

School board marks 100th anniversary of Chinese Exclusion Act with new exhibition

2023 marks the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act, a piece of legislation banning most Chinese immigration to Canada and now the history of the Chinese community locally has come into sharp focus at the York Region District School Board.

Standing in the Doorway: Lived History & Experiences in the Chinese Community is a new virtual exhibition launched by the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) Museum & Archives. Developed in partnership with the Markham Museum, the exhibition ties in with the YRDSB's goal to ensure our students and families see themselves, their identities and cultures reflected in the classroom, says Museum Curator Rebekah Mitchell.

We were honoured to partner with Markham Museum, students, staff, and so many others to help share the stories of the Chinese community in York Region, says Mitchell. We hope that educators, families and community members can use this virtual exhibit to learn more about the rich Chinese culture and history here in York Region and to spark conversations about their own identities.

Mitchell tells The Auroran that the exhibition was inspired by resident Nancy Soo who impressed upon her the importance of this anniversary year. Soo, she says, asked what the Museum could do to share the stories and talk about the impact of the Act on the community.

Based on that conversation, I knew it was going to be a really big project and something that was really significant to be talking about, says Mitchell. I approached the Markham Museum, which has a beautiful space that is very accessible to the public, and I talked to Janet Reid about the potential of doing a collaboration.

We have chatted about this and Janet and I are both not from the Chinese community here in York Region, so we really found that it was important to be able to have this as a community-guided exhibition. We have been working with community to be learning and talking to the stories they want to be talking about. We partnered with the University of Toronto, their Museum Studies program, and we had four students who did research, they conducted interviews with community members, leaders, politicians, former students, teachers, to be able to talk about what it means to be Chinese Canadian and what makes York Region their home. These questions and their answers really guided how this exhibition all came about and the community gave in their responses even today, continuing to give us responses and connect us with artefacts, photographs, with memories it has been something that is continuing to grow.

Growing up in Markham, Mitchell says a lot of her friends are second-generation Canadians, some of whom hadn't heard about the Chinese Exclusion Act. Being able to talk about this through history and the impact it had on immigration to York Region and Canada is an experience that has been rewarding for me and it has become something very personal.

Adds Reid: We want to tell the story of resilience and perseverance of an important community in Markham and York Region. The Chinese community is underrepresented in our exhibition schedule and our museum collections. This community-driven exhibit will celebrate our Chinese residents, and also engage and educate the wider community through the multi-part virtual and touring exhibition program.

Currently an online exhibition, Standing in the Doorway will become an in-person and travelling exhibition, first at the Markham Museum in September.

In addition to the community oral histories that will be featured in the exhibition, educational kits will be shared with educators in the fall, said the YRDSB. Students and staff at Nokiidaa P.S. helped test and frame the educational kits that will accompany the traveling exhibition.

In a statement, Grade 7 student Serena said she was eager to bring awareness to the community.

?It was quite frustrating for me to learn about how there was a Chinese Exclusion Act in Canada, because you know how sometimes you think Canada is a wonderful place, none of this could happen, but the Chinese Exclusion Act happened and I'm still seeing some discrimination [against] Chinese people,? she said. ?I think this is a really good idea to appreciate Chinese culture.?

Added fellow student Edith: ?I wish that people would learn more about our culture since we?showed many things like arts, games, toys and tools, so with all of that information, since they'll get to know more about our culture, it will break culture gaps.?

To view the online exhibition, visit www2.yrdsb.ca/standing-doorway.

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