

# Reconciliation blossoms

## ST. VITAL TUNNEL COMES ALIVE WITH MURAL THAT HIGHLIGHTS HEALING ROOTS

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Jeannie Whitebird of Rolling River First Nation and Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation elder Peter Atkinson provided teachings and a naming honour for the mural unveiling.

"Have you ever been so broken? / You've waited so long? / Tried so hard to stay strong?" reads the opening lines of a poem written by Glenlawn Collegiate graduate Aachal Patel.

"Life is about the fight / stay strong and enjoy the flight," Patel's poem, titled 'Struggle: An essential to all life' concludes.

Aachal Patel's work is one of many emblazoned on the walls of a pedestrian tunnel that connects the school, St. Vital YMCA and the library across Fermor Avenue.

The grimy subway tile, layers of graffiti, and uncomfortable atmosphere that had defined the tunnel since the 1960s was transformed this summer; it's now home to an 120-foot mural that displays Manitoba's natural, healing roots.

With teachings from traditional helper Jeannie Whitebird of Rolling River First Nation and artistic direction from Mandy van Leeuwen, a group of eight Grade 11 and graduating students from Glenlawn Collegiate painted a colourful, larger-than-life monument to traditional healing plants and animals that have their roots in the south Winnipeg fields, adding their own original poems to the tunnel walls.

"I was thinking about graduating and how we're moving on from a very big part of our lives, and this is where we would always be," Patel said as the mural was unveiled Thursday. "It was very different to what it is now, so writing this poem, to me, was like OK, we need to write something that makes people comfortable coming down here, and safe."

Students, supported by art teacher Cloyd Barth and artist Franklin Fernando, worked for nearly a month this summer. It was a chance to make some money, learn, and give back to their community.

"For me, it was about rebirth," said Nawal Semir, who contributed poetry to the mural.

"As a recent graduate, it really speaks to me because it's an opportunity to start over, and I think it starts with this tunnel, and the people who go to school over

there, who come to the library over here. It's about growing up. I used to go to the YMCA when I was a kid, I used to go to the library right before swimming lessons, and then I went to the high school right there. It's my childhood."

In 2020 the City of Winnipeg offered \$300,000 to modernize the tunnel, which was cleaned and painted a cool white, explained St. Vital Coun. Brian Mayes. Thanks to an additional \$6,000 from Take Pride Winnipeg, the tunnel became the site of a mural project that would combine ideas of beautification, reconciliation and collaboration.

During the unveiling, students and artists were joined by elder Peter Atkinson of Roseau River First Nation, who gifted a naming honour to the project.

Now called Onshizhin Zhabahdawaan, meaning "a beautiful flowthrough," the tunnel is meant to introduce Winnipeggers to their roots — literally and metaphorically.

Muskeg (Labrador) tea, weekay (sweet flags), milkweed, seneca snakeroot, fireweed and water lilies are portrayed in massive scale; their bright green and red roots wind through the tunnel alongside colourful monarch butterflies, painted turtles and dragonflies — all referencing the powerful and healing nature of Manitoba's own plants and wildlife.

When the project began last year, van Leeuwen said she was immediately drawn to plants as a theme. But while she had initially envisioned peonies and tulips brightening the drab concrete walls, the extra time afforded by pandemic-related delays opened an opportunity to bring new meaning to the tunnel walls.

"I realized it wasn't sitting right, that a shift was happening," van Leeuwen said.

The artist decided to call on her friend Jeannie Whitebird to bring new life, meaning and teaching to the project by incorporating themes of reconciliation

and Indigenous knowledge.

"If this wasn't a concrete jungle, what would be here?" said Whitebird, explaining the significance of the plants and animals that adorn the tunnel walls. "It's introducing that this is the medicine that's all around us."

Whitebird explained each of the plants has traditional healing properties and would likely have grown in the area before the school, library, roadway and tunnel were built.

"When I take that time out on the land, these are the plants that I see. These are the ones that are speaking to me," she explained.

Students said the opportunity to receive both teachings and demonstrations from Whitebird brought new depths to their painting and poetry, as well as a new connection to the land.

"It took us to another level, just painting lily pads or grass is one thing, but knowing the significance and knowing the healing properties of everything around us, and painting them larger than life, it emphasizes how important this environment, this land that we're on is," said graduate Jaymisyn Santos.

"It strengthened the connection, and helped us find the meaning behind things more," added Grade 12 student Jillian Beaubien.

Whitebird said the mural and collaboration with students have planted seeds for growth, connection and learning in the neighbourhood.

"One of the important things that I thought was relevant, not only is it the time of reconciliation, but also we're nurturing and fostering these incredible relationships by role modelling with the youth.

"Seeds were planted," Whitebird said. "And what will be sowed, we will keep

reaping."

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