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Photo by Dexter Classen

Ezzard Charles Neri teaches the martial art Aikido to Loyalist students on the front lawn of the campus. Neri began teaching because he felt it was necessary to pass on what he learned from the discipline to others. "It heals me to do it, it's self-healing to teach."

Healing movements of Aikido

By Dexter Classen

Ezzard Charles Neri was a kid in Toronto who fought for himself.

While his family came from the Philippines, he grew up in Parkdale and found martial arts when he was young in the form of karate and taekwondo as an extracurricular. It soon became a necessity for Neri as knowing how to protect himself became more and more important.

Neri describes the Parkdale area in the late 70s and early 80s as very "angry". "Every day I lost a little bit of myself. I went to a Catholic school but every day I got into a fight."

As the bullying got gradually worse and worse, there was a feeling that the whole city was out for his neck. "It became part of me to always fight."

From this need to defend himself and the anger that came from the chaos of his daily life at school, a regiment was born.

By this time he had become a para-trooper for the Canadian military and would be further trained physically by Cold War tactic standards. As the training benefited Neri from a physical standpoint, he wanted to develop discipline.

He had also lost his cultural identity. "In the 90s when I joined, it was the last bit of the Cold War tactics in the military. We were just taught to go. Kill…. I found no balance in that... I was culturally lost."

To reconnect with his heritage from the Philippines, Neri found himself in Filipino Martial Arts, which includes weapons-based combat. Neri spent six years of the harsh discipline with a heavy focus on attack. He was based at a dojo in Toronto where all disciplines were welcome. After meeting his first sensei, Laura Holmes, this refined itself into a love for Aikido, which includes the push and pull of energy between opponent and self.

"In Edo Era japan, Jujutsu was split into two more energy based teachings: Judo and Aikido."

Neri saw that in tune with his life at that point, Aikido provided a balance and a flow to his love of martial art that pulled him into years of practicing and teaching the discipline. The balance he wanted in his own life manifested in an art form that bases itself in the balance of combat.

Aikido isn't about burying your opponent, he said, adversely there is no opponent; only the energy that comes with an attacker and how to use that energy in your own movements. Almost as long as Neri has been practicing,he's been asked to teach what he's learned. It's written in the creation of Aikido to always be learning, always passing on what you know to others in order to help people. "It heals me to do it, it's self-healing to teach."

After applying to the Canadian Air Forces, he was posted to tCFB Trenton and brought his teachings with him. He struggled to find a dojo for a long time in the Quinte area before branching off from a Quinte-based dojo and starting his own lessons and regiment that moved around to whoever wanted to learn.

"Before we were established, we moved out of all these place. We were at a core centre, we moved to a dance studio, we moved to a high school, and I finally got in touch with an Eight Wing martial arts club and they invited me to come and train with them."

Ezzard now spends his time teaching wherever he can. COVID moved his teaching outdoors but he now keeps in contact with his students over social media and they train wherever they can.

Location sought for Indigenous population

By Kayla Isomura

Members of the Indigenous community are asking the Region of Waterloo for land in an effort to create a permanent space for the local Indigenous population.

On Monday, Nov. 1, Amy Smoke and Bangishimo Johnston, co-founders of Land Back Camp, spoke to council members at a 2022 budget meeting.

"We want the region to start having the conversation with us and to come up with a conversation about giving us land – help us find a place to gather – because we need a home, we need a community centre," said Johnston.

At the meeting, the pair noted the lack of available space for Indigenous people to gather in the region. According to Smoke, the population has grown in recent years to over 30,000 Indigenous people in Kitchener-Waterloo alone.

"There are several Indigenous organizations in the community that have their own spaces [but] they're not big enough for any of us," said Smoke in an interview.

Citing the Healing of the Seven Generations as an example, Smoke said the local organization is in a single-family dwelling. Meanwhile, White Owl Native Ancestry Association shares a space with Family and Children's Services of the Waterloo Region, a dynamic the community would prefer to avoid.

During the council meeting, Smoke and Johnston proposed the former Charles Street bus terminal in Kitchener as an example of space the region could designate to the Indigenous community.

While the pair acknowledged they don't speak on behalf of the Indigenous community, they said a local hub could include dental services, daycare, a gymnasium, offices, kitchen space and more.

Photo by Kayla Isomura

Bangishimo Johnston and Amy Smoke stand near a firepit near the pavilion in Victoria Park in Kitchener, Ont. in late October. In June 2020, Indigenous community members began gathering at the park, eventually relocating to Waterloo Park and Laurel Creek Conservation Area.

In a recent petition, they received over 3,000 signatures in support of the idea. They have also received support from local Indigenous organizations, ReallocateWR and architecture students who drafted blueprints of the proposed space.

While this is the first time Smoke and Johnston have made this proposal, the pair said community members have been advocating for a central hub for years.

This includes Donna Dubie, executive director of the Healing of the Seven Generations.

Dubie said she has spoken to mayors, regional chairs, Members of Parliament and Members of Provincial Parliament about an Indigenous community centre for 20 years.

Despite providing each level of government with long-term plans, Dubie said her efforts have been unsuccessful.

For Smoke and Johnston, they hope to encourage the region to take some form of action.

"We just want to get this idea on the table and get the region to tell us what they're going to do about it," said Johnston. "What are their plans for reconciliation? Because right now, they're all about using those words but yet, we're not even in their strategic budget plan."

Johnston is referring to the region's 2019-2023 strategic plan, which is described as "a future view" of what the region is "working to achieve."

The plan does mention developing "respectful relationships with Indigenous people" and working "towards reconciliation." However, it does not provide further details.

Additionally, Smoke and Johnston said the region has made no effort to participate in discussions with them over the last year regarding land back.

In fact, approaching the regional council follows a year of conversations Smoke and Johnston have had with the City of Kitchener and the City of Waterloo.

In June 2020, Indigenous community members set up a teepee in Kitchener's Victoria Park, a day ahead of National Indigenous Peoples Day.

While the original intent was to be there for three days, the group stayed in the park for months and eventually moved to Waterloo Park. Following that, they spent this year in Laurel Creek Conservation Area.

What started as raising awareness around defunding the police and land back in light of the recent murders of Black and Indigenous people, Smoke said observing camp visitors changed the conversation.

"It turns out everybody was two-spirit, Indigiqueer, trans, non-binary youth, which spoke to the lack of spaces for queer, Indigenous youth here in the urban centre," they said. "Part of which we've been talking about for years is access to land and access to space, but also for queer youth as well, so it just evolved."

Working with Kitchener and Waterloo, Land Back Camp organizers were able to have fees permanently waived for Indigenous people to access city facilities and public spaces.

This fall, Johnston said camp organizers will be returning to their original space in Victoria Park to host bi-weekly gatherings and eventually their first winter solstice dinner in the park's pavilion.

Although waiving fees for land use is a step in the right direction, it's the bare minimum, added Smoke.

A request for comment from the Region of Waterloo's chair, Karen Redman, was not met by deadline.