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GUEST VIEW: Support for the Turtle won't be silenced

- By Emma Santos

I was at the Niagara Falls City Council meetings in February with the Native American youth club at Niagara Falls High School supporting landmarking the Turtle building downtown. I was there because I know the Turtle would be a great opportunity for Niagara Falls in every aspect for the people living here, in surrounding areas, or who come as tourists. I'm speaking for myself and for the other students and our ancestors who were silenced by the government.

Sitting at the meetings I felt nervous. After I spoke, I felt not heard and shut down since I could see different council members look like they were falling asleep and hearing others ask when are we going to be done talking about the Turtle.

The answer is never. The other groups and I supporting preserving the Turtle will not be forced into silence unlike how many of our ancestors were. The Turtle gave many of us city Natives and many others a chance to feel connected to our heritage. Denying preservation status on the Turtle took away that chance for us.

A local publication came out about children my age that was appalling. Comparing us to homeless people and cattle food is insane and disgusting behavior. Telling us we got manipulated because of our age is completely wrong and acting like we can't do our own research.

We weren't manipulated, we did all our own research and conducted our own interviews with the people we wanted to talk to. All our speeches we wrote ourselves. The only thing adults did was introduce the Turtle to us and fix grammar and spelling issues with the speeches we wrote. When other people spoke up to share their support of landmark status, they didn't get their age thrown in their face so why is it different for us teenagers?

The Turtle is owned by a 72-year-old billionaire who lives in New York City. After gaining the Turtle he had it painted fully white so no attention would be drawn to it. He wants to destroy it for another unneeded hotel. Why as a community are we okay with someone who doesn't live here controlling whether we get better or not?

At 16 I can already tell that we are starting to support Niagara Falls, Ontario, with all our hotels instead of our own enticing side with attractions. So many people talk about how bad Niagara

Falls is. Why do we turn down the chance to make it better then? To build another unneeded hotel or parking lot?

I think the Turtle needs to be preserved because too many young Native people are losing connection to their heritage. Many adults don't have a connection to their heritage either. What are we supposed to do when many of our grandparents and great-grandparents were sent to residential schools which forced them to either forget or be too traumatized to speak about our Native culture and we have nowhere to go and feel the connection?

The Turtle is made by one of 50 Native American architects. The creation story that is shared among many Native tribes is based on a Turtle, the story saying the world rests on the back of a turtle's shell. The building is connected to Natives through our stories and ancestors.

Niagara Falls needs a place for its residents to go and learn. Downtown is aimed at tourists which leaves nothing for the people living here to go to. The number of times I have heard people ask how to get to Niagara Falls, Canada, is outrageous. Niagara Falls is clearly declining so why is the city council supporting decisions for further decline when it can be improved by keeping The Turtle and making us start to improve?

Preserving the Turtle would lead it to opening back up in the future and having tourists stay longer, tourist staying longer leads to Niagara Falls improving. That is something I can support.

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