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FEB. 22, 2017 | 031-17

Lecture will explore impact on First Nations of Mohawk Institute and other residential schools

BRANTFORD - The history of Canada's first Indian residential school will be explored in a free public lecture on Wednesday, March 1 at Wilfrid Laurier University's Brantford campus. Amos Key Jr., First Nations language director of the Woodland Cultural Centre, will deliver the lecture entitled "Saving the Evidence to Save the Witness" at 7 p.m. in RCE 004 in the Research and Academic Centre, 150 Dalhousie St. This is the fifth in a series of free lectures about residential schools and the results of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School on Mohawk Street in Brantford was open from 1828 to 1970. The building now houses offices of the Woodland centre. It is one of only about 12 former residential schools still standing. Key will discuss the lasting impact of the efforts by the schools to eliminate the languages and cultural backgrounds of the First Nations students who attended them.

The lecture series is sponsored by the Friends and Neighbours Group, and presented in association with Wilfrid Laurier University. Friends and Neighbours is a grassroots committee of Brantford area residents supporting the Woodland Cultural Centre's Save the Evidence Campaign. The campaign is raising money for repairs and renovations of the former Mohawk Institute Residential School building at 184 Mohawk Street, one of the last remaining residential school buildings in the country.

"The goal of the lectures is to educate people and promote a community dialogue about the school and reconciliation," said Rob Knechtel, vice-chair of Friends and Neighbours.

Previous speakers have included Ontario Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell, historian Nathan Tidridge, former Ontario premier and federal MP Bob Rae, and Justice Gethin Edward of the Ontario Court of Justice.

After the Mohawk Institute closed in 1970, it reopened in 1972 as the Woodland Cultural Centre. Major roof leaks have caused significant and costly damage to the residential school building. So far, the Save The Evidence Campaign has received financial support from the Six Nations Elected Council, the City of Brantford and the Province of Ontario as well as other individuals and organizations.

About 150,000 First Nations children were removed from their homes in the 19th and 20th centuries and sent to the mainly church-run schools, sometimes hundreds of miles from home. The children were forced to abandon their own language and culture in order to be assimilated into Canadian society. They lived in substandard conditions and endured physical, emotional and sexual abuse. When they ultimately returned home – sometimes after a decade or more – they were outsiders in their own communities.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Justice Murray Sinclair, delivered a report in 2015 that contained 94 "calls to action" on ways that all people – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – can work to heal the wounds left by the residential school system.