

New program aims to bring hometown history and hometown stories into the classroom



By Brock Weir

As Pamela Pal rummaged through the archives, she uncovered the details of an Aurora boy who died of his wounds sustained in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917.

It was in a booklet that was, in those days, often the only memento families received of their fallen loved ones when repatriation was just a dream rather than the standard we've come to appreciate today.

"That hit me the hardest," says Ms. Pal. "It wasn't just a bunch of people fighting who you don't know. When you see that this family had their son buried all the way on the other side of the world and they couldn't bring him back home, that was the emotion I was trying to get."

She hopes to share this emotion and, in turn, the story of Robert Stewart Hillary, the 20 year old scion of the Hillary family now lying in northern France, with students.

The Markham native has hit the ground running as the Aurora Historical Society's new education coordinator, tasked with developing the resources in the Hillary House collection and turning them into programs and artefacts which can be taken to local schools to drive home key planks in the Ontario education curriculum.

After getting her feet wet very quickly in the thousands of artefacts available to her, Ms. Pal has developed a four prong approach to going out into the schools. The first is a Grade 1 program focusing on the "Local Community"; the second is a unit on "Victorian Life" for grade eight students.

Things get more in-depth for high school students with "The World Wars" for Grade 10 students and "Changes in Health Care" for Grade 12 students.

"When I was in elementary school, I thought everything was straight out of a textbook," says Ms. Pal. "I feel as though my experiences with not being able to learn about history the way I wanted to is what inspired me to come to this place where I really want children to learn about it and see that it is important."

Ms. Pal spent the better part of last week at Hillary House preparing educational packages, scheduling meetings with schools, and eventually heading out to the targeted schools to meet with principals and history heads to get the program rolling. They hope to

have all the connections made and logistics worked out with the schools this winter for a full roll-out in February. Feedback has been 'fantastic' so far, she says.

Before she joined the AHS team this summer and really getting to the planning stages in August, Ms. Pal studied at York University for history and the humanities before getting her Bachelor of Education at the University of Toronto and her Masters in Public History from the University of Western Ontario.

A teacher who has trained in the classroom, her love of history propelled her out of the classroom towards museum work.

'As much as I love classroom teaching, I wanted to be able to teach kids in a different setting,' she says. 'What appealed to me with this opportunity with the Aurora Historical Society was giving children a hands-on atmosphere where they can interact with objects on a different level.'

'I think a lot of us are used to going into museums where you look at objects from behind the glass, or you have someone speaking to you about it; but to actually take them out of packages and, in some cases, even handle, is completely different. Children get a lot more out of it when they are able to handle an artefact. It brings a much more personal connection.'

Essentially given free rein to explore the collection and get a handle of the resources available, the only criteria given to her by AHS Curator Catherine Richards and the Board, was it had to be founded and based in the Ontario curriculum. With that in mind, she focused on two units for elementary school students and two for secondary school students. A fifth secondary school component has also been developed focusing on handling and interpreting primary documents like letters and diaries.

'[Schools] have told me right away they think this is great for the community and [fills] a need to have something like this because you don't always get into the history of your own area at school,' she says. 'It tends to be 'bigger' Canadian history and world history. They seem to be really enthusiastic about the idea of bringing forward a more personal connection.'

Given her background, Hillary House is increasingly seeming like a perfect fit. The House's extensive medical collection was not completely alien to Ms. Pal, having worked in the past at the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame. Being able to handle medical equipment in both that context and at Hillary House was also important to her in deciding how she wanted to select items to appeal to the kids 'so students can expect to see a lot of medical equipment coming their way. Except for saws 'schools are tending to frown towards that.

'I have really come to love Aurora history through doing this program,' she concludes. 'It's great to hear the stories and the personal connections. I am really hoping we do the program justice and give everyone a sense of the history that is right around them.'