

Golden Nuggets

ELDER LYLE RICHARDS... HONOURING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' LIVES AND FAMILIES

DR. WESLEY (LYLE) KEEWATIN RICHARDS FACILITATES THE ANNUAL CEREMONY OF REMEMBRANCE AT THE RED DEER CEMETERY EVERY JUNE 11. IT WAS THEN-MAYOR TARA VEERS WHO ORIGINALLY PROCLAIMED JUNE 11 AS "REMEMBERING THE CHILDREN" IN RED DEER IN PERPETUITY, IN HONOUR OF THE INDIGENOUS CHILDREN OF THE RED DEER INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL AND THEIR DESCENDANTS.

"June 11 is the date of the [official apology given by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper](#), and it is a poignant and melancholy event commemorating serious things. But when you hear the stories of things going on in other parts of the world, it's important to stop and remember."

About 50 people attended the most recent ceremony earlier this month. They took part in a smudge and a prayer, and the reading of the proclamation. This was followed by a Talking Circle at Sunnybrook Church.

"Someone came up to me afterwards and said, 'Thank you for being such a good listener - everyone felt they were being heard.' That's all I do, but it's important. Some people have recorded their stories, which are now at the museum, and now they can continue on with their lives without feeling such a need to speak about it. But some of the people present spoke for the first time. It's horrific stuff, of course, talking about residential school. But it's within living memory until the last person who went to residential school is gone, and the last residential school didn't close until the 1990s. It's a privilege for me to be trusted with their stories."

"Elder Lyle", as his friends know him, was part of the 'Sixties Scoop' in Alberta and has long been an ardent advocate for Indigenous Peoples. His people came from Okanese First Nation in Saskatchewan, but he was adopted by a church minister and his wife shortly after he was born in 1959.

"I sometimes feel strange saying I did okay in my childhood, but it's important for the community to know that not everyone was a victim," said Lyle. "When I searched for my birth family and met them in 1985, it became one of my biggest influences. I had people in Maskwacis and in Rocky, throughout the area really, who were inspirational role models for me."

Also in the mid 80s, Albert Lightning walked into the Red Deer Museum where Lyle was a summer student and asked him to look for his brother who had attended the 'Red Deer Indian Industrial School' in 1919 and never came home. After decades of advocating, researching and sharing his learnings, Lyle saw ground penetrating radar arrive at the former Red Deer residential school site in 2008 and again in 2021 to locate the burial sites of former students. That work continues by the First Nations who had loved ones at the school. An extensive article on this appeared in MacLean's Magazine, titled '[Finding David Lightning: The decades-long quest to locate an unmarked grave](#)'.

"We set out to find one and found them all," said Lyle, whose list of accomplishments includes Founder of the Red Deer-based 'Remembering the Children Society', Past President of the Red Deer Friendship Centre, and an Honorary Doctorate. He worked as a social worker with Children and Family Services for over 30 years.

"There has been a lot of work and a lot of struggles, but I've also had a lot of people helping me. I've dedicated myself to honouring Indigenous People's lives and families, and honour is one of the most healing things we have."



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Lyle as a young boy in the 1960s.



Elder Lyle and Pat, his wife, comrade and best friend, have been married for over 30 years. Amid all his work, Lyle still finds time for some quirky hobbies. He does historical re-enactments, is involved in metal arts, and has antique telephones connecting his house and garage!

Do you know someone who has discovered a new hobby or project or way of adding joy and purpose to their days in retirement? Or discovered the time to pursue an old favourite? Let's celebrate them! Contact me at sandybexon@gmail.com

