

réconciliACTION 2015, An Evening Open to the Public – Tuesday, June 16, 2015

The réconciliACTION Team 2015 and the Pastoral Services of the Université de Saint-Boniface (USB) held an evening open to the public on Tuesday, June 16 at the USB. Members shared their experiences and thanks were given to the many donators and collaborators.

Two years of sharing and spirit of community



The *réconciliACTION* Team is proud of the two years of sharing and enrichment.

Since September 2011, “Projet réconciliACTION” has gathered students and staff of the Université de Saint-Boniface to increase their awareness about the socio-cultural and political issues, past and present, resulting from the Indian Act, particularly the repercussions of the residential school system. The goal of this project is to forge relationships among Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals so as to promote healing and reconciliation. (Janelle de Roquigny, in The Prairie Messenger Newspaper, June 19, 2013)

The reconciliation of First Nations communities has long been a subject both grievous and complicated, but there is hope...

RéconciliACTION was set up by Sister Norma McDonald, director of Spiritual and Pastoral Services at the Université de Saint Boniface. “I had already been on humanitarian adventures with the students outside of Canada, namely in Mali,” confides Sister Norma. “But when I came back from Mali, I was inwardly moved by the thought that it was equally important to bring about justice in our own back yard, here in Canada,” confides Sister McDonald. So in September 2011, she invited students at USB to join her in a project to connect with First Nations groups. “I wanted to teach the young people about the First Nations, to break down the barriers of racism and prejudice through interrelationships.”

This first project made such a difference in the lives of students and others who participated in it, that Sister Norma decided to offer it a second time in September 2013.

In September 2013, students from different backgrounds got together with Professor Jacqueline (Nursing Sciences) and Sister Norma McDonald, to bring to fruition the second phase of the *réconciliACTION* project. Four of the students, Mohamed, Gabrielle, Brenda and Abdelwahab, were able to finish the program with a trip to Tofino, BC, where they were most welcomed by four different First Nations, namely: Hollow Water, Tla-o-qui-aht, Hesquiaht et Ahousaht.

On Tuesday, June 16, 2015, at the Université de Saint-Boniface, they met to share their experiences and their hopes with guests and others who had participated in various phases of the project. After Sister Norma's introduction, stating her regret that the First Nations people they had met were not able to attend the evening's presentations, each one said a few words of thanks and shared their memories, in conjunction with a video on a wide screen.

The main thrust of the program, reconciliation, allowed the students to take a step back and reconsider what it is to be human, and rethink the world in which they live on a daily basis, as Mohamed explains: "We were of different nationalities, different religions, and we remained united. This inspired confidence in the First Nations people who were very open with us and, together, we were able to undertake this reconciliation project. We were fascinated by the manner in which their culture is based on respect for the Earth and animals. Our industrialised societies have lost that."

For more than an hour, they related how they had lived the two years of sharing, as well as their adventurous experience with the First Nations participants who had spoken intimately of their lives. "I really discovered the hidden history of Canada," said Abdelwahab. "Thanks to *réconciliACTION*, I was able to learn how the First Nations people engaged with their peers, and to understand their traditions and their customs. It was truly enriching."

The notions of sharing and of living together were manifested in each of the presentations. The many activities undertaken during these two years brought out unique personal feelings. "Experiencing the communal drums really affected me," relates Brenda. "The ever-present meeting in a circle is deeply significant: the First Nations live like that. The journey on which we embarked with the First

Nations communities was marvellous; they have a real community life, where everything is shared, even the moments of silence.”

Throughout this journey, all were able to discover what had previously been unfamiliar to them, yet at the same time, so close to their lives. If the photos and videos of their immersion in the First Nations communities are ever lost, the students will keep in mind this experience, as Gabrielle confirms: “For me, one of the significant aspects is listening. These men and women told their stories, and revealed their lives. I can no longer ignore that.”

Warm thanks were extended to those who made this project possible, namely the Winnipeg Foundation for the Manitoba programs; for everything else, there were bursaries from other foundations: from the USB, the Archbishop Hacault and Father Deniset-Bernier bursaries as well as from Spiritual Services Department; from Francofonds, the Father Deniset-Bernier bursary; from the Knights of Columbus, a generous contribution from l’Auberge du Violon and ID Fusion Software and many others. “We also had a good deal of moral support as well as monetary contributions from individuals of the surrounding communities of First Nations as well as anglophone and francophone communities. That is proof that we can live together!”

The evening wound up with refreshments in the Student Lounge at USB, where the participants continued sharing more anecdotes, while admitting that this undertaking will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

RéconciliACTION 2015-2016 is on the move towards new discoveries, always guided by Sister Norma McDonald, and this time it’s in Brazil!