

Peace is more than a military construct

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Staff Reporter

BARRY'S BAY – Chris Houston, founder of the Canadian Peace Museum, has worked in conflict zones with groups like Doctors Without Borders and the Canadian Red Cross, believes the idea of peace is more than simply a military concept. He takes a more holistic approach to the idea.

"Peace is not just the absence of war," he said.

Houston gave a talk June 23 about the broader idea of peace at the Royal Canadian Legion Branch #406 in Barry's Bay. About two dozen people attended. The event was sponsored and organized by pflag Renfrew County. The title of the presentation was, *Making Peace: the value of building peaceful, inclusive communities.*

Peace, Houston explained is, "a fair and equitable society. It's taking care of the planet we live in," he explained. People may not fully appreciate the broader idea of peace because we live in a world where we are constantly bombarded by information, the world is chaotic and frenetic. "[W]e think it would be helpful for everybody to be able to learn about the importance of peace (and) how to have a more peaceful society."

Discussions around the bigger idea of peace may be happening in larger urban centres or in academia. They're not happening in rural areas. Bringing that conversation to rural areas is why he chose Bancroft as the location for the Canadian Peace Museum.

Houston's property in Bancroft is near the site of a former uranium mine which highlights that the threat of nuclear war may be higher today than it has been in generations. The Bancroft (and Madawaska Valley) area was also a settling point for many Vietnam draft dodgers. Promoting the bigger idea of peace isn't possible in a 280 character post on X (formerly Twitter) or other social media platforms where brevity is the norm and snark is the stock in trade.



Chris Houston, founder of the Canadian Peace Museum, gave a presentation on peace and inclusive communities at the Royal Canadian Legion Branch #406 on June 23.

Aislinn Caron photo

Trust in media, he noted, is also in decline. Trust in museums, however, remains high, Houston said. He noted, in his presentation, that 86 per cent of people believe museums are a trusted source of information. The number drops to 48 per cent for daily newspapers and 33 per cent for television.

The day Houston spoke to the *Gazette* he had woken at 6 a.m. so he could speak with people in Gaza at 7 a.m. for his work in humanitarian aid. He has been to Yemen, Syria and Somalia, also.

"It's impossible to spend time in those places and not be affected by it," he said, about why he wants to establish a peace museum. "It leaves me with a passionate desire for peace." Canada, he noted, is viewed as a peaceful country. The Global Peace Index calculates the peacefulness of countries and exports a peacefulness score. The lower the score, the more peaceful the

country. Canada's score dropped .42 points from 2024 to 2025 and the country's rank globally fell from 11 to 14. One is a perfect score. By comparison, the United States had a score of 2.622 in 2024 which was 132nd in the world. The United States improved in 2025 to 128th in the world with a score of 2.443. The level of democracy is also declining in Canada, Houston said.

Holding the presentation during Pride month was not a coincidence, Houston acknowledged. He began his presentation talking about recent headlines in conflict areas like Ukraine and the Middle East then moved into the idea of peace and what leads to a peaceful society.

"One of the measures of peacefulness is an inclusive society," he said. "And one of the measures of a lack of peacefulness is when we start excluding from society." His presentation included information on hate crimes and trends in hate crime in Canada. One of the motivations for hate crimes is gender identity. Religion is another. Hate crimes related to sexual orientation are up 69 per cent from 2013 to 2023. Crimes related to gender identity rose 37 per cent from 2022 to 2023 and are up more than 150 per cent since 2022. He cited a study from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute which showed global military spending in 2023 was nearly \$2.5 trillion with just .6 per cent of that spent on peace efforts.

Marginalized groups in smaller communities, he said, may not feel able to take on the task of advocating for themselves and others, allies, may need to step in to help. "Not to cement hatred. Not to cement polarization. But to realize that excluding people from society is bad for democracy. It's bad for equity and inclusion."

Houston's goal was to use the analogy of

peace in larger areas of conflict as an entry to the discussion of peace and peacefulness in smaller communities. Canada has a high degree of peace because of its education system, its health-care system and its democracy. "Excluding people or targeting people is counter," to the idea of peace more broadly.

Laura Hinrichsen, from Eganville, attended the talk and a few things Houston said stood out to her. She wrote some of her impressions in an email. "Things such as health care, education, some level of equity in resources, democracy, people's confidence in their government," are all things that contribute to a peaceful society. Hinrichsen said, toward the end of the presentation, Houston emphasized that people don't need to be wealthy, a world leader or famous to make a difference. "Anyone can find their own ways to make a positive impact and regular, everyday people can make a huge impact in their own communities."

Another Eganville resident, Aislinn Caron, also attended the talk and said, via email, "My main impression of the talk was that it felt extremely important that it was happening and where it was happening (in Barry's Bay). It felt like a first window being cracked in the community," toward equity and inclusion.

Houston and his group have a building in Bancroft and are in the final stages of negotiating the ownership transfer. Once that is done, work will begin to organize the museum. He and his board of directors plan to use the building for other community events, as well and plan to open in stages as the fundraising allows.

The *Gazette* is working on a more in-depth story which we will publish on our website in the near future.

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