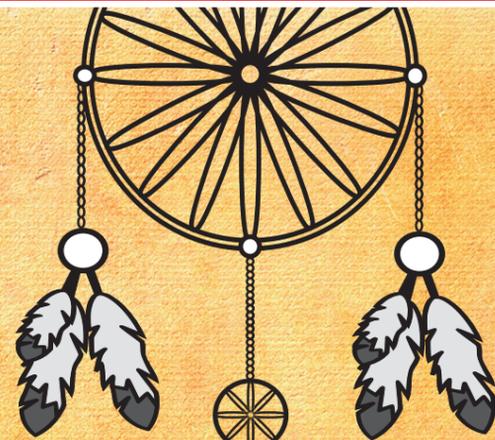




National Day FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION



Friends United: Forging global connections and healing communities in Cape Breton

By **Drake Lowthers**

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In Cape Breton, an extraordinary story of reconciliation, culture, and creativity is quietly unfolding at Friends United, an organization dedicated to bridging communities, honoring Indigenous heritage, and fostering global connections.

Founded on principles of respect, empathy, and shared purpose, Friends United has become a hub where Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities collaborate, learn, and heal together. Its work spans cultural education, international partnerships, and artistic innovation, guided by the tireless advocacy of Rolf Bouman.

One of the organization's most moving milestones involved a ceremony with Port Hawkesbury Mayor Brenda Chisholm-Beaton, Hereditary Chief Stephen Augustine, and former Premier Rodney MacDonald.

Bouman and Elena Paul presented a peace pipe to Chief Terry Paul, crafted a decade ago by Chief Terry's late friend Norman Peter Paul. Deeply moved, Chief Paul now has the pipe on display in Membertou, where it serves as a lasting symbol of healing and reconciliation.

Additionally, Friends United is also expanding its reach beyond Nova Scotia.

Bouman and Paul recently met with German Ambassador to Canada Matthias Luettenberg and Honorary German Consul Suzanne Rix in Halifax to explore collaborations supporting Indigenous artists. Over the past 15 years, numerous diplomats and government officials have visited the Friends United International Convention Centre in Cape Breton, offering Indigenous artists vital international exposure.

The organization's partnerships extend into the business world as well.

EverWind, a leading Canadian maritime company, presented Friends United artwork to Chief Terry Paul, Minister Julie Dabrusin, and other dignitaries during the recent christening of three tugboats in Port Hawkesbury.

This collaboration emphasizes listening to Indigenous guidance to build sustainable futures while celebrating cultural heritage.

Art and mentorship remain central to Friends United's mission.

Eric Schweig, the acclaimed Inuit actor known for Hollywood films including the upcoming "One Battle after Another" alongside Leonardo DiCaprio, Sean Penn, and Benicio Del Toro, has been carving traditional Inuit masks and forging knives from recycled scrap steel at the Convention Centre for the past four years. Schweig also works closely with Indigenous youth, passing down traditional skills and fostering pride in heritage.

Meanwhile, artist Shannon Monk has made the Convention Centre her home, establishing a new glass studio where she creates fused-glass art that reflects Indigenous heritage and customs. She has already completed several collaborative pieces with fellow artist Melinda Robertson, bringing Indigenous stories and traditions to life through their work.

"Reconciliation is not just a concept – it's action, relationships, and learning together," Bouman said. "Every ceremony, every collaboration, every artwork is a step toward a more compassionate and just society."

From peace pipes in Membertou to international collaborations in Halifax and artistic creation in Cape Breton, Friends United exemplifies the power of community, culture, and connection. It is an organization that honors the past, nurtures the present, and inspires the future – not just for Cape Breton, but for communities around the world.



Photos courtesy of Friends United.

Meeting with German Ambassador to Canada Matthias Luettenberg.



Peace pipe presentation to Chief Terry Paul.



Rolf Bouman presents Minister Julie Dabrusin artwork at EverWind tugboat christening.



Elena Paul, Melinda Robertson, Rolf Bouman, Shannon Monk.