

Ceramic poppies set to paint Aurora red



By Brock Weir

In the lead up to the 100th anniversary of the First World War, images of the Tower of London bathed in a growing sea of red as ceramic poppies ? one for each fallen soldier ? filling the landmark's millennium-old moat became instantly iconic.

As Canada prepares to mark the 150th anniversary of Confederation on July 1, however, this same kind of garden ? albeit significantly smaller in scale and spread across a wider area ? is set to take root in Aurora thanks to the Pine Tree Potters Guild, Meridian Credit Union, and the Royal Canadian Legion.

Hands are hard at work in the Pine Tree Potters' studio this week putting the finishing touches on 150 handmade and hand painted ceramic poppies, each as unique as a snowflake which, come Canada Day, will be ready for sale to the general public to support the Legion's ?Raise the Roof? campaign.

Pine Tree's Cathy Harris says she was inspired to bring this initiative to Aurora after learning about a hugely successful campaign along similar lines being spearheaded by a Royal Canadian Legion branch near Cambridge, ON.

Connecting with a local pottery group, they collectively set a goal of creating and selling 100 poppies but their idea soon went viral on social media and their output mushroomed to 364.

?It was a great fundraiser for the Legion and we thought it would be a good fundraiser for us to do or our Legion to celebrate the 150th,? says Ms. Harris. ?We approached the Legion and asked if we could do that to celebrate Canada's 150th and that's where we are.?

But that is only part of the story.

Before the Pine Tree Potters started getting their hands dirty on this particular project, Ms. Harris happened to be at a function with a representative of the local Meridian Credit Union on Wellington Street East and took the opportunity to ask Branch Manager Nancy Bedford if they had gotten on board with any community efforts to mark the Sesquicentennial.

As it happened, they hadn't ? and they soon stepped up with a \$500 contribution to bring the project to fruition.

?I went to the Guild two days later and I said I already had the sponsorship and asked how they would feel about doing this, and they were very keen,? says Ms. Harris. ?The Guild has committed to making the 150. We have a template to do it with, they can make them either at home or at the studio, and we have had three workshops already.?

By Friday morning, 75 poppies were complete and ready for painting.

Of course, to say the Aurora Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion welcomed the initiative is an understatement. For the last two years they have been in the midst of their Raise the Roof Campaign, an initiative to bring in \$135,000 to replace the expansive roof on their equally expansive Industrial Parkway Drive North Facility.

Raise the Roof was initiated by Dave Franklin, the former Legion President who died this past April just days after handing over the presidency to Ken White. Mr. White continues the campaign and is eager to get the new poppies moving to new homes all around Aurora.

?It was brought to our attention and I actually called the other Legion that was doing and talked to them about it,? says Mr. White.

?They said it was a great idea and it was taking off for them. We talked to the management here and we thought we would try it and see how it works out. We are very excited about it.?

Members of the public will have their first chance to see the field of completed poppies on the morning of Canada Day. They will be ?planted? outside the Guild's studio at the Aurora Public Library at the corner of Yonge Street and Church just in time for the annual Canada Day Parade to pass by.

As soon as the parade passes, however, Legionnaires will be close by to gather them all up, load them into vehicles, and hurry them over to the Legion once the Canada Day festivities head over to the adjacent Lambert Willson Park and Aurora Family Leisure Complex.

There, people can purchase the poppies for their own house and garden for \$50.

?On behalf of the Legion we really want to make sure that potters guild know how much we appreciate what they are doing,? says Mr. White. ?It just fell into our lap and it is a wonderful opportunity for us to do exactly what we need to do around the Branch.

?For me, it is about the remembrance throughout the whole year. We still have the signs we put on the front lawn or in the gardens that we started a while back with Dave Franklin and the idea is that you remember all year round and not just at Remembrance time. I hope that is what these continue to do to make sure people remember in the middle of summer and the middle of Christmastime it is nice to remember them and the nice life we have here because of them.?