

## ‘Don’t take a single breath for granted?’



Take a moment to stand still and hold your breath as long as you can.

Do you feel the struggle? A surge of strength? A wobble of weakness?

When you can't hold your breath any longer, exhale, and take another breath in.

That simple action can be a precious thing, says artist and architect Roxana Farrell, and one that shouldn't be taken for granted.

That is the simple but potent message Ms. Farrell wants people to leave with when they pass by her Larmont Street home, just east of the historic Aurora Armoury.

There, on her front lawn, Ms. Farrell has installed ‘I Can't Breathe’, a public art display in memory of George Floyd, the Black man killed at the hands of police in Minnesota earlier this year which sparked global waves of demonstrations against anti-Black racism and in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Made from wood, the abstract piece ebbs and flows, as it spells out words gasped by George Floyd as a police boot pressed down on his neck: ‘I can't breathe.’

‘I chose wood for a very specific reason,’ says Ms. Farrell. ‘Wood has an evolution of life. I thought, in relation to George Floyd, wood has this element of rebirth. It grows from a seed, it is used in lumber and timber, but it drops its seeds and gives life again. In a way, with George Floyd, his death wasn't in vain, it brought life again; it has brought an attention towards this very dark issue that has been around for hundreds of years and it still isn't resolved.’

From Ms. Farrell's perspective, it was Mr. Floyd's begging for air that helped galvanize the world.

‘When you're begging for the most fundamental thing of life, I think that drew people,’ she says. ‘How can you not just take your foot off a person's neck? It is also the fact there's cameras now. There were so many cameras and with the internet, it goes viral and everyone can know about it very fast.’

Ms. Farrell knows the reality of anti-Black racism after living on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border.

The situation is much the same on either side of the divide, she says.

'It is not just in the States, it is right here - the tactics might not be as brutal, but it is still there and it is almost to the point of, 'We're going to fight for that cause, just as long as you don't come to our neighbourhood.' That is the reality and once you enter into the neighbourhood, so to speak, then you are watched.'

Aurora, she says, is not immune to this way of thinking.

She gives what she describes as a 'middle of the road example' as the 'worst and the best might be a bit too much.'

That middle road came approximately eight years ago when she began work on her century home, now known as The Blueprint House for its bold blue paint with white markings inspired by architect drawings.

'I was taking off the [old] siding - a homeowner can do that - but, in the course of me taking off siding I had nine government officials [come by],' she says, before pausing. 'I can barely say it because it is almost fresh. I couldn't believe it. They were questioning me. Because I am an architect, I know good and well there is no bylaw that says you can't take off your own siding. People will say, 'Oh, that is a coincidence,' or 'Oh, that has nothing to do with skin colour,' but it absolutely does because that would not happen to another neighbour that is not my skin colour. I was shocked and dumbfounded, but I just kept plugging away because I knew very well there was nothing anyone could do.'

But, did this challenge galvanize her forward or cause her to shrink back?

'That's the thing about racial equality,' she says. 'When you're born with a pigmentation, you learn very early to fight,' she says. 'Within this community, I have been told, 'You're angry,' and they put these titles on you. The reality is it is really unfair that because of your pigmentation you have to go that extra mile. You have to stand taller, you have to stand your ground, and when that wrong is thrust upon you, you have to stand tall and say, 'No, this is wrong.' Did I press on? Of course!'

The resulting Blueprint House stands just a stone's throw, fittingly, from Town Park, which was the site of a thousand-person Solidarity March inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. Ms. Farrell says she was thrilled such an event was able to take place here as it is important for people to understand, 'If injustice happens to one, it happens to all.'

Now, her art stands as testimony to that sentiment.

'Artists have a very important responsibility for changing the human condition and I find that, through art, you are able to speak change in a more gentle yet strong way,' she says. 'It has that strength and softness. People can enter into art a little bit easier than through an all-out confrontation. It is not necessarily just through speaking and yelling, but maybe it is easier entering through something like art.'

'I want people to take away the urgency, that we need to unify our differences, unify our ethnicities. We are a multicultural society and all our voices need to be heard.'

**By Brock Weir**