

Hillary House offers kids a summer of Discovery



By Brock Weir

If you're looking for family activities over the summer that are just a little bit outside the norm, take a second look at Hillary House National Historic Site.

Here, on Wednesdays and Saturdays through August 23, families are invited to come out and participate in crafts and activities that will give youngsters a play-based learning experience centred on resources right here in our community with Discovery Days for Kids.

Facilitated by teacher Leigha Cooney, along with summer students Claire Layton and Robert Hess, if you think this is merely an opportunity to sit around a musty, old museum, think again.

It is a long-standing tradition of Hillary House and the Aurora Historical Society, one which has been re-tooled by Cooney to be relevant to today's young Aurorans.

"Last year I redeveloped four out of the five programs to put my own spin on it trying to tie in a lot of the themes of the House to the programs," says Ms. Cooney, highlighting the "Medical Detectives" theme built around Hillary House's other identity as the Koffler Museum of Medicine, "Nature Detectives," which makes use of the National Historic Site's expansive grounds, and arts and crafts programs.

"I am a teacher and I really find that play-based learning is more valuable than just sitting and looking through a museum," she says. "Hands-on is a better way of learning. I want these activities to be fun, but to still have some educational priority in it and that is what I look to when designing the programs."

In addition to Medical Detectives, Nature Detectives and the arts and crafts components, campers and their parents will have a chance to get a guided tour of Hillary House, which includes a scavenger hunt to make things a bit more exciting than your average tour.

"For a lot of young people coming in, a big old house like this can be overwhelming and there are so many bits of history they don't know," says Layton. "To focus in on one thing like Medical Detectives, we can talk about the history of the property, a little bit about the history of Aurora, and if they learn just one thing it is rewarding."

For Cooney, it is also about connecting local kids with their local history and indeed their local community at large. Living in Toronto, she says many people are not fully aware of the smaller museums in their neighbourhoods, but programs like these can shine a light on the unknown and foster a love of history that comes from their very own neck of the woods.

"That is the big goal we have here," she says.

"These things really help parents connect with their kids too in terms of local history so they can point to things the kids are learning right in their own back yards rather than having to go down to the ROM and have this kind of generic experience a lot of high school or elementary school kids have," adds Robert. "We usually find by the end of the day, the kids that are really enjoying it, don't want to leave and their parents have to say, 'We'll come back another day,'" adds Hess.

That is, of course, music to the ears of everyone concerned, as Discovery Days for Kids is run on a purely walk-in basis with no

pre-registration required, and all available at a minimal cost.

The best campers ? and there are no pre-requisites ? are anyone who has a ?willingness to learn and have fun.? The only thing they ask is for parents to stay with their kids for the duration of the program.

?From the parents I have spoken to, they are very interested in not only learning about the House themselves, but they are happy their children are having fun,? says Cooney, adding that many of this year's activities have had a focus on Canada 150. ?Last year, we had a Back to School theme and one of the kids who came out was a newcomer to Aurora who knew very little English. She was trying to teach me words in her language ad I was trying to learn the words and get a full idea of how their learning happened. They too seemed quite willing to enjoy themselves and by the end of the day everyone was smiling. Whenever a kid goes away smiling, having fun, and do more things at the House is always the rewarding aspect.?

For a full schedule of the Aurora Historical Society's Discovery Days for Kids, visit www.aurorahs.com or call 905-727-8991. The sessions run \$5 per child and \$2 per adult and take place Wednesdays and Saturdays from 1.30 ? 3.30 p.m. Theme days include Medical Detectives (July 29, August 9), Dig It! (August 12), Arts & Crafts (August 2, August 23), and Nature Seekers (August 5, August 16).