

For Immediate Release — Thursday, June 15, 2017

## Community invited to help reconstruct vandalized public art piece

University of Lethbridge art student Sarah Russell planned to share a message of unity through her artwork in the LandMarks2017 exhibition. However, vandals rearranged her work into a crude image on the side of the coulee in Indian Battle Park. Russell's artwork, which represented the Blackfoot symbol for unity, now needs just that – people to unite to help rebuild the installation before the opening reception on June 20.

As part of the national art project LandMarks2017, a University art class has been working hard since January to create artworks to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary. Aimed at exploring and connecting with the land, LandMarks2017 consists of 100 works presented in 20 national parks and historic sites from June 10-27. Sixteen universities and 12 leading Canadian artists created works for the exhibitions.



Everyone is invited to play a part in an act of unity by joining artist Sarah Russell at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, June 20 at Fort Whoop Up to assist in reconstructing the symbol on the coulee.

The main objective of LandMarks2017 is to encourage exploration and inspire dialogue about the history of the land. Universities were invited to participate and Jackson 2Bears adopted the project for his topics course: Art 3850 – LandMarks 2017 (Spatial Storytelling: Land, Art, Place and Community). 2Bears brought in knowledge keepers from the Blackfoot community to share the history of the land and the people with the students.

Russell, a Kainai-Piikani Blackfoot herself, wanted to come to the table without any labels. "The elders really opened up my mind to be positive, so I wanted to create something that was positive out of negative," explained Russell. "I wanted to represent the University, I wanted to represent the Blackfoot people, and I wanted to represent the territory."

Russell was inspired by the Blackfoot symbol for unity and decided to take on the enormous task of hand painting more than 150 rocks, placing them on the coulee-side by Indian Battle Park. The piece was large enough you could see it across the river from University Hall. The project was extremely labour intensive, not just in finding, painting and placing the rocks, but also the formal process she went through in securing permission to create the piece.

"You can't just go and take a rock," explained Russell. "In our culture we believe that everything is alive, and has its place, so I didn't feel comfortable just going to take rocks. Therefore, I had to talk to the elders about how to obtain the rocks respectfully for this piece."

Russell also needed to receive permission from the elder who originally created the symbol before she could recreate it. "I had to track him down, understand the meaning behind the symbol, and get permission from him," continued Russell. "I asked him about the meaning of painting the rocks white and he said it was up to my interpretation. But the symbol was a gift to the Blackfoot people and it is a gift to me to use it however I wanted to."

Russell's interpretation of the symbol and the message she hoped to share through her art, was about connecting all people, not just First Nations. "The symbol is to unite the Blackfoot confederacy," said Russell. "But I wanted to push it a little bit further and unite all human beings."

Unfortunately, between May 20-23 the rocks were reconfigured into a crude shape, and with frustration and disappointment, Russell removed all traces of her work. "I started with seven rocks, and they were really heavy," said Russell. It took two months to get every rock painted and in place.

"There were over 150 rocks, and I got help placing maybe 30 of them. The rest I did myself," said Russell. While she had help in other ways, it was discouraging to see months of hard work destroyed. "Why 'those' rocks? That's why I got upset. If you want to make a sculpture like that, bring up your own rocks," Russell said with a laugh.

However, with support and encouragement from 2Bears and the U of L Faculty of Fine Arts, Russell's artwork should soon be back on display. Everyone is invited to play a part in an act of unity by joining Russell at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, June 20 at Fort Whoop Up to assist in reconstructing the symbol on the coulee.

Russell warns the terrain is steep and rough, with cactuses, and maybe snakes. Volunteers should come prepared for the elements including good shoes and proper clothing.

The LandMarks2017 exhibition, including Russell's symbol of unity, are on display in Fort Whoop-up and across Indian Battle Park from June 20-27.

To view online: <http://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/community-invited-help-reconstruct-vandalized-art-piece>

-- 30 --

Contact:

Kelly Morris, PR/Communications, Faculty of Fine Arts  
403-329-2227  
403-915-1854 (cell)  
[kelly.morris@uleth.ca](mailto:kelly.morris@uleth.ca)