



Clockwise from the top: Fashion Arts student Blake Lambie works on a traditional ribbon skirt; Prof. Jenifer Forrest (right) works with students Allison Visnaw (left) and Aoi Takeda; the blue flower on the ribbon skirt is a special symbol that signifies Mother Earth's beauty for the Anishinaabe women; Aviation Operations student Caitlin Lyder (left) and Seneca graduate Emma Greenfield receive ribbon skirts from Fashion Arts student Kaylani Gatchalian (right); and Fashion Arts student Hourieh Dorali Beni shows off a ribbon skirt with the spiritual motif of a feather.

Ribbon skirts more than a fashion affair

Collaboration contributes to Indigenous reconciliation

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When a collection of custom-made ribbon skirts was wheeled into Seneca's Odeyto last week, there were tears in the First Peoples@Seneca (/student-services-and-support/first-peoples.html) centre at Newnham Campus. But that's because these skirts are no ordinary fashion garment. They are sacred regalia worn by Indigenous women at ceremonies and gifted by School of Fashion (/school/faculty-of-communication-art-and-design/school-of-fashion.html) students.

"Many of our Indigenous students have never seen or worn a ceremonial skirt because they were raised in the city away from their cultural roots," said Peggy Pitawanakwat, Co-ordinator, First Peoples@Seneca. "They can now borrow these sacred skirts and wear them at ceremonies such as the water blessing or the Sisters in Spirit vigil for the missing and murdered

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A collaboration between the School of Fashion and First Peoples@Seneca, the ribbon skirts were created by students in Prof. Jenifer Forrest's fashion class. Ms. Forrest, who conceived the project in close co-ordination with Ms. Pitawanakwat, said the exercise was infused with learning at every step. As part of the course, students were required to read the summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report and learn about the history of residential schools and the Orange Shirt Day.

"Fashion students have been very responsive to this project," Ms. Forrest said. "They understand the connection we have with our clothing in terms of identity, family ties and feelings of being protected and safe. They understand what it would mean to have that taken away."

Ribbon skirts, distinctive in the colourful ribbon trims along the hemline, are a traditional symbol of the strength, resilience and sacredness of Indigenous women who wear them at ceremonies and other important events.

Each motif on the skirts is of special significance to the Indigenous people. Feathers denote spiritual strength and flowers the beauty of Mother Earth. Orange flowers edged in white honour the survivors of residential schools while those edged in black are a stark reminder of the children who did not survive. The vivid colours are symbolic, representing nature and the traditional beliefs of the Indigenous people.



From left: Caitlin Lyder, Aviation Operations student; Peggy Pitawanakwat, Co-ordinator, First Peoples@Seneca; Kissa Zhara, Fashion Arts student; Prof. Jenifer Forrest, School of Fashion; and Emma Greenfield, Seneca graduate.

Caitlin Lyder, a first-year Aviation Operations diploma program (/programs/fulltime/AVO.html) student, wore one of the skirts — her first ever — and said she felt both proud and showed the tremendous effort made by the fashion school students to



history. To her, the project symbolized the coming together of two worlds.

Emma Greenfield, a recent graduate who has been working at Odeyto to help develop the Indigenous curriculum at Seneca, was equally moved as she tried on a ceremonial skirt, also for the first time. She said she was touched by the fashion students' gesture and the skirts brought her closer to the Indigenous community and to Seneca.

"This is such a practical and meaningful way to contribute to reconciliation and build relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people," Ms. Greenfield said.

For the fashion students, the four weeks they spent designing and stitching the skirts not only helped them hone their skills but also provided them with an invaluable opportunity to connect with First Peoples@Seneca.

"We have read about Indigenous traditions in school but this project helped us interact directly with the First Nations people and understand their symbols," said Kaylani Gatchalian, a first-year Fashion Arts (/programs/fulltime/FAA.html) student. "For instance, the flower that I stitched on a skirt signifies Mother Earth's beauty and is special to Anishinaabe women."

The project, funded by the K.M. Hunter Charitable Foundation (<https://kmhunterfoundation.ca/>), also reinforced the principles of sustainable clothing and zero waste. The skirts have been made with a blend of biodegradable materials such as cotton and hemp. The polyester ribbons do not have any harmful chemical residue and can easily be reused. The design of the skirts produces minimum waste during cutting and all the leftover pieces are used to make medicine bags.

"Fashion should not be perceived as something for a small segment — fashion shows, magazines and blogs," Ms. Forrest said. "Fashion is about serving people in a more responsive way and the ribbon skirts will foster a better understanding of Indigenous history, traditions and culture in the Seneca community."

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