

Healing, Reflection, and Renewal at the 2025 Shubenacadie Gathering



Participants of the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School 2nd Healing and Resilience Gathering: Left to right: Margaret Labobe-Provencher (Lennox Island First Nation), Mary Susan Johnson (Millbrook First Nation), Annie Gould (We'koq'maq First Nation), Valerie (Beverly) Gould (We'koq'maq First Nation), Caroline Mae Johnson (Millbrook First Nation), Petula Gould (We'koq'maq First Nation), Tepgunset Marshall (Membertou First Nation), Kaitlin Cullen (MDCC Staff), Carolyn Bernard (Paqtnekek Mi'kmaw Nation), Marlene Thomas (Lennox Island First Nation), Felicity McGraw (CMM Resolution Health Support Worker), Caitlen MacPhail (Halifax, NS), Gloria Marshall (Paqtnekek Mi'kmaw Nation), Natalie Gloade (Millbrook First Nation), and Marilyn Francis (Wasqopa'q First Nation).

by **Ross Nervig**
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Survivors, families, and community members gathered in Truro this September for the second Shubenacadie Indian Residential School Healing and Resilience Gathering, hosted by Mi'kmawey Debort Cultural Centre (MDCC). The event coincided with the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a time of remembrance and reflection across Canada.

Over three days, attendees shared stories, joined workshops, and reflected on decades of advocacy that have led to the near completion of the Nora Bernard Commemoration Park, a new memorial site honouring Survivors of the former Shubenacadie Indian Residential School.

A Gathering Rooted in Survivors' Voices

The event, held at the Inn on Prince, brought together Elders, artists, and leaders

from across Mi'kma'kik and Wolastoqey territory. For Dorene Bernard (Sipekne'katik First Nation), a Survivor and member of MDCC's Survivors' Advisory Circle, the work represents a personal and collective commitment.

"This project is very important to me as a Survivor and as a descendant," she said. "I have made a commitment to see it through to completion for all the survivors."

MDCC Executive Director Tim Bernard (Millbrook First Nation) reminded participants that the commemoration project was shaped directly by Survivors' direction during engagement sessions in 2018. "You told us what was needed—more gatherings, recognition of the school site, and commemoration to celebrate Survivors and descendants," he said.

Those recommendations led to the development of the IRS Commemoration Project, the establishment of the Survivors' Advisory Circle, and years of design and consultation that have culminated in the creation

of the Nora Bernard Commemoration Park.

Honouring Nora Bernard

The park's namesake, Nora Bernard, was instrumental in bringing justice to Survivors. Her decades of determination and advocacy helped

lead one of the largest class-action settlements in Canadian history, compelling the country to confront the lasting impact of its residential school system.

For keynote speaker Senator Dan Christmas (Membertou First Nation), the creation of a permanent

place of remembrance—a space to gather, reflect, and heal—offers Survivors an opportunity to release the pain of the past while reclaiming strength and love.

"Now that you have a place," said Senator Christmas, speaking about the future park, "you should

go there and give back the pain, the heartache and the shame that the school had left with you. Leave it there and, instead, take back the love for yourself that you had left there as a child. Take that love home with you and share it with your family, friends, your community and your people."



A community member places an orange flag in remembrance during the Fill the Heart Campaign & BBQ hosted by Sipekne'katik First Nation.

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Community members join hands in a circle during the Fill the Heart Campaign & BBQ hosted by Sipekne'katik First Nation, honouring Survivors and remembering the children who never returned home.

A Park Built Through Collaboration

The Nora Bernard Commemoration Park will feature a public art sculpture, Wejkwalkwet, “Dancing Towards Us,” created in collaboration with artist Ursula Johnson (Eskasoni First Nation), architect Michael Anderson of Passive Design Solutions, and the Survivors’ Advisory Circle.

The park’s centrepiece sculpture consists of three stainless-steel panels that interact with sunlight throughout the day, capturing and casting light to represent the healing journey of Survivors. As the sun moves, shadows from the panels form the pattern of the Klokowej weave, a motif symbolizing connection and continuity. The light’s movement across the sculpture transforms time itself into part of the artwork—a living marker of resilience and survival.

The site also features a circular stone fire pit for ceremony and two curved stone benches with wooden tops, reflecting Mi’kmaw and Wolastoqey visual cultural signifiers, while

honouring the Wabanaki Peoples. One bench, built taller than the other, provides accessibility and includes space for an engraved quote by Nora Bernard. The design integrates stone, metal, and wood—materials chosen for endurance and balance—while inviting reflection, prayer, and gathering.

