

Branding for a reconciled future

Unity Square conveys a certain image of the state of reconciliation in the neighbourhood, but how much of a difference does a name change really make?



Editor's notebook

By Aubrianna Snow

WHAT'S IN A NAME? It's an age-old cliché, but popular discourse from across the world over the last few years goes to show that names carry the baggage of their history – and that baggage has consequences.

The renaming of the Oliver neighbourhood has been a topic of debate in Edmonton for years, and

the process of switching the historical moniker has been under way since 2015. The new name for the retail area near the downtown core, “Unity Square,” clearly seeks to convey a certain image of life in the area.

That said, it should be obvious to anyone who drives through the neighbourhood that the new name has made little tangible difference in the lives of the community’s Indigenous people. The same can be said for the city’s broader project of renaming its wards.

To be clear, the renaming of the wards, and the Oliver renaming project in general, are indicative of meaningful progress for reconciliation. These sorts of movements create a space for discussion on our country’s true history.

But discussion is the bare minimum.

Some people are in favour of continuing to honour genocide and racism in the interest of “not rewriting history.” That indicates such symbolic efforts are not making the difference needed to build a better future for all Canadian youth, and the question remains: How do we change the hearts and minds of non-Indigenous Canadians?

The nice thing about history is that it is never written in stone. Human knowledge is always expanding, bringing new perspectives and insights to the stories we thought we knew.

We are under no historical obligation to uphold the legacies of wrongdoers. We must critically examine the imprints they leave and the impacts they continue to have. History is ours and the future is ours, as well. We get to decide what legacies we leave for generations to come.

Regardless of whether the trend of changing problematic historical names proves to have a lasting impact on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in the Oliver neighbourhood, the conversation it has created is both positive and insufficient.

Time will tell whether this “rewriting of history” will be able to erase the legacy of Frank Oliver’s colonial violence.

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