

Canadian Library installation shines light on MMIWG by sharing stories, showcasing beauty



Bonnie Jack.

Dodi Brunette

Hazel Coombs.

Leslie Talley.

Brittany Bearspaw.

Lorraine Wray.

You might see their names on the spines of books.

They're not the subjects of best-selling biographies or the authors of their own stories.

But theirs are stories we need to know ? and the latest installation from The Canadian Library initiative is intended to inspire people to delve deeper into who they, and hundreds of other women who share similar tragic storylines, are ? underscoring harsh realities in Canada.

A new micro-branch of The Canadian Library is now installed at the Royal Rose Gallery in Aurora's Downtown Core.

One of hundreds around the country, this latest branch features an array of colourful and evocatively-decorated books, each of which represents individual Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and children. (MMIWG)

The Canadian Library is intended to serve as both a living art installation and a memorial, intended to spark important conversations ?and help educate all Canadians on the true history of Canada and the inequalities that still exist today.?

?I moved to Canada 14 years ago (from Singapore) thinking I was well-educated but I had absolutely no clue there were people in

Canada who still didn't have clean drinking water, that we had so many Indigenous peoples here, and I really didn't know a lot about the history of Canada," says Shanta Sundarason, founder of The Canadian Library, adding she soon realized that a lot of other people didn't truly understand the history, either.

The Canadian Library is the result of this deep dive Sundarason took into the history of her new home. Over the last decade, the organization has been dedicated to education relating to history, lasting and contemporary issues, and reconciliation.

The inspiration for the physical library itself came to Sundarason after a trip to the United Kingdom where she saw an art installation comprised of books covered in African fabric.

"I thought how amazing it would be if I could do something similar, but use the books to represent stories of people," she says. "Books represent stories and if we could use these books to create something beautiful, then we could help share."

From the initial idea came intense brainstorming. A sure sign they were headed in the right direction was the donation of money from six women, and a Billy bookcase for the first library by the daughter of a residential school survivor.

What's contained on the physical pages of the book isn't important; what is important however, are the names of the women on the spines and the authentic Indigenous fabric covering the volumes. With their names in mind, the viewer can go online to find out more about each of their stories at thecanadianlibrary.ca

"Our end goal is for several thousand books and get between 6,000 to 8,000 books covered," says Sundarason. "We're at more than halfway now. At the end, we want to give them to a major art gallery or museum somewhere in Canada like the National Gallery, the AGO or the ROM to house the books; then it will become a permanent teaching tool, even in the design of the fabrics."

For the time being, however, the Royal Rose Gallery is the latest local branch to explore and it will be there until funding allows The Canadian Library's ultimate dream to be realized.

"I have a wonderful group of volunteers and they happen to be retired York Catholic teachers, they brought this project to my attention and asked if I wanted to acquire a little micro-gallery of our own," says Royal Rose owner Rosa Calabrese. "I said absolutely after learning about the project, I feel it is a very important installation to share and I believe our mandates are similar in engage, empower and educate the community."

The York Catholic District School Board is very involved in the initiative as a whole.

Each YCDSB high school has a micro-gallery of their own and students in their Life Skills classes have helped create the beautifully colourful and thoughtful covers.

The Aurora Public Library has also expressed interest in becoming a part of the initiative.

Sundarason says she is "so proud" of the initiative's uptake.

"When the Royal Rose Gallery create it, when the Aurora Public Library create it, they are custodians of their own art installation and that is theirs until we come and collect them and give them back to Canada," she says. "Nobody owns this. Somebody who helps facilitate it, that's how we like to look at it

"We never thought for a moment it would spread so vastly and quite so quickly, to be honest. We're very proud and very grateful for the support and sharing people have done. We just want conversation, a bit of awareness, and once we all know, we understand, then we can change the way we behave moving forward. If we can help create awareness through art and something that is beautiful, but also different, it's thinking outside the box in causing people to stop and look. If we can start these conversations, I think in the next decade, hopefully the conversations will be different."

By Brock Weir