

Mural on side of church expresses promises for the future

# DRAWING ON RECONCILIATION



MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Charlie Johnston (left), Jeannie White Bird (middle) and Brad Lent install large mural on the east side of Harrow United Church last week.

BRENDA SUDERMAN

**M**ORE than just a pretty painting on a brick wall, a mural on the side of a Rockwood neighbourhood church sketches out hope for reconciliation and a promise for the future, says one of the artists involved.

"It beautifies the landscape, and it changes it and alters it and then it has messages that draw on the things that are going on in Turtle Island," says Jeannie White Bird of the large mural installed last week on a tall gable wall at Harrow United Church at the corner of Harrow Street and Mulvey Avenue.

Featuring a flowing river, a sunny sky and a stand of birch trees, the polymorphous mural created by collaborators White Bird and Charlie Johnston was rendered on about 30 aluminum-composite panels in their Selkirk-area studio. Measuring about 12 metres at its highest point and nine metres at its widest, the mural covers much of the church's east wall facing Harrow Street.

"It's completely organic," explains Johnston of the mural's shape, which doesn't feature any straight edges or right angles.

"I love that style of mural design." A year in the making, the project costing about \$10,000 was primarily funded by a grant from the Winnipeg Foundation, says co-ordinator Marissa Smirl, a member of the youth and young adult committee from the Prairie to Pine Region of the United Church of Canada. Harrow United Church also contributed some money.

"Our goal with the mural was to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth," she says of the project, which involved the artists painting their full-body silhouettes on the mural.

A group of nine youth and young adults spent a day with White Bird and Johnston in their studio, getting to know each other and collaborating on the mural.

"I'm so glad to be leaving part of my personality up there with all the people who worked on it," says Evelyn Thompson, a Grade 10 student at Fort Richmond Collegiate, originally from Oxford House First Nation.

Titled *Sharing the Truth*, the process of creating the mural, from idea to installation, involved consultations with elders and conversations with young artists from her home community of Rolling River First Nation and members of the United Church of Canada, says White Bird, who has collaborated with Johnston on several previous murals.

"I sat with it for a while before I said yes and then I sat with it after and thought who should I pull in," says White Bird of her process.

"Really, it was an act of reconciliation for me on my journey." The mural's Anishinaabemowin name is Debwewin Awiigewin, translated by knowledge keeper Frank Beaulieu of Treaty 1 territory.

To prepare for the installation, the church removed a spotlight and letters spelling out their name from the exterior wall, says Rev. Teresa Moyssey.

But the process of offering the space on the side of the church building completed in 1949 took much longer than the practical preparations, she says.

For the past two decades, the congregation located at the northern edge of the former Rooster Town, also known as Pakan Town, has worked to understand its role in racism, residential schools and reconciliation. In 2021, they planted a reconciliation garden on their property and are currently developing a walking tour of some of the significant landmarks of the former urban Métis settlement destroyed in 1960 to make room for a shopping mall and other development.

"At Harrow, we believe that reconciliation is the most definitive and important work for our nation and our community in this generation," says Moyssey, who retired at the end of



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April after 23 years at Harrow United Church.

She says the mural is the congregation's latest step in responding to the needs of the community as they continue to host neighbourhood groups for 12-step groups, dance classes and story time for preschoolers.

"Folks are curious as to what conversations are provoked and whether there are opportunities to host other

conversations," says Moyssey of the images in the mural.

That's the point of all public art, says Johnston, a mural painter with more than three decades of experience. Murals transform the environment and create an impression on people driving by and walking in the neighbourhood, he says.

"I think you have to stop, pause and take a look at the ground you're stand-

ing on and take a moment to see why you're here," says Johnston.

"To me, a lot of reconciliation is the truth of place, the place of this land and the people you share it with."

Harrow United Church and the artists plan to celebrate the completion of the mural in a ceremony at 4 p.m. on Sunday, May 28 at 955 Mulvey Ave.

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