

# The Children Are Waiting: *Hope in Words and Action*

Pamela Thomson

Redeemer was privileged to host representatives of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth on June 17—Irwin Elman, Laura Arndt and Aliesha Arndt—as we learned more about the work of the provincial advocate and the Feathers of Hope. Irwin Elman is the advocate. From the biography on the Provincial Advocate’s website we learn that *he brings to this position an extensive background as an educator, counsellor, youth worker, program manager, policy developer and child and youth advocate. In working with young people in our ‘systems,’ he has carried out these roles with respect—borrowing from the courage and hope of the young people he served to create innovative approaches for youth in Ontario, Jamaica, Hungary, and Japan. For over 20 years, Irwin was the Manager of the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre in Toronto: a program of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto and the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Toronto. More recently, he was the Director of Client Service at Central Toronto Youth Services: an innovative children’s mental health centre.*

The duty of the Office of the Advocate is to:

- ☞ provide an independent voice for children and youth including First Nations children and youth and children with special needs by partnering with them to bring issues forward; and
- ☞ encourage communication and understanding between children and families and those who provide them with services; and
- ☞ educate children, youth and their caregivers regarding the rights of children and youth.<sup>1</sup>

Laura Arndt is a Mohawk woman and Bear Clan member, who is the mother of two and is currently completing a PhD in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University. She has served children, youth and the disability community for many years. As director of

<sup>1</sup> Detailed information about the role of the Advocate can be found online: [provincialadvocate.on.ca/main/en/about/meet\\_provincial\\_advocate.cfm](http://provincialadvocate.on.ca/main/en/about/meet_provincial_advocate.cfm)

advocacy, she helped author the *Feathers of Hope* report that resulted from a gathering of First Nations youth from 65 communities in remote parts of Ontario. The issues identified within that event led to an invitation from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Laura and the youth to make a presentation at their last national event. You can find the report online ([digital.provincialadvocate.on.ca/i/259048-foh-report](http://digital.provincialadvocate.on.ca/i/259048-foh-report)). This powerful document offers insights into the experiences of First Nations youth—the legacy of the residential schools, the issues that affect them the most and the places of hope in their recommendations of a way forward. You will learn much by reading this report. The most recent gathering of Feathers of Hope was in July and report on *Culture, Identity and Belonging* will be published in 2017.

Laura was accompanied by her daughter, Aliesha, who had just graduated with a MA. Aliesha has been part of the *Feathers of Hope* team since the beginning. The most moving part of the evening was when the two of them shared their story. Laura’s mother was taken to the “mush hole” (Mohawk Institute) at the age of four. The mush hole was run by the Anglican Church. They both entered the Redeemer in trepidation, with sadness and gentle anger. Sharing the evening with us, it took strength and determination to come into our church, and to share so openly with us.

For Laura’s mother, the experience of growing up without the love, support and wisdom offered by family resulted in difficulties in parenting Laura and her siblings in an urban setting. Laura became, in many ways, the caregiver. Bullied for being First Nations, Laura learned the strength of being quiet—to hide from bullies, and to hide from the Scoop of the ‘60’s.

Laura confirmed that “invisibility kills, and drowns voices.” The most important thing one can ‘do’ is listen: all else will follow. Being heard means having influence. Dreaming gives strength to take risks. Young people must be given leave to do so. From being listened to, comes story and power. We should not think about “decolonizing” our minds, our culture, but rather to “revitalize” through healing, listening and sharing. We all need to heal from the trauma of discovering what we thought was wrong. Everyone will have pain.

To keep the hope alive, young people need to be treated as equals. They need everyday heroes and champions. They truly are the experts, with clear vision for the future. They need to see healthy adults who listen.