



Cory Bilyea photos

The R2R 2024 rural assembly's theme for 2024 was Exploring Our Differences Together. This year's conference included a guided nature walk with local knowledge keepers Sheila Robson and Ken Albert. From left: Maitland Valley Conservation Authority General Manager Phil Beard, Sheila Robson, Ken Albert and Chris Lee, G2G trail association. Right: A large group of participants joined the guided nature walk on the G2G Rail Trail to learn about how the trail nurtures community and Indigenous connection to land.

## Connecting with the Land: Indigenous knowledge keepers lead reflective trail walk at R2R conference in Blyth

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BLYTH - The R2R 2024 (R2R24) assembly returned to Blyth at the Memorial Community Hall for the Canadian Centre for Rural Creativity's 10th anniversary. The 'Rural Assembly' theme for 2024 was Exploring Our Differences Together.

This year's conference explored key rural issues and opportunities, including the impact of artificial intelligence (AI)/data on rural communities, innovation in economic development, and leading practices and research.

Several keynote speakers and signature events, including several Indigenous voices, took place over the two-day conference, held Oct. 16-18.

Chippewa's of Nawash knowledge keeper Sheila Robson and her husband, Ken Albert, who is from the Chippewa of the Thames, guided a nature walk along the G2G Rail Trail.

Many conference participants joined the

'Nature Walk: How the G2G Rail Trail Nurtures Community' to meet and listen to the guides as they learned more about Indigenous connections to the land.

Robson, whose Anishinabe name loosely translates to Northern Lights and Fire Woman, encouraged the participants to "use your ears while you're in the bush, because there are lots of birds that will come around, and they're talking, and, you know, they're making noise, and they're singing." She suggested that the birds may have messages to convey.

She described the connection with the land, trees, plants, and stones and invited the observers to engage with the environment during the walk.

She emphasized the importance of "listening to the land and the water." She suggested that the participants may "feel a sensation through your body when you're walking through a specific area of the trail," which could provide insights.

Robson and Albert encouraged the par-

ticipants to be open to the messages and teachings that the natural elements, such as the trees, plants, and stones, may have to share during the walk.

The overall message is that the natural world has wisdom and guidance, and the participants are encouraged to listen with their hearts and senses to receive these teachings.

The group walked along the G2G Rail Trail to the old railroad crossing bridge, where they stopped to listen to Robson describe her connection to the land and the emotions she felt as she stood there.

A hush fell over the crowd when Robson began to sing a traditional Anishinabe welcoming song, and several spectators were moved to tears at the overwhelming emotions they felt when they spontaneously joined hands, creating a circle of indescribable energy.

Many of the participants expressed their enjoyment of this nature walk, engaging in private conversations with Robson and

Albert on the way back to the conference.

### About R2R

The Rural Talks to Rural (R2R) biennial conference has become a staple in Huron County since 2016. This event supports rural development in Ontario through its connections, and collaborative initiatives, in rural and remote communities across Canada.

The first conference held at the Blyth Fairgrounds in 2016 brought together people from across the region to connect/network, explore rural issues, and take home shareable ideas. Four subsequent R2R conferences have made this a signature event on the Ontario rural landscape.

These conferences fulfill a need and offer an opportunity in rural Ontario as they provide a meeting place and space to come together and connect with different stakeholders who support rural development. Most importantly this conference is about rural people talking to rural people.

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