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Participants at the Feb. 6 afternoon Conversations Across The Racial Divide gathering at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay speak about the issues raised and gather next to the speakers they agreed with.
 Photos by Rick Garrick.

Reaching across the racial divide

By Rick Garrick

Seine River's Sandi Boucher looks forward to change in the community after participating in the Feb. 6 Conversations Across The Racial Divide gathering at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay.

"It was so worth our time," Boucher

says. "As an Indigenous woman I needed to hear non-Indigenous people acknowledge their privilege, acknowledge their frustration, acknowledge their determination to do a better job. We needed to hear that. We needed to know that that's real and that that exists."

Boucher says this type of gathering needs to be held more often in Thunder

Bay.

"We need to get across that divide," Boucher says. "I just hope it continues past today, that this conversation happens outside this room. Thunder Bay is on the right track — we just need to keep going."

The gathering was held to share insights and to imagine new possibilities for Thunder Bay through an honest look at the community's history.

"It was pretty intense," says Sarah Nelson, with YSI Collaborative. "I'm feeling very drained, but I think it is a conversation that needs to keep happening."

YSI Collaborative was one of the sponsoring organizations. Others were Diversity Thunder Bay, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee, Racialized Young Professionals, Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund, Lakehead University Office of Aboriginal Initiatives, Lakehead University Anti Racism Committee and Lakehead University Student Union.

"We work to try to establish better relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth," Nelson says. "We want to start that process in Thunder Bay and then we want to build those opportunities out to the rest of northwestern Ontario."

The gathering was facilitated by Aftab Erfan, a Deep Democracy facilitator and director of dialogue and conflict engagement at the University of British Columbia. Deep Democracy was developed in post-apartheid South Africa for the purpose of making reconciliation real at the local level. A second gathering was also held in the evening at the Ka-na-chi-hih Specialized Solvent Abuse Treatment

Centre.

"In the afternoon conversation we just literally polarized around identities, so we had Indigenous folks telling their stories and talking about their experiences from one side and then non-Indigenous folks telling their stories or asking their questions from the other side," Erfan says. "And in the evening (conversation) we polarized differently — it was more around strategy, it wasn't around identity. So one side was the strategy of we need to talk about our differences and really point to our different experiences and how we are not all the same and why that matters. And on the other side it was: 'No, let's emphasize that we are the same and get in touch with our common humanity.'"

Erfan says the goal of the conversations was to encourage people to hear each other and to listen to their different stories in a more engaging way. She noted one comment in the evening conversation that stood out for her after one of the participants spoke about not knowing what to say when somebody in the community says something that they know is not right.

"Almost right away there was this other action commitment from the other side of the room, which said: 'I was in that situation, something happened and I didn't know what to say and now I am organizing a film screening in my neighbourhood and I am going to bring that person and other people together,'" Erfan says. "I think that is a realistic way of going about some of these micro aggressions or even real aggressions, that at the time are very difficult to address on the spot."

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