



## RECONCILIATION IN ACTION: A FOOTBALL GAME IN HONOR OF TRUTH & RECONCILIATION

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*A Special Event in Honor of September 30th Day for Truth and Reconciliation presented by Exchange Income Corporation, Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers*

Acknowledgement, inclusion and actions of reconciliation were the main reasons 1,000 members of various Indigenous communities attended the Winnipeg Blue Bombers football game against the Edmonton Elks on Oct 8th this year. The idea behind the large gathering of nations was to not only recognize the importance behind the new National holiday on Sept 30th, but to provide a memorable experience for all the Indigenous peoples who attended. In honor of Canadian residential school survivors and their families on the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Exchange Income Corporation, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers partnered together to make it all possible. A total of 80 communities sent 10-20

people each and it took multiple volunteers, staff, aircraft, kilometers travelled, hotel rooms and busses to get into the city and to the game. At the stadium that evening, it was easy to see the efforts and intent of the special event just by witnessing the energy and happy faces.





## IMPORTANCE AND RECOGNITION

The night was a special one for more reasons than the Bomber 5 game winning streak. At this game where the Blue Bombers faced the Edmonton Elks, there were notable efforts towards Truth & Reconciliation in special ways. Most prominently you could recognize the presence of the movement called 'Every Child Matters' where Indigenous peoples and their allies remember children who died and were buried at former Residential School sites. Previously recognized as Orange Shirt day, the National Day for Truth & Reconciliation on Sept 30th is still a day to wear orange. This bold statement was visible at the game through orange Every Child Matters wristbands for the special guests and an Every Child Matters turf decal on the field. Orange sweaters were also supplied to the special guests which had the Blue Bombers 'W' logo on them and were hard to miss throughout the crowd.

During the pre-game warm-up both teams also wore orange New-Era jerseys, all of which were auctioned off for charities in each team's local region. More than \$35,000 was raised in total for WASAC in Winnipeg and Spirit North in Edmonton. Both are non-profits that aim to improve the health and well-being of Indigenous youth through sport and cultural

programs. The Bombers also wore their newly designed helmets that incorporated a blue and gold star blanket design in the 'W' logo which was redesigned by an Indigenous creator in Winnipeg, Dene Sinclair.

Before kick off, an Indigenous drum group started off the evening with an honor song and AMC's Grand Chief Arlen Dumas shared a blanket ceremony right on the field. He presented Blue Bomber President Wade Miller with a star blanket to honor their efforts to acknowledge the inaugural Canadian national holiday by including those attending from Indigenous communities. A notable effort also worth mentioning is that the Bomber's were also the first professional sports organization in North America to acknowledge the treaty lands they are on and they did so before the Canadian anthem was sung, this game. They are also currently the only team to fly the Treaty 1 and Metis flag, which they started this year.





At halftime The Sports Network (TSN) interviewed Mike Pyle, CEO of EIC and Grand Chief Arlen Dumas who shared about the importance of this event and why orange sweaters and jerseys mean so much at a time like this. And before this game, Winnipeg's news and sport radio station CJOB invited Mike Pyle on the pregame show with Bob Irving and Doug Brown, to let him talk about how important this issue was. "Media coverage was an important part of this event," said Mike Pyle. "This is about the big issue and getting the discussion in non-traditional places". Former Canadian

Senator Murray Sinclair, one of Canada's most prominent Indigenous lawyers turned Cabinet Senator, shared his thoughts on the event and meaningful steps towards genuine reconciliation as well during the halftime interviews.

These were acts of reconciliation that were felt beyond the stadium and of course did not go unnoticed.

## NATIONAL DAY OF TRUTH & RECONCILIATION + EVERY CHILD MATTERS

This gathering and recognition was especially significant in light of recent events. Months leading up to the game on October 8th had the greater population of Canada and the world unavoidably acknowledging the deep pain felt by many Indigenous peoples, including those special guests who were invited to the game by EIC and its partners. Earlier in 2021 unmarked graves were being discovered at Residential School sites where presumably most of the bodies found were those of children who died at the schools. This was a sad reality many Indigenous peoples knew about long before the confirmations were announced.



## This is about the big issue and getting the discussion in non-traditional places.

Mike Pyle, CEO, EIC



How we got to this point has been part of a long and painful, often overlooked history in Canada. Many Residential School survivors and thrivers lived through the era where the Canadian government tried to “Kill the Indian in the Child”, which is a disheartening term that was used in government policies that legislated Residential Schools in Canada. To make that reality even harder, many Canadian citizens continued to undermine the Indigenous experience rather than accept and support those who were impacted by it. For Indigenous people directly impacted by the Residential Schools through their families, and know the intergenerational trauma that it has caused, the results are hard to overlook. “I think it’s about time to recognize it for what it is. It’s about time.” said Chief Burke from Fort Severn, Ont.

The topic can be an emotional and overwhelming one to think about let alone talk about, especially at a professional football game. But during this game other types of overwhelming feelings emerged. Those of gratitude, inclusion, connection and support felt by the survivors and their families. “I’m really honored to be out here to represent the intergenerational trauma survivors from people who went to Residential Schools” shared a youth from The Pas, MB. “I think it’s

really nice and it’s awesome to do something like this, cause when you think of it - it’s so sad - but when you think of our ancestors and you think of the children, they never got to experience (things like this) ... and it hurts.” shared Lori Sanderson from Pine Creek, MB. And their thoughts on what else they think could help towards Truth & Reconciliation? Lori Sanderson shared “Healing. More healing and more awareness. And more supports for our communities.” The issues at home were too large for Daisy Panika from Rankin Inlet, NVT to ignore when sharing her thoughts on the game. She shared her perspective saying that “it’s good that we’re going to a ball game and all, but we have other issues that need to be addressed. We need to start working together for a common cause, for the Inuit. We already know what the issues are, one is that - it’s like we’re yelling and no one can hear us.”

