and taking away of their land; everything societies need to thrive. Questions have arisen however, about the literal application of the term 'genocide' as known from historical wars, to applying it to Canadian colonization. Rather, it has been considered that the genocide of the First Nations people hasn't even ended. The TRC report has suggested that all Indigenous people are recognized as genocidal targets to include Indigenous women, Indigenous girls and 2SLGBTQQIA (Two-Spirited; Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transgender; Queer; Questioning; Intersex; Asexual) people as the most vulnerable population at risk [1].

Celebrations this year in Lethbridge, Alberta were held as The Fireside Connection Event held at Galt Gardens to honor the memories of the Missing and Murdered

Indigenous Women and Girls, including Two-Spirited and Gender Diverse people (MMIWG2S). This May 5th annual Canadian event is also known as Red Dress Day. The importance of indigenous women within their societies needs to be re-instated with an emphasis on ending societal values that have maintained colonial violence and oppression [1,3,4]. “Violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia against people have become a regular occurrence. Indigenous people have become normalized to violence while Canadian society shows an appalling apathy to addressing this issue. “The fact that this national inquiry is happening now doesn’t mean that Indigenous Peoples waited this long to speak up; it means it took this long for Canada to listen [1].”

In Lethbridge, Alberta, Blackfoot, Metís, and Inuit members prayed and spoke about the importance of women in indigenous societies and how there are a disproportionate number of indigenous women, 2-spirited, and gender diverse people that are reported missing and murdered [2]. The local indigenous members bring with them stories, teachings, and prayers to bring awareness to our community about women’s traditional roles; how important they were for their clans and how important it is for indigenous women to regain their strength and knowledge for their children and grandchildren.

The Blackfoot women, **Niitsitapiiaakiiks**, traditionally held great power in their clans. “As life-givers, mothers were considered to be closest to Creator and was the center of the family. Ceremonies would also not take place without the women. A Blackfoot woman who received a stand-up headdress was considered a woman of highest regard with recognition of the spiritual and physical life that she led [3].” Recently, women of the Standup Headdress Society have been in consultation for the empowerment of Blackfoot women (pictured right).



*Blackfoot Women’s Standup Headdress Society
(with permission)*

“Violence against Blackfoot women, **Niitsitapiiaakiiks**, was seen as counterproductive to survival, as they were central to the family and clan’s ability to thrive [3].” All indigenous women had distinctive roles and responsibilities that contributed to the survival of their clans and societies and “when they are taken away, it creates ripple effects that throw entire communities out of balance and in danger [1].”

It is essential that indigenous women regain their voice and place in their society to re-learn from the elder’s traditional teachings to be passed through the upcoming generations [4]. Our local Blackfoot women have shared stories of their personal lives that can inspire and educate many people in our community. Women talk about the love and support from their grandmothers who maintained the Blackfoot ways with their families:

Beverly Hungry Wolf, Sikska-Ghee (Black-Faced Woman), resisting racism and oppression, attended Lethbridge College in the 1960's. She "feels all of her grandmothers holding her up that gives her confidence, and she believes in that knowledge her grandmothers gave to her; the knowledge they lived by for thousands of years [5]." Marcia Black Water lito'tawaohkaakii (Walking Beside), makes note of how indigenous women fear danger in situations such as travelling for work. As a young girl, her mother said to her "we will walk this world differently; it is a blessed and honored life." Rachel Crowspreadingwings, Naatoikiimakii (Holyfeather Woman), often lives as though she has a target on her back because of her indigeneity and feels she has to watch her back every time she leaves a building, is alone in a stairwell, or walking to her vehicle. "When she encounters other indigenous people, she encourages them to keep in contact because helping one helps us all." Janetta Soup, Kanah'soyi (Star Shining Brightly), advocated for First Nations people and integrates Niitsitapii values into her work and transfer of knowledge. She has "learned from and has witnessed the strength when Elders and traditional knowledge keepers are involved in the development of protocols and best practices." Janetta considers this "a form of reciprocity that can strengthen First Nations communities and honor their responsibility to the past, present, and future generations [5]."

The stories brought forward by numerous First Nations women are inspiring for all community members, native and non-native. With continued education and community gatherings without fear of violence, racism, or oppression, all Indigenous women, girls, two-spirited, and gender diversified people can learn to express their voices that bring enhanced awareness about their lives that with time can make changes in our understanding to bring about a healthier and safer community for all people.



References

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