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Bess Legarde, left, a jingle dress dancer, helps Cameron Esquega, a grass dancer, with his headdress during National Indigenous Peoples Day celebrations two years ago at Prince Arthur's Landing on Friday, June 21, 2019.

Indigenous people hold unique place in multicultural society

BY LISA SCHMIDT

MONDAY, June 21 will be Indigenous Peoples Day, that one day of the year that Canadians have set aside to recognize and remember Indigenous peoples in this country. Yet I'd be willing to bet that many of you didn't know this day exists. Even if you did know, you might be wondering: "Why a day just for Indigenous people? Why not a day for Ukrainians or Chinese or Pakistani or Syrians? What about them? Doesn't everyone have a culture worth celebrating?"

I know some of you have said this, or thought it. I know this because I am a white woman who was born and raised in Thunder Bay, and I've heard you say it. Once upon a time, I might have said it myself.

I get it. You were raised in a country that adopted multiculturalism — also known as diversity — as the core of our identity. In fact, June 27 is Canadian Multicultural Day.

We in Thunder Bay love to go to the Multicultural Festival (or we will when the pandemic is over) and try all the foods and see the cultural displays. I know I do. But multiculturalism isn't always the right idea. Indigenous people are not just another tile in the cultural mosaic, and we white folk — yes, I'm talking to you — should not treat them that way. It's a question of fairness.

Let me explain with a story.

Suppose that you live in a very beautiful house. You and your people have always lived there. One day, some bedraggled strangers show up at the door. "Please help us," they cry. "We're cold and we're starving."

Once you get over your surprise, of course you let them in because you are compassionate and there is plenty of room. You feed them, you give them a place to



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The Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

sleep, you even show them how to live here.

Then more of them show up. And more, and still more. Soon the house is feeling crowded. Some of these new people are not so nice. Some of them barge in and start stripping the walls and grabbing the silver. When you protest, some of them attack you. Others, who are trying to be nice (even though they refuse to leave) suggest that you can share the house — and they show you to the basement.

Next thing you know, the People Upstairs are saying that this is their house and you were never really living here at all. Even worse, most of the time they act like there is no basement and no People Downstairs. They seem to forget how they relied on you, how much you gave them.

Time passes. The People Upstairs thrive and share their wealth with their neighbours. The neighbours compliment them on their beautiful house. And then, one day, some newer people arrive.

"Can we please come in?" they ask, and the People Upstairs respond just as you did a long time ago — with compassion and even interest at all the new faces and languages and clothes and foods. "Yes, and here's a room you can have. Dinner is at seven. Let's do

potluck."

The newer people settle in upstairs. They love the house (because it is a really great place) and they are eager to belong to it. But they wonder, who are those people in the basement?

The People Upstairs get a little embarrassed. "Oh," they say, "those are the Basement People." It occurs to them that they should invite the Basement People upstairs. They send an invite: "Join us at the table and bring bannock. Dinner is at seven."

You see where I'm going with this.

I'm not trying to argue that we should stop celebrating diversity, absolutely not. I love difference. I don't want Canada to be some pale, blended soup. But for Indigenous people, multiculturalism is like the dinner party upstairs. And when we argue that we should just celebrate diversity, that we don't need a June 21 (or any other "special" treatment for Indigenous people), we are forgetting whose house we are living in.

Lisa Schmidt, born and raised in Thunder Bay, but has travelled to various places for education, returning home permanently (she believes) in 2017. She holds a PhD in media studies from the University of Texas at Austin, a master of arts in religious studies from the University of Toronto, a juris doctor from the University of Toronto, and a bachelor of arts honours degree in religious studies from McGill University. She has worked in the field of Indigenous education for over 10 years that reflects her commitment to social justice and the value and importance of education. Lisa is currently employed at Confederation College as a program manager at the Negahneewin Research Centre. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.