

Friends United hosts second annual reconciliation talks

By **Drake Lowthers** · December 1, 2022



KEMPT ROAD: The founder of the Friends United International Convention Centre says a recently filmed conversation series is a combined effort to learn about Indigenous People, their heritage and culture, while also learning from what happened in the past to create a better future.

“The main topics of these talks have been inclusivity, bringing people together, reconciliation, education, and leadership,” Friends United founder Rolf Bouman told *The Reporter* in an interview. “This time, there are 20 to 25 in-camera conversations, each one is about an hour long, and it’s always about reconciliation.”

After Bouman immigrated to Canada from Germany in 1986, he’s spent the past three decades working to eliminate prejudice and focus the world’s attention on First Nations people.

The discussions, which took place from Nov. 14 to 23 at the Richmond County facility was the second annual “Friends United Reconciliation Talks.” The inaugural event took place in 2019, and due to COVID-19, the second event was delayed until this year.

“I think this is a respect that’s owed,” Bouman said. “We owe this respect, us listening, to Indigenous People.”

Bouman advised the Reconciliation Talks, which were hosted by former Live at 5 host and author of *From Showing Off to Showing Up* Nancy Regan, will be featured on the Friends United website in the coming months.

The Friends United International Convention Centre houses the artwork of more than 43 Indigenous artists, and is an important tool for learning about Indigenous heritage, art, and culture, Bouman noted.

“Twelve years ago when I started this, the building was a fish hatchery and it was falling apart,” he said. “The majority of the artwork depicts harmony, friendship, love, and family but also portrays the dark side of the experience, like the high child suicide rate in First Nations communities, the disturbing rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the generational damage caused by the residential school system.”

Bouman indicated their initiative aims at raising awareness and facilitating reconciliation dialogue, as this, he said, is one of the most important issues in which future generations must be engaged.

People from all walks of life are being featured in within this second round of discussions, such as Mi’kmaq artists Loretta Gould, Shianne Gould, Darren Julian, and artists from other areas of Canada such as Cree Nation artist Jasyn Lucas, Salish totem pole carver Gerry Sheena, and Inuit film and television actor Eric Schweig, who is also a mask carver.

Also included in the discussions are Hereditary Chief Stephen Augustine of Cape Breton University, Senator Dan Christmas, Paqtnekek Band Councillor and StFX Knowledge Keeper Kerry Prosper, Barry Bernard of the Red Tribe Boxing Club, Port Hawkesbury Mayor Brenda Chisholm-Beaton, former Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil, former Nova Scotia premier Rodney MacDonald, former Nova Scotia Premier Iain Rankin, Judge Laurie Halfpenny-McQuarrie, Richmond County Warden Amanda Mombourquette, and Principal of the Nova Scotia Community College Strait Area Campus Vivek Saxena, among others.