Though major issues like housing, food security and lack of mental health support in remote and isolated communities may not be addressed at a football game, the wonderful thing about events like these is the possibility to inspire the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities to come together, and make efforts to mend relationships which is in itself a step towards greater healing.



## PARTICIPANTS/ OVERALL TRIP

Many of the special guests were witnessed throughout the 2 days in the midst of a happy whirlwind.

The excitement one group felt was witnessed right from the moments of travelling by plane as described by EIC consultant Stephen Ellwein “When I was on the plane and I was talking about the orange jerseys people started clapping. . . how cool is that! And that was kind of the way it was throughout the whole time.” When asked about their flight and involvement, Jennifer Bloomfield from War Lake First Nation shared “It was awesome, it was exciting and fast, comfortable. . . We’re thankful for the invite.” Their excitement was matched as they got off their plane at Charter Connexions, by Buzz and Boomer, mascots for the Blue Bombers and the staff of EIC. After welcoming the group and snapping some photos, they gathered their bags and hopped on a line up of busses ready to take them to their hotels.

Some attendees like Irvin Head from The Pas described that attending the football game will be his first time in years, but the trip was especially impactful for those who had not

been to Winnipeg at all before. As described by Ronald Lad, a candidate for MLA in Saniqualik, NVT “Some of our residents have been to Winnipeg, and some it’s their first time being here. The flights are fairly expensive, so it’s an honor to have different sponsors that allow us to be here. We’re very fortunate and we’d want to thank those sponsors.” In addition, there were also many who hadn’t been out of their communities since the start of the pandemic. Lori Sanderson, a chaperone with a group of girls part of Jordan’s Principle in Pine Creek described their group as being “excited to be coming out of the community. Because of Covid, people haven’t been able to go anywhere, and so they’re excited to just be able to come out and experience some normalcy.” Super fans like Patricia Enuapik from Whale Cove, NVT were also ecstatic to attend a game for the first time ever. After reciting the starting line up of players she went on to say “I watch their game every time they’re playing, I follow them. I wrote on their site, I’m coming all the way from Whale Cove, Nunavut to watch this.” The excitement was not only about the game, but the efforts that allowed the Indigenous community members to feel included and hopeful for more actions like this to end the inequalities.



For some of them who come from communities of around 400 people, to then gather in a stadium that can hold 33,000 people, the sights and sounds could be an overwhelming sensation to observe. But those who attended were up for it and were as energetic as the Bomber Drumline and the athletes on the field that night. Some groups brought their community flag and they were seen on the jumbotron cheering and ecstatic. After the energetic event, some were able to shop in Winnipeg before heading home to their communities by driving or flying.

## SPONSORS

EIC, through its family of air carriers, is uniquely positioned to bring this event together. The company owns multiple airlines across Canada - some in partnership with First Nations - and has been committed through its history to being a vibrant part of the rural, remote and Indigenous communities its airlines serve. To mark this memorable day, EIC gave back to their customers by offering free flights to Winnipeg and arranged hotel rooms for two nights. Thanks to AMC, other First Nations who were able to drive into Winnipeg were provided with gas money and hotel rooms as well. The Blue Bombers football club supported the effort by providing the tickets for the game and a meal upon arrival.

“It was a big project with a lot of logistics involved which isn’t unlike what we do on a daily basis, just on a much bigger scale.” said Naomi van der Wal, Manager, Charter Connexions, an EIC company. This event was inspired by the Perimeter Airlines and Blue Bombers current Stay in School program which launched in 2017. Each year since then about 500 students have had the chance to be flown out from communities EIC serves for Bomber football games. Mike Pyle shared a memorable chat he had with a 10 year old boy during one of the first games in the partnership. Despite enjoying the flight to Winnipeg, the stadium food and football game, this boy’s major highlight was that “tonight we’re staying at the hotel, and I get a bed to myself! I’ve never had a bed to myself.” “It gives you an idea of the size of the issue we’re dealing with,” says Pyle. And in regards to the almost million dollar price tag of the special game day efforts on Oct 8th, EIC’s Stephen Ellwein stated “I don’t think you can waive the cost of what good came out of it. It had to be done. We just want people to know they have support no matter who they reach out to in the EIC Family of Companies.”



# It's about working with the Indigenous leaders in your community.

Wade Miller, President, Winnipeg Blue Bomber Football Club



Each detail showed the guests were recognized and welcomed at the game. And when Wade Miller, President of the Winnipeg Blue Bomber Football Club shared about if he'd recommend the same for other professional teams, he said "I'm proud of our CFL teams across the league. They've all done this in their own way and what's right for their community. I don't think it's one size fits all. It's about working with the Indigenous leaders in your community and I think we did what's right for us. And you've seen the other teams do what's right for their area as well... I think you have to listen and see how it makes sense to work together."

## CONCLUSION

As the exciting trip ended and people went back to their home communities, what can be learned from an event originally aimed at acknowledgement, inclusion and reconciliation? Three major takeaways that have proven to be valuable through this large event: 1) working with Indigenous leaders to organize events for their people is a major step; 2) thoughtful details and efforts to bring awareness and acknowledgement will not go unnoticed; and 3) collaborating with other companies that have similar values can truly enhance the experience and outcomes for those involved. Efforts for the Oct 8th event

made by EIC, AMC and the Blue Bombers in honor of the first National Day of Truth and Reconciliation this year were steps in the right direction towards reconciliation and healing.

