

A taste of home, a love letter to family nets prize for budding filmmaker



By Brock Weir

A kitchen is often at the heart of home and family. It's a place where people create, share ideas, pass down time-honoured traditions and come together to share a meal.

Aurora's Jaiden Pugar grew up watching his grandmother, Vera, making cookies. When he came to her house as a child, there was always a fresh batch waiting for him. When Vera came to visit, another fresh batch was in the offing. In Jaiden's mind, those crescent-shaped vanillekipferl, known within the family as 'U Cookies' are inextricably linked with his grandmother and his sense of family, and now he's shining a light on these links through film.

Jaiden was joined by Vera at the Aurora Seniors' Centre on Wednesday afternoon to show his resulting short film and receive a cheque for \$1,000 - the first prize in Heart to Home Meals' 'Show A Little Heart' video competition.

Now in its second year, Heart to Home Meals' video competition aims to highlight the benefit of intergenerational relationships.

The competition first hit Jaiden's radar last year as a film student at York University, but he had to put his idea on the backburner for a few months. Yet he never wavered on his idea: he had to tell the story of Vera - whom he calls Baka - and the light and sweet treats that have satisfied the hunger pangs of three generations of his family.

'Baka and I go way back,' said Jaiden in his video narration. 'We have been friends forever. We have

always been a very close family. I would make countless visits to Baka's and on each and every visit, I knew I could count on her to make a fresh batch of those sweet, soft U cookies. Have you ever had a certain food associate so strongly with a place? When I take a long and hard look back at those times, I can almost smell them.

?As delicious as they are, these cookies are very special to me for more than just the taste. Baka came from a very small village in Croatia and continues to live the very traditional lifestyle that she was brought up in. As time went on, it became more difficult to talk to Baka and relate with her. As the speed and intensity of my life increased, Baka's drastically slowed down. I feel the U cookies she makes are not only a connection to memories of the past, but as a symbol of the relationship I have with her.?

The video, just shy of five minutes in length, packs in a lot of story.

Jaiden shares snippets of Vera's relationship with her late husband, Jaiden's grandfather. He also provides insight into Vera's life now, living with her daughter Lillian and creating new memories in the kitchen.

?When [my grandfather] passed away from lung cancer, it really took a toll on everyone, especially Baka,? Jaiden shares. ?Visiting had become a lot less frequent in recent years, but Baka and I need to see each other now more than ever. The memories of time spent with loved ones are stored and cherished deep inside our hearts; but the time we have to create them is limited more and more each day. As busy as my life is, the last thing I would want to do is put someone or something over family. She said that she would always be there for me. Don't worry, Baka, I will always be there for you.?

Prior to the presentation by Heart to Home Meals, Jaiden, 20, shared with The Auroran, that he was interested in taking up the film competition's challenge of capturing ?a little moment and process that is going on, something that was nostalgic and sweet ? and ?sweet' is those cookies and how they are made. I could talk things over the making of them.?

?This wasn't scripted, but we chatted a lot and I got footage of [Vera and Lillian] talking,? he said. ?Then, I had to ask myself how I can put this together to fully make a story? Then, I had to go deep within my memories to find the right stuff and what worked. I want people [who see the film to see] that family is really important and cookies can be used as a symbol of the closeness of a relationship. As time went on and my life became busier, we'd visit each other a bit less. She wasn't able to make them as much and it was just kind of a reminder that even if things are in the way you always have to have a special priority for family.?

Jaiden will put his \$1,000 prize cheque towards another short film, one he describes as a "bit of a horror romance."

As the film streamed at the Seniors' Centre, a smile rarely left Vera's face. After one Centre member asked her to share the recipe for U Cookies, she said participating in the video was "very emotional."

"It means the world to me," she said. "He's a beautiful grandson."

To view the film, visit youtube.com/watch?v=icyQ_A92S0Y.