

"April Ghouls" tour aims to lend voice to voiceless on World Autism Day



By Brock Weir

Over 10 years ago, Dave Heard met a young man who was kicking and screaming on the floor.

At the time, the boy's quality of life could best be described as low. It was difficult for the young guy to find his place in the world, but Mr. Heard was struck by his indomitable spirit.

They first met when Mr. Heard walked through the door of Kerry's Place Autism Services on Berczy Street and, over the next year and a half, they worked with a diligent team to improve this young man's lot in life. By the time he was a teen, they were able to take him to fun events and participate in society.

His life, however, was cut short, and when Mr. Heard was 'labouring over' the boy he supported, he was inspired by his spirit to create the Aurora Spirit Walk, a walking tour through Aurora's quirky, kooky, and spooky past.

'He had such an incredible spirit and it was his incredible ability to overcome adversity having autism,' says Mr. Heard.

These walks, which have become an enduring Aurora tradition, are typically held in the lead-up to Hallowe'en, but this year, the tour returns for a one-night-only event April 2, beginning at Kerry's Place in a special event to mark World Autism Day.

'Recently, we had an individual, an early adult,' Mr. Heard continues. 'She is non-verbal with autism, came to us over a year ago, and has now been diagnosed with ALS. With her, it suddenly hit me when World Autism Day came up, here are two people who have impacted my life and the team around them so greatly, that I contacted the people who helped me with the ghost tours to put something together.'

With everything unfolding the day after April Fools, everyone was on board for the one-off 'April Ghouls' tour.

'This is a one-shot deal to honour all the people who are gifted with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and it kind of fits,' says Mr. Heard. 'It starts in front of Kerry's Place and Kerry's Place is part of the old Sisman Shoe Factory. In autism, we always use the phrase, 'a walk in their shoes,' the ability to be empathetic and know what someone else, especially someone with autism, how they function day to day. Most of us couldn't even imagine.

'In some ways, I think some people with autism are invisible. They struggle to find their place or be accepted in their community, or we try to make them fit in the community when it is their own community. How they fit is their choice.'

In many ways, this makes a ghost tour even more fitting. The spirits, he says, are invisible, and he sites a particular instance at the Filly & Firkin Pub when he says the spirit of a woman came through with a message that had to be conveyed through non-verbal communication.

“I am going to take the spirit of a lot of these stories, and people communicating these stories, but I am also going to communicate some incredible ways some of the people I have met [have had an impact],” says Mr. Heard. “A lot of times, we only get to hear the negative stories. This is showcasing through street theatre a message wrapped around a little theatrics. I am going to do my darndest to get that message out there that these people are incredible people.”

“At Kerry's Place, we try to help individuals enhance the quality of life for people with autism and it really is the opposite; people with autism, for almost a decade, have enhanced my quality of life because they have made me look at the world differently, that everybody deserves a chance, and the only way that chance can happen is through really good communication. And that is all I am good at.” storytelling is the one gift I have that rises above all. I am going to be selfish for one day and, for the people who are non-verbal, I am going to be their voice and hopefully I can help them be heard.”

To lend an ear to these voices, tickets for the April Ghouls tour are now on sale for \$15. Proceeds support Kerry's Place Autism Services. For more information, visit creepytours.com.