

## Quilts for Survivors

Building compassion and respect, stitch by stitch

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Speaker Reporter

EARLTON – It takes time to make a quilt – to select fabric and pattern, to sew blocks from small pieces of cloth, to assemble the blocks into the decorative top, and to then quilt and finish the multi-layered covering.

Vanessa Génier sees parallels between quilting and the experiences of survivors of the residential school system.

“They’ve kind of been chopped up into all these little pieces, and they need to put themselves back together. So a quilt is a symbol of their journey.”

And every stitch, she said, “is made with love.”

Génier, 42, is a member of the Missanabie Cree First Nation, the mother of five, a bookkeeper, and founder of Quilts for Survivors.

To date, the initiative she launched from her home in Timmins last June has sent almost 1,300 hand-crafted quilts to survivors of the residential school system.

It has received another 800 requests for quilts and that number “grows every day,” she said.

### BUSY BEE

A three-day sewing bee in The Quilting Barn in Earlton helped meet the demand.

A crew of sewers, some coming for two or all three days, spent a total of 192.5 hours cutting, pressing and sewing quilt blocks and quilt tops, and quilting using a long-arm sewing machine.

They sewed six quilt tops from scratch and quilted three, assembled another 11 quilt tops from blocks that had been sent to Génier, and added the finishing touches to 16 quilts.

Local quilters donated 22 quilt tops to the project.

It was the largest single quilting blitz to date for Quilts for Survivors.

Quilts are one way to bring survivors some comfort, said Suzanne Gauthier, owner of The Quilting Barn.

Gauthier was moved by the cause itself, and also that it was spearheaded by a fellow North-



At The Quilting Barn in Earlton, owner Suzanne Gauthier, at left, and Vanessa Génier are seen with a quilt that is headed to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg. Génier is the founder of Quilts for Survivors. In less than a year, it has marshalled donations of quilt blocks, quilt tops and completed quilts as well as supplies and cash, and sent 1,300 quilts – so far – to survivors of residential schools. (Staff photo by Diane Johnston)

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She at first donated fabric and then her unique skill set – machine-quilting to finish the assembly of a multi-layered quilt.

After completing 30 quilts, “I’ve stopped counting,” said Gauthier with a laugh during an interview March 19.

“The quilting community likes to give back,” said quilter Lisette Léveillé.

She wanted recipients to know that the quilts are “a gift from the heart.”

Gauthier and local sewers will use the remaining blocks to finish quilts at what’s dubbed Charity Mondays at the expanded store on Tenth Street East in Earlton.

Its new classroom will be turned over on Mondays to people working on local and national quilt-related charitable projects.

### ORIGINS

The cross-Canada effort began simply enough, after news broke

last May of the discovery of 215 unmarked graves at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.

Génier did not attend residential school, but her grandparents did, and she considers herself a survivor.

For Indigenous families, the residential school experience is “intertwined in all our lives,” she said.

“I thought, ‘I’ve got to do something.’”

She was inspired by Patricia Ballantyne, a residential school survivor who led a Walk of Sorrow from her home in Saskatchewan to Ottawa last year.

Génier began quilting at the age of nine, instructed by a neighbour who was an expert quilter and who often babysat her.

“The Creator said, ‘you quilt, use your gift,’ and I thought that would work,” she said.

“In my culture, we’ve always honoured people with blankets,

whether they were bought or hand-made, whether they were from our community or not.”

She originally planned to make 18 quilts, using 215 individual quilt blocks plus one.

It was a number she considered manageable for herself and her family.

She figured she’d send the finished quilts to First Nations to distribute to survivors.

She put out a call to some quilting groups to donate a block or some thread or fabric.

Within three weeks, she had enough blocks to complete the 18 quilts.

And donations kept pouring in, from across Canada and the United States and as far away as Australia and Norway.

She set up a group on Facebook, a website and, in October, Quilts for Survivors was established as a not-for-profit organization.

“It is amazing what one person

can do with the support of thousands,” Génier said.

She said the offer of a quilt has been extended to not only survivors of residential schools and their descendants, but also of Indian day schools and the child welfare system.

She sees the quilts as one step towards real truth and reconciliation.

It’s more, she said, than acknowledging the abuse that children suffered and then moving on.

“You own the truth, then you learn, and you grow from that. And then I think it’s important that we take a step and honour the people who were traumatized by attending those schools, and then that we are committed to never allowing that to happen again.”

To learn the response of most quilt recipients is “like the icing on the cake,” she said.

Some have found it overwhelming, she said, and she recalled one recipient who described it as “a true sign of respect and honour.”

She was on hand when quilts were presented at a gathering in Timmins, and remembered the words of one man who spoke on behalf of the group.

“He said we’ve been so ashamed because of what happened to us at school, and for someone to take time to honour that, and to support us, wherever we are, is just amazing.”

Génier said there’s also been some anger because people don’t want to be identified and remembered as a survivor, and it’s a reaction she understands.

“I’m hoping they’ll see that you’re more than this, and we love you where you’ve been and we love where you’re going.”

Residential school survivors are resilient, she said.

“I’m able to do what I’m doing simply because they survived,” she said.

In June, Gauthier and Génier will take in the Canadian Quilters’ Association convention in Vancouver, where they’ll promote Quilts for Survivors.

To learn more about the project, to request a quilt for someone, or to donate quilt blocks, supplies or cash, go to quiltsforsurvivors.ca.



Simone Beaudry, at left, and Lisette Léveillé display one of the quilt tops completed March 19, midway through a three-day quilting marathon in Earlton to support Quilts for Survivors. March 19 happened to be National Quilting Day, and an auspicious date for The Quilting Barn to celebrate its expanded quarters at its Tenth Street location. (Staff photo by Diane Johnston)