

Humour and poignant words on show in Melinda's Room



By Brock Weir

Dierdre and David Tomlinson were hailed for their bravery Thursday evening at the opening of 'Melinda's Room', featuring the art and words of their late daughter who lost her battle with extreme bipolar disorder.

Her eclectic artwork, featuring poignant images of mothers and children, symbolism from the world's religions, mermaids galore, and a few tongue-in-cheek illustrations of prostitutes out on the job, now fills the walls of the Aurora Cultural Centre's Aurora Room gallery.

Mr. and Mrs. Tomlinson were joined by their daughter Beth, and Melinda's son Booker for the packed opening reception for speeches not only from Mrs. Tomlinson, but also Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Laura Schembri, Executive Director of the Centre.

When asked, however, whether she saw what they were doing as brave, Mrs. Tomlinson rejected the idea. Their intention, she said, was to create a dialogue on mental illness, but also showcase their daughter's vibrant spirit.

'I wanted it to be a celebration of her life and I think it has been,' she said. 'Several people have come up to say they were moved and you can still see the tears in their eyes. She drew a lot of people to her throughout her life and she was so diverse.'

Melinda's humour is evident throughout the exhibition. Her elder sister, Beth, said she believed it was important for Melinda's art to be acknowledged

'In losing my sister, I lost the person who made me laugh most in life,' Beth told *The Auroran*. 'Every time we would sit down she would tell me stories. She had an unusual job [working with Toronto's homeless] so there were always lots of stories about that and she always laughed things off - like the time she fell asleep and Booker glued all her hair together!'

'I think that mental illness is something people don't like to go into and they don't want to acknowledge that it is more common than people think. I think it is important that people know as much about it as possible because it is a huge part of many people's lives. I wish she could be here.'

Speaking to the assembled crowd, Ms. Schembri paid tribute to Melinda's extreme creativity and highlighted the unique nature of the exhibition, Mrs. Tomlinson having approached them to showcase her daughter's work. It is important these images and words be on show to create a dialogue on mental illness within the community, particularly during National Mental Health Week this week.

'The exhibition was a challenge in the best of ways, and it stretched us,' she said. 'We are happy to have had that experience and we have learned so much on so many levels. We want to thank the family for the opportunity that you have given us to share your

daughter's life, to celebrate it, and to learn from it.

?This is a very difficult and private subject and the family has opened this up in a very profound and generous way for us all to participate in discussion, celebration of their daughter who could be any one of our daughters, mothers, our sisters, our aunts.? In paying tribute to her daughter, Dierdre underscored the humour her daughters brought into their lives.

?They made emigration, charity fundraising, a major house fire and a couple of car accidents fun,? she said.

She spoke about her daughter's birth, her stint as an actress in community theatre and, after she left school after Grade 12, her passion for Arabic ? earning her degree in the language ? and travelling the world to perfect it.

?Her letters home were interesting and frequent,? said Dierdre. ?I could feel and smell the places she visited. One Christmas I bought her an Indian duvet cover from an Oxfam shop. When unwrapped, it smelled like concentrated stallion urine. Once washed and dried, a fainter smell lingered.

?As soon as she opened it, she held it to her nose with delight. ?It reminds me of the smell of Indian markets!' she said, without realising she could have had a higher octane.

?In the last few months of her life, she started painting and creating pieces inspired by Mexican and Indian art. Her subjects were often the disadvantaged, the bullied, the poor, the handicapped, bag ladies and strippers, eccentric paintings framed by several tiny written lines of text, cast a compassionate eye on people trapped in unenviable lives. She knew that well.?

Melinda's Room runs through June 15.