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## **COMMUNITY** DEBATING THE FATE OF THE CHAMPLAIN MONUMENT

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For Chippewas of Rama First Nation member Emerson Nanigishkang, the Champlain monument casts a long and painful shadow.

"It has always made me feel belittled and less than," the local man told Simcoe.com.

It was a sentiment shared by others when about 60 people gathered at Couchiching Beach Park on Canada Day to demonstrate their opposition to the monument's potential return.

Assembled next to the fence that encircles the area where the iconic piece stood before it was removed for restoration by Parks Canada, the group voiced concerns that form the core of a growing, and increasingly impassioned, discussion over its fate

To Indigenous people, Samuel de Champlain, and the monument erected in his name, represents "racism, oppression, genocide and colonialism," said Krystal Brooks.

A member of the Chippewas of Rama, Brooks views the sculpture as a demeaning portrayal of First Nations men positioned below the French explorer and other figures.

"The monument depicts Champlain standing above Indigenous people, who are cowering beneath him as a priest also wields a crucifix at them," she said. "That cowering and that fear is real - I felt it even as a child coming to this park."

Orillia historian Bruce McRae challenges the characterization of First Nations figures as subor-



Angela Cadieux was among several speakers who addressed an audience during a demonstration protesting the potential return of the Champlain Monument.

dinate to the French, arguing the monument is "tragically misunderstood.'

Where others find fear in the faces of the Huron-Wendat men, McRae, who supports the monument's return, sees "pensive thought."

"One is looking at the Bible being placed in front of him by Friar Caron, and the other is Le looking at the two of them reflectively," he said. "Neither seem to be converts to the evangelical zeal.

Were the monument returned, Nanigishkang suggests that, at the very least, its accompanying plaque - which states the monument was erected "to commemorate the advent into Ontario of the white race" - be replaced.

"How about talk about us, you know?" he said. "How we were here first and we welcomed them here.'

Barb Shakell-Barkey attended public consultations on the monument and views it as a piece of art that should be reinstalled at the park, albeit alongside other installations to explain the history of Indigenous people and their relationship with Champlain.

"We can't change history, but we can correct the story and we can add to the story," Shakell-Barkey said.

That suggestion reflects a recommendation by city council to have the monument returned in its original form while working with First Nations to develop an "accompanying narrative" that better reflects the history and context.

A committee tasked with making a final recommendation to Parks Canada, the monument's owner, will consider the suggested direction, along with any others members bring to the table.

"I believe that we have the ultimate same goal, and I hope that

THE ISSUE:

Orillia Today IN ADVANCE OF PARKS CANADA **DECIDING A PATH** FORWARD FOR THE CHAMPLAIN MONUMENT, COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE VOICING BOTH **OPPOSITION TO, AND SUPPORT** FOR. ITS RETURN LOCAL IMPACT: UNVEILED IN 1925. THE MONUMENT HAS HAD A POLARIZING EFFECT ON THE COMMUNITY. WITH SOME VIEWING IT AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF LOCAL HISTORY AND **OTHERS DECRYING THE PIECE** AS A DEMEANING DEPICTION **OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE** 

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we see that we get there in the next little while," Mayor Steve Clarke said.

Education about Indigenous issues remains an ongoing process and a priority, he added.

Along with a Canada Day button, Clarke wore a circular pin segmented into black, red, yellow and white quarters, representative in First Nations culture of the four directions.

## STORY BEHIND THE STORY

A demonstration at Couchiching Beach Park on Canada Day revealed the depth of concern felt by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents who oppose the monument's return. Simcoe.com spoke with participants at the protest, as well as others, to offer a variety of views on this issue

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