At the Autumn Equinox, the shadows reach their most dramatic form, linking the artwork to the cycles of the sun and to Survivors’ continuing path of healing.

“This project is not mine,” said Ursula Johnson. “It belongs to you. It is shaped by your stories, and strengthened by your courage.”

The park also includes art by Michelle Sylliboy (We’koqma’q First Nation) and Emma Hassencahl-Perley (Tobique First Nation), whose works interpret Mi’kmaw and Wolastoq teachings through language and design.

Sylliboy’s copper hieroglyphics will be set into the ground, symbolizing both rootedness and renewal.

“Placing the symbols on the ground was important

because they come from the land—that’s the historical value of our history,” Sylliboy said. “We are strengthened because they are called out in one voice.”

This interpretation is reflected in the hieroglyphs depicted in her artwork.

Hassencahl-Perley’s contribution is a two-panel digital illustration titled *kikehtahsuwakon* (healing power), inspired by four key terms identified from the 2021 Survivors and Descendants Gathering: hope, love, reclamation, and gratitude. The Wabanaki Double Curve motifs—a recurring design in beadwork, birchbark etching, and textiles—form a visual language symbolizing life cycles, kinship, and nationhood. The two-tone background represents past and future, with stars symbolizing the spirit world and ancestors. Plant life sprouting along the bottom signifies opportunity for growth and healing in our communities.

Conversations on Reconciliation

Keynote speaker Graydon Nicholas (Tobique First Nation) spoke to the



Lorraine Whitman from Glooscap First Nation, Judy Googoo from Wagmatcook First Nation, Joe Googoo from We’koqma’q First Nation, and Patty Prosper from We’koqma’q First Nation take part in the Sweet Grass Teachings workshop.

long history of resistance, faith, and reconciliation.

“We talk about reconciliation—but how far back does it go?” Nicholas asked. “It goes farther than residential schools. Farther than the treaties. Back to 1491. You can see the resistance of governance, of the church, of corporations. Let’s write a new relationship.”

He urged the audience to see reconciliation as a living process:

“Ensuring our next generations continue the

struggle so there will be resolution, respect, and recognition of who we are—that’s the greatest challenge we face now as Indigenous peoples.”

Workshops, Music, and Community

The Gathering’s program blended learning, culture, and ceremony. Each day began with prayer and an honour song and included workshops on quillwork, beading, wooden flower making, and sweetgrass

teachings. In the evenings, participants came together for music, games, laughter, and conversation—a reminder that healing is also found in community and joy.

Between sessions, Survivors shared memories, reflected on how far they had come, and spoke about what it means to carry the legacy of Shubenacadie forward. It was in those moments—between laughter and quiet reflection—that the deeper purpose of the Gathering became clear: to remember,

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to connect, and to affirm that the stories of Survivors will never be forgotten.

That message was powerfully expressed by Dorene Bernard, who has spent decades advocating for truth, recognition, and healing.

“We stand together as survivors of genocide,” said Bernard. “We want the world to know that this dark history in Canada can never happen again. All our children matter. All our people matter.”

Looking Ahead

For many, the announcement that the Nora Bernard Commemoration

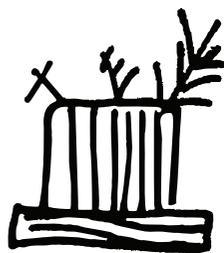
Park is nearing completion felt like a promise fulfilled.

“This project is shaped by Mi’kmaw and Wolastoq voices,” said Tim Bernard. “Led by Survivors, guided by Elders, and carried by love.”

The Gathering closed with a reminder that the work of remembrance and healing is ongoing.

“It has been the deepest honour of my life to walk this path with all of you,” said Ursula Johnson. “To listen to your stories, to witness your courage, and to create alongside you. We are still here. We are still dancing towards the future.”

Thank you to the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund, Sipekne’katik, the Mi’kmaq–Nova Scotia–Canada Tripartite Forum, the Province of Nova Scotia, the Government of Canada, and The Healing Fund of the United Church of Canada for supporting the Shubenacadie IRS 2nd Healing and Resilience Gathering. ✨



"Petroglyph of a Top Hat"



Matilda Bernard (Millbrook First Nation) and Mary Agnes Paul “Toots” (Eskasoni First Nation) at the wooden flower workshop.



IRS Survivors and sisters Karen Byard and Dorene Bernard from Sipekne’katik First Nation gather during the Shubenacadie IRS Legacy Project community consultation.



A participant works carefully during the medallion workshop.