

Media Release

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First Nations Nominee Accepted into Order of Ontario

Members of the Right Relations Working Group at Huron Shores United Church in Grand Bend were thrilled to learn that their nominee, Elder Geraldine Robertson of Aamjiwnaang First Nation (formerly Sarnia Reserve), is being awarded the Order of Ontario. The group nominated Geraldine a year ago, after meeting with her several times in their efforts to improve relationships with Canada's First Nations. Geraldine is devoted to educating both natives and non-natives about the devastating impact of residential schools on generations of Indigenous people.

"What an honour that the Grand Bend group would consider nominating me. I was grateful to them for submitting my name, and then I was so surprised to be accepted!" says Geraldine, "I never thought an average, ordinary person would be nominated. I assumed it would be high profile people, with enough money so they could be philanthropic. It's very humbling."

Geraldine says she was surprised when Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford, the minister at Huron Shores United Church, called her to tell her she was to be awarded the Order of Ontario. "Then I realized it provides another opportunity for the information on residential schools to get out further and further, and provide another way to educate the public. This validates the work I've doing since 1995 when I moved back to Aamjiwnaang."

Geraldine explains that the Ontario Honours and Awards Secretariat has asked if her information and photo can be used to promote the Order of Ontario, making more people aware of this honour. "There are many ordinary people like me who should be nominated for their work," Geraldine adds.

The Right Relations group was reviewing the Truth and Reconciliation Report in an effort to see how they can follow up. They were moved by the injustices and cruelty of the residential school system, and invited Geraldine to attend their meeting to learn more about it. A member of the Right Relations group, the late Marie Strapp, had been a secretary at the Mount Elgin Residential School on the Muncey Reserve, west of London, and remembered Geraldine. The two reconnected and developed a friendship over the past three years, until Marie passed away recently. As a small child, Geraldine suffered loneliness at the school. Then she was sent to the Mohawk Institute in Brantford where she was subjected to horrific physical and mental abuse.

Geraldine joined a committee with the United Church of Canada National Office and travelled from British Columbia to Ontario, assisting with workshops and/or talking circles to encourage indigenous people to open up, and also become aware of how residential schools had impacted their lives. She held talking circles in places such as Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, and at Five Oaks in Ontario, speaking about the residual effects of residential schools. The ultimate goal was to help people get rid of feelings of shame, of being unworthy, and of being hurt. The group convinced participants that while they should acknowledge the hurt and pain, they don't have to hold on to it. She is credited with making great strides to helping participants build self-esteem.

Back in Southwestern Ontario, Geraldine spent five years going to schools across Lambton and Kent Counties to talk to students in elementary and high schools, to educate them about the history of residential schools. She spoke to students, both native and non-native. "Talking to students in schools was very emotionally draining, but fortunately the students were quite attentive," she says. Occasionally some were hesitant to talk about it, but with her supportive approach, she helped the youth become comfortable with the discussions.

Along with Rev. Matthew Stevens, Geraldine has been invited to different churches, to talk about residential schools. She is also active in promoting "Blanket Exercises" with KAIROS, an ecumenical social justice organization that promotes a participatory Blanket Exercise so that those unfamiliar with indigenous history in Canada can take part to better understand it.

Most recently, Geraldine appeared in a documentary film entitled *We Are Still Here*, where she talks about her residential school experiences.

“We are so pleased that Geraldine will join the Order of Ontario and be recognized for her dedication, hard work and amazing stamina,” says Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford. “Her passion to educate others about the horrors of residential schools is very evident, yet she remains a forgiving and loving person.”

Geraldine is one of 23 new appointments to the Order of Ontario. The list includes:

- Internationally renowned pediatrician Dr. Upton Allen, whose approaches to treating hospital-borne diseases have prevented the deaths of countless children
- Comedian Dan Aykroyd, now a successful entrepreneur and philanthropist as well as an accomplished entertainer
- Retired nursing professor Myrtha Lapierre, who broke barriers for black Francophone nurses in Canada
- Mental health advocate Dr. Dorothy Cotton, whose recommendations have helped change the way police respond to people with mental health crises
- Celebrated science-fiction author Robert J. Sawyer, who has published 23 novels and is a champion of the Canadian fiction industry.

The Order of Ontario recognizes individuals whose exceptional achievements in their field have left a lasting legacy in the province, in Canada and beyond. Order members come from all walks of life, represent diverse professions and have played an important role in shaping Ontario.

The Lieutenant Governor will bestow the honour to the newest appointees during an investiture ceremony at Queen's Park on February 27, 2018.

-30-

Photo: Some members of the Right Relations Group of Huron Shores United Church present Elder Geraldine Robertson with her Order of Ontario nomination papers. From left: Mary Alderson and Blanche Savage of Huron Shores U.C., with nominee Elder Geraldine Robertson, Betsy Hanes also of Huron Shores U.C., and Cheryl-Ann Stadelbauer-Sampa, Executive Secretary of the London Conference of the United Church of Canada.

For more information about the Right Relations Working Group at Huron Shores United Church, contact:
Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford 519-872-0654
katecrawfordmn@gmail.com

For more information about the Order of Ontario, contact:

Matt Gloyd 416-314-7013

Communications Branch, Government of Ontario

News Release: <https://news.ontario.ca/mci/en/2018/01/twenty-three-exceptional-honourees-to-be-appointed-to-the-order-of-ontario.html>

Backgrounder: <https://news.ontario.ca/mci/en/2018/01/the-2017-appointees-to-the-order-of-ontario.html>