

Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage inspires songwriter's tribute to healing and hope

The Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage had such an impact on Craig Ginn, he created a song and video about it.

"I was at the Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage and was so impacted by it that I thought, that's a story that I can retell in a song," said Ginn, who teaches religious studies at the University of Calgary and writes and records songs in his spare time.

"I was really quite moved by the spirit of genuineness and vulnerability that is there."

The annual Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage normally attracts thousands of pilgrims, mostly First Nations and Metis people, to the lake west of Edmonton. While the pilgrimage itself is more than 130 years old, Indigenous people considered it a sacred place for generations before that. They come to Lac Ste Anne in prayer, seeking St. Anne's intercession and healing for themselves and their loved ones.

But this summer the COVID-19 pandemic forced the July 25-29 pilgrimage to go online.

The Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage song "Walk with me" is part of a series of 10 songs Ginn, his wife Carla and others have written and recorded. They are in the process of making videos to go with each. How they will be made public is yet to be determined, but they will be a part of the University of Calgary's Indigenous engagement strategy.



The Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage song "Walk with me" is part of a series of 10 songs Ginn, his wife Carla and others have written and recorded. Courtesy of Famira Racy

Other songs and videos Ginn created include "Let justice roll," which was influenced by his work at an Indigenous youth orientation event at the U of C, and a TV panel discussion on the mixed legacy of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, in his relations with First Nations.

"I thought I'd write these songs, do some videos for them, and then be able to do educational presentations," Ginn explained. "That was really the extent of what I thought they would be. When I saw that the Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage was going to go virtual, I thought maybe I could offer a song to that community. Maybe it could be a helpful resource."

Ginn had visited Lac Ste Anne in the past, but last year was his first visit to the pilgrimage along with his wife, daughter Aron and a group from Region 3 of the Metis Nation of Alberta. He wrote "Walk with me" soon after that visit.

The video was created by Monique Riel, a research assistant funded by the U of C and Rupertsland Institute – affiliated with the Metis Nation of Alberta – through the Indigenous Summer Student Program. The images used in the video include archived photos from past pilgrimages; many are from Steve Simon, author of the book *Healing Waters: The Pilgrimage of Lac Ste Anne*.

Prior to attending the pilgrimage, Ginn viewed the healing that pilgrims experience there from an academic perspective, allowing only that "I believe that you believe what you believe."

That changed when a pilgrim, a stranger to him, asked if Ginn could make phone call on his behalf.

"I didn't even ask him why. He said he wasn't allowed to use a phone right now or own any form of technology because he was working through an addiction episode in his life and he wanted to call his mom.

"That was not an academic moment for me. That was a very personal moment where I lent him my phone," Ginn said. "And he said, 'Actually can you dial the number and get my mom on the phone and tell her it's me?' Then academics was just pushed aside for me. I saw the real journey in his eyes. He was there for healing and hope. It was a very different perspective – the personal, the real, the vulnerable."

In the last few years Ginn, a Metis from northern Manitoba, developed a growing interest in working with Indigenous students and scholars at the U of C. The institution's Indigenous strategy encompasses the entire university from the lands it sits on to curriculum, supporting scholars, policies, and student and community engagement. Roughly 900 to 1,000 students claim Indigenous heritage,

or about three per cent of the student body. The hope is to grow that number.



Michael Hart

Michael Hart, the university's vice-provost of Indigenous engagement, hope the songs and videos – including the one on the Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage – raise questions and prompt viewers to want to learn more about Indigenous issues and culture.

"It impacts you in terms of having an emotional connection to the pilgrimage," said Hart, although he hasn't attended the Lac Ste Anne event personally. "You get a sense of community, a sense of acceptance, and a sense of people coming together to connect in a supportive kind of way."

"I've kind of found a niche in a surprising way through music," Ginn said. "Most songs take me a long time to write. I get up early in the morning, pick up my guitar, grab a cup of coffee and go down into the basement. My wife will often join me and we'll think through ideas."

It took about six to eight weeks to write "Walk with me" along with Carla and a friend who is a singer-songwriter and recording engineer. That process took Ginn back to his pilgrimage visit.

"I'm so aware of so many failures of Canadian governments, provincial and federal, failure of Christian denominations and traditions, in the missionary impulse in forcing religion and in many cases abusing Indigenous communities and individuals," Ginn said.

"The darker side is in the back of my mind, and then to get to a space where there is a more cooperative spirit, where you have Indigenous pathways and ways of knowing honoured by the Catholic Church in that setting, that was an

impression I still have.

“It’s like I was there yesterday seeing it for the first time,” Ginn said. “They’re walking in a good way here and we need to see more of that and hopefully nurture more of that.”

Ginn hopes to visit Lac Ste Anne regularly and – barring COVID-19 restrictions – to attend the pilgrimage in person again next year.