

High school students get up close with Victorian design through AHS mentorship program



Victorian architecture: hot or not?

This was one of several questions considered by local high school students participating in the Aurora Historical Society's inaugural Youth Mentorship program.

Now, it's a question the students are posing to the community through their resulting exhibition, which opened this month at Hillary House National Historic Site.

Over seven weeks, high school students learned the ins and outs of museum curation, including handling artefacts and bringing an exhibition together.

The program culminated in the exhibition, *Victorian Design: Elegant or Outdated*, which now takes pride of place in Hillary House's exhibition space.

"We started with an introduction to basic job skills and transferrable skills such as how to write a resume, how to do an interview, the different administrative professions you could have, and any kind of arts and culture position," explains Selin Kahramanoglu, Programming & Outreach Coordinator for Hillary House National Historic Site, who conceived the mentorship program. "We started broad, teaching the basics of workplace culture, and then we started to narrow in a bit more about exhibition work. They got to do object handling with pieces from the collection, moving them and storing them, and they also learned about panel writing and how to communicate the interpretation of art and artefacts. We also did a lot of field trips, including the Royal Rose Gallery so they could see what an art gallery looked like as opposed to a historic house museum, and we also went to the Aurora Public Library to see different programming technologies in the field.

"They got a really broad perspective on the arts and culture field, but the last three weeks of the program focused on their exhibition."

Throughout the seven weeks, Kahramanoglu says students really gravitated towards local history and showed a keen interest in other

historic buildings in the area.

Going through a few exhibition ideas, they hit upon interior design and, with Kahramanoglu's help, the students found items in the Hillary House collection that fit the bill.

‘They each focused on two rooms and teams to decipher what was important for Victorian design for their specific room, connect it to historic artefacts that are relevant to that space as well, and also all of the installations. They came in with sticky notes to say ‘I want the dress here’ or ‘I want the panel here’ and really mapped it all out. Our co-op student assisted a little bit with extra with cleaning the display cases and the back-end museum work that nobody thinks about. That was wonderful and this is the end product!’

Looking over the course of the program, Kahramanoglu says the students did a great job with the knowledge imparted in such a short period of time.

‘I was surprised because when I was a high school student I wanted to learn about museums and galleries but I was too young to explore those spaces, didn’t have any qualifications. It turns out things haven’t changed; there are students who are interested in galleries and archives and things like that, so I am glad we were able to give them an opportunity to safely explore that subject matter as a potential career path for those who are graduating and starting to pick university programs,’ says Kahramanoglu. ‘Also, in the pandemic, it was really hard for them to get their volunteer hours, so that was a plus with this program to get their volunteer hours, too.’

Amy Norris, a Grade 12 student at Aurora High School, shared these sentiments, stating she has a particular interest in history and the artefacts that have been left behind to tell a story.

When asked how she would answer their own question on whether Victorian interior design is elegant or outdated, Norris said, in her view, the answer lies somewhere in the middle.

‘It’s beautiful, it’s elegant and it’s nice, but there are some other times where it is a bit much,’ says Norris, who says she is considering pursuing studies in fields related to museums and curation. ‘Selin had a lot for us to do behind the scenes. It was nice she could help us, but we also had our own charge of the program. The process was so much and so many small aspects were just really important to the building of our exhibit.’

Similarly, Samona Nasrullah, a Grade 12 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School said she was taken by the process ‘particularly the behind-the-scenes work.’

‘The research and the data management helps me with the program I want to go into, which is criminology,’ she said, adding she particularly liked the process of picking artefacts for the exhibition. ‘I hope people take in the information that we present and I hope the information passes on to future generations.’

That sharing of information is what Kahramanoglu hopes is a legacy of this inaugural year of the program as she looks ahead to what the next school year might hold.

‘Hopefully when people [take a look at the show] it will look put together and polished, but I would like them to reflect a little bit on what the background work is and what it means to produce an exhibition at the professional level,’ she says. ‘Certainly youth are not used to that kind of responsibility, so to have a well put-together exhibition at the end of their program kind of shows that they are up to the challenge and they can do a really good job with some guidance and just generally mentorship in the workforce. Hopefully they like the way it looks and it is translated into new skills for them, too.’

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter