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Op-ed: Reconciliation at Massey College

An Indigenous Junior Fellow shares her story

By [Audrey Rochette](#) on October 8, 2017

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STEVEN LEE/THE VARSITY

A few years ago I was approached by a lovely, incredibly talented graduate student through my role on the Native Students Association (NSA) here at the University of Toronto. We were walking through Queen's Park on a brisk fall afternoon after a class we shared that combined undergrads and grads. I was the infectiously optimistic undergrad who had big dreams and a million projects on the go to work towards positive changes for First Nations in Canada — notably, our youth. As a mature student, I was elated at the countless possibilities for collaborations, projects, student groups, and jobs available within the university community. My plan was to try to advocate my cause in as many forums as possible.

As we swayed through the park with no urgency or regard for time, the student told me about the Walter Gordon Symposium being organized at Massey College. The theme was reconciliation through policy with respect to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action. The committee wanted to consult with Indigenous student groups on campus and have members join them in their work. Though I had never been to Massey College, I agreed to go meet the committee and hear more about the project.

Once I got past the gatekeeper, I was mesmerized by the land and space hidden behind the outer walls. A quaint water bed lay still collecting Mother Nature's brightly hued leaves, benches lined the courtyard yearning for company, and best of all, I was warmly greeted by the few faces I saw. 'Not bad at all,' I thought to myself when I approached this tiny doorway in the left corner that led me into what they called the round room. The room was impressive. The walls echoed with secrets that whispered softly. I could feel the presence of some very interesting stories being told here. I looked around and found the smiling face of my friend, who eagerly invited me to sit next to her.

It was here in this fateful moment that I was introduced to Massey College. From that day, I have built meaningful relationships with some of the kindest, smartest, and warmest group of students — Junior Fellows — I have met so far. Through my collaboration on the symposium, I learned more about this community.

The committee, and notably, their fiercely organized and extremely dedicated Chair, delivered a great symposium filled with meaningful and engaging topics, which gave birth to new ideas and the urgency for change and action on this idea of reconciliation. This word has been used loosely since the TRC, but here, I felt it was dissected and given context; more importantly, feasible steps and actions were discussed in order to begin the process.

The best part of this process was the ability to work with a man that I highly respect due to the outstanding changes he is a part of within our First Nations in Ontario: the Regional Chief Isadore Day. The symposium began with an address from Day that took place in the upper library at Massey College, and was loaded with facts about the Treaties with First Nations and its very complex history, along with some contemporary examples of where we are today. The room was filled to the brim, every chair was occupied, and the walls were lined with an attentive audience. At the end of the symposium, I left feeling very hopeful that the audience was inspired to take action and gained a greater understanding of the complex issues facing First Nations in Canada.

After some time had passed, my new friends had approached me to apply to become a Junior Fellow. I was invited to meet the Dean and Head of Massey Hugh Segal for lunch. During lunch, they warmly welcomed me to join the community, approaching me with humility and honesty. These attributes deeply affect me as an Indigenous woman because they are embodied in the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers and a foundation for the governance of the NSA. That lunch was key to my engagement in the college's community.

I have witnessed and participated in the diversity of Massey College through orientation events, high tables, low tables, lunches, and of course meaningful

conversations. I am now a second-year Junior Fellow, and though my experience at Massey has been very pleasant, this is only one story — a story from a student who has faced tremendous adversity at an institution that has caused my family great pain.

My mother is a residential school survivor. When we speak of her experience, she always tells that the Creator has a plan for us all: through the dark times there is always light and a purpose. I am still avidly working on my purpose, and I face challenges and barriers daily. When I feel lost, my mother tells me a story and my Elders tell me stories; through that gift, I wanted to share mine with you.

What happened to the Junior Fellow who experienced racism at the College recently is terribly sad and incredibly painful. I still bear the scars of inappropriate remarks and outright hateful speech. I know how damaging it can be. We are a community, and that community has the responsibility to create safe and inviting spaces for all. Moving forward, I hope that my story is mirrored by new faces and of course encouraged by the Senior Fellows. Miigwech — until next time.

Audrey Rochette is a second-year Junior Fellow at Massey College. She is the Crane and Governance Leader of the Native Students Association.

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