

Gallagher heads to Provincials to prove history is far from boring



By Brock Weir

History is not boring, history is who we are. Those are among the takeaways of York Region students who descended on the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex to give the public a flavour of their history projects in a new spin on a time-honoured tradition.

Dr. G.W. Williams student Rachel Gallagher is a testament to the fact history can be relevant and exciting ? and will have the chance to prove it this week, taking her genealogy project, ?Young Citizen: My Place in Canadian History? to the Provincial Heritage Fair at York University.

Rachel took home the Ontario Genealogical Society Award last month as the Aurora Museum and Archives, the York Region District School Board, and the Aurora Historical Society joined forces to bring the York Region District School Board's Regional Heritage Fair back to Aurora.

?It is important [to bring it back] because one of the big things that came out from all of the students I spoke to was the notion that everybody has a story and everybody's story is part of the larger Canadian narrative,? said Shawna White, Curator for the Aurora Museum and Archives, who also had the opportunity meet with students and evaluate their projects ahead of Provincials. ?It is not just facts and figures, they are these personal stories that just weave together and that is what Canada is. I think people need to understand that. History isn't boring, history is us. It is important for the museum to get that message out that it is not something that is not related to you and doesn't affect you because what we're doing here today is history. We're just always looking for ways to gather those stories, collect them and tell them. This is the perfect opportunity to tell stories that are otherwise not told in the traditional narrative.?

As this writer toured the sea of poster boards, dioramas and audio-visual presentations, he found himself at the receiving end of a pitch from Xan Rathore of Kleinburg Public School.

?Do you know about Lester B. Pearson?? asked Xan, referring not only to the late Prime Minister, but also a proud Aurora hometown boy.

In fact, this writer knew a bit about Pearson, but was happy to let Xan fill in the blanks.

?I was going to do basketball for my project, but then my dad told me about Lester B. Pearson and the more I did some research, I realised he did so many different things like create the Canadian flag, improve the immigration system, and he was the first Canadian to win the Nobel Peace Prize,? he explained. ?I was fascinated and I wanted to let other people know about Lester B. Pearson.?

And he did so with great enthusiasm.

?I want people to know that he was one of those Prime Ministers who really impacted Canada,? he continued. ?He created so many things and without him Canada wouldn't be the same. He helped create an inclusive policy that helped Canada have more culture and backgrounds and I was really shocked and surprised by that.?

Looking back over her time interacting with the students and helping decide who made the cut to go onto provincials, she was joined

by fellow historian Michelle Johnson, and both agreed what the students offered was 'extraordinary'.

'It wasn't just another classic assignment, they took the project to heart and really started delving into some issues that were quite complex and, in many cases, coming at it with a different eye, a different viewpoint, and standing in front of judges to present,' said Ms. White. 'One that really stood out to me was a project on LGBTQ issues and it made you think of it in a different way. Some might think, 'It doesn't affect me, I'm a bystander, not my issue, not my life, let me get on with my business,' but when you see the way the girls presented, you think, 'Hey, maybe this is everybody's issue.''

With a morning dedicated to presentations by secondary students, while elementary school students participated in workshops led by organizations ranging from the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame to Sharon Temple National Historic Site. In the afternoon, they switched it up.

'We hope this keeps getting bigger and bigger every year,' said Ms. White.