

Children to Children

Shirley Horn, Shelly Fletcher and Zenith Lillie-Eakett

Artist Shirley Horn

Elder Shirley Horn is a Shingwauk second generation residential school survivor and graduate from the BFA program at Algoma University. When offered the Project of Heart, she jumped at the chance to participate. She saw in this project a chance to express herself in more abstract way, outside of words, which can oftentimes be difficult given the subject matter. The art piece has evolved through six incarnations with each one in Shirley's mind, not quite right. "It's too traditional, too literal." She qualifies herself as an abstract artist and wanted to move away from the traditional iconography and forms such as canoes or wigwams. "We are a progressive and forward thinking people, we respect and pay homage to our past but we are also able to function in today's world with an eye to the future."

Shirley's final design took the cylindrical form of the drum and abstracted it to the point where it now exhibits the form of a round billboard. "Billboards reflect history, past and present, they proclaim, exclaim, and tell a story, much like our drums." The material chosen for this piece is rusted steel because the weathering and rust conveys not only beauty but resilience through the passage of time. While not a welder, Shirley has contracted a local steel fabricating business with her design, a tall round steel framework into which transparent layers of plexiglass with artwork on them that will be inserted vertically into the four quadrants.

Each panel or quadrant will tell the story about the residential schools graduating from the past and into the present. . Additionally, the tiles will be seen within the artwork on the panels and throughout the room surrounding it. While they acknowledge the devastating effects of the legacy, Shirley, Shelly, and Zenith want to convey instead, a sense of growth, a bright future, and an affirmation that the children who did not make it home from the residential schools will always be remembered and that they did not die in vain.

The Project of Heart – Sault Ste. Marie: Shelly Fletcher – Artist

When I graduated from Algoma University with my Bachelor Fine Arts degree my path was far from clear to me, all I knew was that I wanted to use my art in some way that would benefit society in some way. The Residential school legacy has played such a significant part in my life, all of my life, that it was ultimately a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. That was until I was approached by Shirley Horn, an Elder within my band the Missanabie Cree First Nation, to participate in the project of Heart, a commemorative inter-cultural and inter-generational collaboration honoring the children who died during the residential school era. I jumped at the opportunity for several reasons. My family has been torn for three generations by this tragic, ill-conceived legacy and it has affected me in innumerable ways. Not only did many of these children perish under this system but those who survived were also robbed of their childhood and ability to “be” children and in later years, their ability to parent their own children was forever altered. I wonder how have the families fared whose children did not come home and how on earth am I going to represent this tragedy in this art?

A question was put to the participants at the 2013 Residential school Gathering at Algoma University by Augustine Park, Professor of Sociology from Carleton University, and during the workshop she asked, what does commemoration look like for the children who were lost to this legacy? How should it be expressed? Do we turn to the tried and true by having the placement of monuments? Do we have a national day of remembrance? Should we observe a minute of silence? This to me is so within the strictures of colonial expression that there must be some kind of equalizing balance to accommodate perspectives and worldviews of First Nations people.

Art addresses Professor Park’s question so completely in that it bears witness and not responsibility, the dynamics of confession, confessor, and witness intermingle. I look at the tiles that were made by the Islamic students and I look at the tiles from the Catholic students and I cannot differentiate. What better platform than this to serve as a point of departure for commemorating, understanding, learning, and growing together as Canadians?

All My Relations,

Shelly Fletcher