

A Welcome Figure for Bowen Island

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Welcome Figure in Squamish with Pauline Le Bel and Elder Randall Lewis in 2016. | Paul Fast

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This is an invitation to become part of something beautiful to honour the island's past and guide us into our future.

But first, a little history. Several years ago, when I was researching my book, 'Whale in the Door: A Community Unites to Protect BC's Howe Sound', I was fortunate to begin meaningful relationships with leaders and Elders of the Squamish Nation. It soon became obvious I knew very little about the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

So I read the Indian Act, passed in 1876 to control (and continue to control) the lives of the original inhabitants and their land. I read books by Indigenous authors, attended Indigenous ceremonies and Squamish Nation powwows. Then I read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Summary — all 384 heartbreaking pages. I had a responsibility to share what I had learned.

So in 2017, "Knowing Our Place" was born. The name was a gift from my friend, Chris Corrigan. We were standing at the lagoon causeway watching the salmon return to Terminal Creek. I told Chris about my reconciliation dream and how I was looking for a title. Knowing Our Place, with its two meanings, was a good fit: knowing where we live, and knowing our place here as guests of the Squamish Nation on their traditional unceded territory.

Knowing Our Place was a way to educate ourselves about Canada's true history with Indigenous Peoples, to create respectful relationships with First Nations, and to be in allyship with Squamish Nation. Over the next eight years, with the ongoing support of the Bowen Island Public Library and the Bowen Island Arts Council, I organized workshops and arts events with Indigenous teachers, as well as a monthly book club to read and learn from Indigenous authors.

One of the tangible reminders of these events was the weaving made by Islanders in 2022 with master Squamish Nation weaver, Cheximiya (English name, Alison Burns). Cheximiya taught the ancient Squamish twill weaving technique to more than 45 Islanders — young and old. Next time you're in the Library, step into the Annex. This weaving of reconciliation is on permanent display.

The Sign Blessing Ceremony was to become the inspiration for this new project. In 2022, the Squamish Ocean Going Canoe Family came to the island to bless a new sign with an old name — Nexwlelexwm — one of the Squamish names for the island. At the ceremony,

Squamish Elder and Knowledge Keeper, Dennis Joseph, brought tears to my eyes with his words. "A healing journey has begun with this sign," he said.

"We are building a mighty bridge, and we have a foundation to work from." At the end of the ceremony, Elder Alex "Bucky" Baker tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Nice work

the ceremony, Elder Alroy "Bucky" Baker tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Nice work, Pauline. Now you need a welcome figure."

What is a welcome figure, you might be asking? Tall figures with open arms carved by Coast Salish artists to offer greeting, connection and hospitality to all who arrive on their territory. Examples can be found in Ambleside, Squamish, Porteau Cove, Murdo Frazer Park in North Vancouver, and Simon Fraser University.

So here's the plan: A community project to raise funds and support the installation of a Welcome Figure to be carved by a Squamish Nation carver. Chris Corrigan and I have spent several months looking for the perfect location and will share the results in a future article

We've been meeting with Mayor Andrew Leonard, councillors and municipal staff to finalize things. Now we are inviting Islanders to become part of this exciting project. Over the next few months, I will be writing a series of articles to let you know how you can help build another section of that "mighty bridge," a visible, lasting symbol of respect, reconciliation and connection.

Part Two will examine 'The Great Log Search'.

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