

Cullen is on the search for Aurora's ?Untold Stories?



By Brock Weir

Lauren Cullen recently sat down with a man who knows her workplace all too well.

Pointing out a corner, he recalled there used to be a water fountain installed on the spot where, once upon a time, he was dragged over and had his mouth washed out with soap for swearing in school.

For students of a certain age ? and a certain disposition ? that may have simply been a day in the life, but for Ms. Cullen, a Queen's University student and lifetime Aurora resident, there is a certain beauty in the ordinary that makes it extraordinary.

She is on a mission this summer to record all these ?Untold Stories? in a new history initiative being undertaken by the Aurora Cultural Centre to compile a first-hand history of the Church Street School.

The Church Street School is a building Ms. Cullen often passed as she grew up, one of countless historic local buildings that fired her imagination and now she has a chance to satisfy that singular itch in finding out what made this building, and the people who went to school here, tick.

?I want to know everything about them, even what people would think are the most mundane things like what you thought when you came here,? she says of her project, which will come to fruition in a so-called walking museum that will be part of Doors Open Aurora on August 20. ?I want to know what this building really meant to them and that is the message I want to get across.

?The little things like [getting your mouth washed out with soap at the water fountain] just amaze me. After you hear that, you come into this building and it just has a completely new life to it that wouldn't have been attained if I didn't hear the stories from people in the past.?

The bones of this project are the brainchild of Laura Schembri and Jane Taylor of the Aurora Cultural Centre, who have had something like this in the backs of their minds for quite some time, Lauren explains. They wanted to uncover the stories, but they were very open in terms of creative liberties.?

The initial idea was creating a brochure for people, but things took a turn when Lauren started to dig.

On a trip to the York Region Archives, she was able to uncover most of the attendance records from the former Aurora High School, which once called the building home, and the Church Street School. Coupled with the material in the Aurora Museum and Archives, she was able to match attendance with photos taken in each class each year.

She proudly points to a roll call of Room 6 from 1921 and a photo of a class full of eager young faces in that very room from that very year.

?It is like a puzzle where you find a new piece and take it in that direction,? she says, adding Cultural Centre Staff have taken down the names of those who attended the school as they happened into the revamped building since it opened, putting Lauren in touch with them to record their memories.

She knows there are many more stories to be uncovered ? and more details on how you can share yours will follow ? but there is less time in which to dig.

?I think as much as this is a condensed eight week project, it is just going to keep growing and growing because there are so many

people who have gone here and so many people who are connected and still here,? she say. ?Every single time I do an interview and just listen to the person talk about what interests them, things come out I never would have even talked of. The things that people think are their most treasured memories just add so much more colour than I ever would have thought.

?We are hoping in the future there will be an interactive website or snippets online that people can listen to for interviews that have been conducted and it will just keep growing.?

Once the job is done, however, Lauren will be back in Kingston to undertake her Masters in English. It might not seem a natural fit for a budding historian, but she says it is all about creating a narrative and telling a story.

Uncovering the stories of the Church Street School has lit another spark in her, this time much closer to home.

?After an interview I wonder why I haven't asked my own family some of these questions and that is something other people need to start doing, too,? she says, noting she has talked with her grandparents all about the Second World War and the great milestones in their life, but there's much more to find out.

?So many thousands of children came through [the Church Street School]. This may have shape their life in a way we don't know. A Grade 1 experience could have made one child become a teacher, or a Grade 4 experience may have made a child not want to pursue academics at all. We don't know that kind of stuff and those are the things I would like to ask my grandparents: how did it shape your life and influence you. We focus on huge events, but the ordinary is much more extraordinary than we think.?

If you ever spent time as a student in the Church Street School building, contact Lauren at the Aurora Cultural Centre by calling 905-713-1818 or email untoldstories@auroraculturalcentre.ca.

And, if you had a sense of déjà vu thinking you had read this article before, that's because you have. Last week's edition of The Auroran ran the story, attributing the project to Leanne Dimonte (R) at the Cultural Centre. We are re-running the story to correctly attribute this fine project to Ms. Cullen (L), also of the Aurora Cultural Centre, and apologize for the error. They offered to provide a handy guide above to illustrate who's who.