

Advocacy starts young

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One of the first things I saw this morning was a *Toronto Star* article concerning more First Nations kids taking their lives, and chiefs calling for help to deal with the suicide crisis. In conversation with a friend about it, she said to me “I wish I could help, but as a student I just don’t know how.”

Talking about it more with her, she expressed that she felt as if she couldn’t do anything because she’s non-Indigenous, but also far away both socially and physically from the issues at hand.

But that’s simply not true. It needs to be known that we are all treaty people, and reconciliation needs to be a national movement with 100 per cent of Canadians being a part of it, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous.

Everyone has a role to play, especially young people.

When I received my appointment earlier this year to work in the Office of the Minister of Youth, the Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, part of my mandate was to help figure out what the Youth Service Initiative would look like. Essentially we were asked what nation-building activity for youth would encompass.

For me, a nation-building activity would focus on reconciliation and the position that young people play in it.

The issues reconciliation addresses are widespread, and don’t stop or start in any one place or level and students have been championing reconciliation and advancing the agenda for many years now.

At all levels, you have strong, passionate, young people leading the way. My own inspiration being Maatalii Okalik, who dedicates her life as the President of the National Inuit Youth Council, advocating at all times of the day for Inuit youth. It goes to show that students and young people alike are both leaders today and of tomorrow.

Youth involvement and placing young people at the forefront of advocacy like Okalik is absolutely necessary.

By taking a step back and looking at the local aspects of reconciliation the importance of getting young adults involved in these movements is clear.

Indigenous people make up four per cent of the population of Canada, yet according to internal Queen’s numbers they make up much less than that, around one per cent. When I mentioned this in debate with my partner as I wrote this article, he rebutted “but if education is free, then that’s not an issue of the university, but the student.”

Needless to say, he got himself a free education for the next hour on why he’s wrong.

These issues that are addressed by reconciliation are systemic, and don’t start or end with the students themselves, however, they are the ones who remain most vulnerable to the problems.

A common example is the myth of a free post-secondary education for all Indigenous peoples, which does not match the realities young, struggling students face. Of the current federal funding model, only roughly two out of every three of the students who apply can access funding. Think of this in the context that out of a class of 15 that I grew up with, 12 didn’t graduate. This is coupled with the fact that many First Nations youth these days don’t even count as Status Indians because their blood deems them less than 50 per cent. With all this to take into consideration, it’s not surprising that Indigenous students populate such a low percentage of students at Queen’s.

During a conversation I had with the Indigenous Affairs Minister’s Representative on Child Welfare, Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, she said many things that resonated with me, including this phrase that continuously inspires me: “The foundation of reconciliation is inclusion; conversation brings us close enough to know one another well

enough to care, we can't reconcile what we don't know or care about, and we can't include what we don't see!"

This, for me, provided reassurance that this year's Queen's Native Student Association (QNSA) Conference here at Queen's is on the right track by the nature of being inclusive to all. Its theme focuses on empowering young people and is adequately entitled "Inspiring a Generation."

By engaging in discussions, I'm contributing to reconciliation, as all individuals at a learned institution like Queen's should be doing.

Imagine if every Canadian took the time to learn and then discuss the benefits of reconciliation — we'd be in a much different space than where we are now.

All of this reinforces the notion that young leaders on campuses like Queen's need to make reconciliation a priority in their community because the impact will be felt across Canada. If we make the conscious effort now to normalize these conversations that often fuel movements, then future generations will be able to take the steps to ensure reconciliation is a thing of history.

Everyone within the confines of the Canadian border is a treaty person — me, you, every Canadian citizen, Indigenous person, landed refugee, permanent resident, and visitor.

We as university students have the means to help build Indigenous youth up and champion a human rights movement. Reconciliation requires both the 96 per cent of non-Indigenous Canadians and four per cent of Indigenous Canadians.

Everyone being treaty people means we all have the responsibility to uphold treaty and Aboriginal rights, and to ensure that children aren't discriminated against simply because they hold Indian Status. It means we need to let go of stereotyping and myths, like the aforementioned full education funding, that obscure the real challenges Indigenous students face.

As Queen's students, and leaders today and of tomorrow, we must learn and do what we can to leave Canada a better place than when we were born.

It all starts by joining, and creating debates that matter.

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