

# Cultural diversity, respect can add much to our lives

BY BRENDA REIMER



ONE CITY,  
MANY VOICES

**A**S A member of Diversity Thunder Bay, I am committed to making Thunder Bay a community where diversity is welcomed and valued. What does this mean? Does it mean one city where the only voice that counts agrees with the “mainstream” voice? Does it mean the freedom to voice your opinion even if it is hurtful and involves labelling and name-calling of others who are different from you? Does it mean the freedom to honour your own particular culture and to be treated with respect for doing so?

My childhood treat was hot dogs; for my children, it was pizza; for my grandchildren, it is sushi. Neither pizza nor sushi were known in my family. All have become a standard part of Canadian cuisine. What will it be for my great grandchildren? As each new food has become part of Canadian cuisine, we have not lost anything; nothing has been taken

away. Rather, only greater variety and choice have been added. Food is easiest.

In the 1950s, growing up in a middle-class area of Winnipeg, we didn't know how to deal with our rapidly changing neighbourhood. We were uncomfortable when our friends refused to come to our house because the new neighbours, Italian men, stared at them. When these neighbours offered to teach my mother to make pizza we teenagers said “no way.”

Some months later when my father was very ill, the men offered to

put on all our storm windows and I felt embarrassed by our previous unfriendly behaviour. Four years later, when the first pizza restaurant opened in Winnipeg and it became the trendy place to go for a date, I realized we could have been ahead of the pizza trend if our discomfort with another culture had not held us back.

Another lesson learned. Be open to multicultural Canada.

Earlier this year, my thinking about multicultural Canada changed again when two young women, one indigenous and the other a Pakistani Canadian, stated very clearly that to say, “we are all the same” or “we are all one” negated for them their culture and their stories.

I didn't realize that the unthinkable assumption that we were all the same was sweeping aside important differences and not allowing others space to learn about and practice their cultural teachings. I didn't see

these words as helping to erase a culture, but that's how they were heard.

As I have become aware of how our country set out to systematically destroy the indigenous culture, I have been horrified. Yet, once aware, examples keep appearing. Colonialism exists to this day. Collectively we need to figure out how to move forward together in the 21st century. What does it mean when we say “we are all Treaty people”?

I want us to create a society where there is both space for individual cultures and opportunities for these cultures to work together as equals.

For some in Thunder Bay, indigenous people have existed in the community for years, but largely invisible. Attitudes have become hardened and opportunities for conversation and dialogue seem limited.

For many indigenous people, Thunder Bay has become a place of fear. How can we break down these barriers? How do we appreciate what another culture has to offer

rather than destroying it? I think we should begin by listening with open ears and open hearts.

For me, this could lead to a new and exciting relationship which might even have a new designation — Thunder Bay, a city of true diversity where all residents feel safe and respected.

*Brenda Reimer grew up in Winnipeg and has lived in Thunder Bay since 1975. Brenda has been involved with March 21 activities and Diversity Thunder Bay since the early 1990s when she was Executive Director of Lakehead Social Planning Council. Since retirement Brenda has continued her role with Diversity Thunder Bay and is an active volunteer with her faith community, St. Paul's United Church. In both organizations, she is concerned with issues of justice and with community building. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.*

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