

Artist creates mini hearts in honour of lost residential school children



Fredericton artist Karen LeBlanc was joined by her granddaughter Araminta Gallagher Sunday at Wilmot Park. Gallagher helped her grandmother pass out hand-sewn fabric hearts in memory of the hundreds of Indigenous children whose remains were recently discovered in unmarked graves at or near the sites of Canada's former residential schools.

Photo: Michael Staples/The Daily Gleaner

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It may be a small gesture but Fredericton artist Karen LeBlanc is hoping her hand-sewn fabric hearts will have a giant impact when it comes to promoting reconciliation with Canada's Aboriginal communities.

For the last several weeks, LeBlanc has been creating miniature hearts as part of an ongoing project to honour the memories of Indigenous children - specifically the hundreds whose remains were recently discovered in unmarked graves at or near the sites of Canada's former residential schools.

On Sunday, the well-known fibre artist and weaver, along with her granddaughter Araminta Gallagher, gave away around 50 hearts - measuring between two and 2.5 inches in size - at Wilmot Park on the city's south side.

LeBlanc said it was her way of helping to bring people together.

"It has opened the door for conversation and that's what I really like. Not everybody is completely open to it but, for the most part, people are very happy to take a heart."

LeBlanc would like to see her creations hung at numerous locations throughout the city in memory of the children.

Saint John resident Ainsley Swift, who accepted one of the hearts, said the message that goes with the creations is one that resonates with her.

"It's something that's been on my mind and I thought it was a beautiful gesture," Swift said. "I chose a lovely birch, found a low hanging branch, did a little prayer and put my heart up."

Swift said as she hung her heart on the Wilmot Park tree, a feeling of hope and healing filled her mind.

The hearts, made of various fabrics and colours, are hand-stitched with embroidery floss and a running stitch.

LeBlanc said it reminds her of the steps taken by the children and the paths they walked during their short lives.

"Maybe I am selfish, maybe I am doing it for me, but it seems to be helping other people, as well, because it does start that conversation and I think that's important."

LeBlanc, who has made close to 100 of the hearts, is unsure at this time when she will stop making them or how many she will create.

"I'd love to be able to eventually do something larger," she said.

"Maybe I could do some sort of very large installation. It's a growing idea, expanding all the time."