

Hearts are full at Aurora Montessori for late beloved educator Lisa Walters



Lisa Walters was known for her love of hearts ? so much so that it wasn't unusual for her students at Aurora Montessori School to keep an eye out for heart-shaped rocks ?in the wild? to bring back to her.

Her desk at the Industrial Parkway North school practically groaned under the weight of all the souvenirs the kids brought back to touch her heart and, months after her tragic death, they still do ? adding their finds to a little dish that stands outside the office she used as their Vice Principal of Student Life & Wellbeing.

Now, thanks to the Aurora Montessori community, her love for the symbol of just that has spilled out of their doors, and is at the ?heart? of a long-lasting artistic tribute to the beloved educator whose primary job, according to principal Kelly Parker, ?was to just take care of all of us.?

If you've been to the intersection of Industrial Parkway and St. John's Sideroad recently, you may have noticed hundreds of paintings along the Montessori property line, many of them depicting hearts and butterflies. Each was painted by a single student in memory of a woman who touched so many of their lives.

?We were thinking of how we can bring our school community together to really remember this beautiful person,? says Parker. ?Our school ethos is all about being kind and caring to one another, being respectful and supportive, and she was our talisman for that. She really was the person that we all looked to for that guidance.?

Walters, a long-time Aurora resident, was in her seventeenth year of teaching when she lost her battle with illness at the beginning of July. She first began at Aurora Montessori teaching Grades One and Two. She then took on a Vice Principal's role and, in 2019, made the switch over to Student Life and Wellbeing, a role she essentially created for herself to fill what she saw as a need and gap.

?She noticed our students needed something in terms of building confidence, self-esteem, self-regulation, bullying, all the issues they're facing no matter where they are,? says Vice Principal Rosanna Gaudio. ?She thought it was important enough for it to be separated out of the Vice Principal position and addressed regularly and daily, not just when the need came up, but as a preventative and getting the children to develop that agency to take care of themselves.?

Parents and children connected with Walters equally, she adds, noting one particular 10-pound heart-shaped rock one family brought her back from vacation as a prime example of this connection.

That lost connection was a difficult adjustment for the Aurora Montessori community, and they, particularly art teacher Kim Steffan, developed the idea of the paintings now decorating Industrial and St. John's, replacing another artistic array the students made at the height of the global pandemic.

?We really were trying to think about what we can do where everybody feels like they're doing something,? says Parker about the

development of the project. ?The previous paintings that went up during COVID was just to bring the community together and bring in some joy at a time that was very difficult for everybody. We thought after five years, let's change and make a gallery of hearts and send the love that we all have for Ms. Walters out into the community as well so they can feel that love and caring from our school.

?We had to figure out a way to properly celebrate her. That's how we sort of positioned it with the children ? this is our way of showing our appreciation and gratitude for this wonderful person who we were so fortunate to have a part of our life.?

Gaudio, who trained as an educator with Walters in the late 1980s before their paths crossed again at Aurora Montessori, says her friend and colleague simply loved what she did ? and seeing the artwork only helped underscore that with her family.

?She loved it because it's who she was, but it's also that she knew she could make a difference for these children in a way that's not just understanding a math question ? it's something so integral to who they are and who they will become and maybe how they will think about things later,? she says. ?She was so patient, too. You need a lot of patience with adults, but even more with young children when they're going through something they can't identify, whether it's a relationship with a peer or how they feel about themselves ? whatever it is, you have to be willing to take the time to work through all the layers before you can help them figure it out. She had so much patience for that, and she was successful.?

?And she wouldn't stop,? adds Parker. ?She was very persistent. Children have a lot going on in their lives. Not every child's life is shiny, happy rainbows and butterflies. There may be some significant family things happening. If a child was having difficulty, she was persistent, calm, and gentle in approach. Sometimes it may have taken her time, but eventually she would get to sort of the root of what was happening to be able to help in that way.

?The children are still collecting [the rocks]. I get them when I'm out on recess duty, they'll come and bring stones over and, to be honest, some of them don't look like hearts at all, but in their eyes, it's, ?I've got this for Ms. Walters,' and they'll place it in her little heart-shaped dish there. The feeling is still there for all of them.?

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