

Local artist collaborates on graphic novel on personal experience with Japanese internment

As a grandmother, Lillian Michiko Blakey shares family stories in unique and creative ways.

Some are of happy memories, some are memories that might be challenging for young minds to fully process until they are a little bit older ? but for Ms. Michiko Blakey, the medium can help convey the message.

As an artist based in York Region, Ms. Michiko Blakey, a third-generation Japanese-Canadian, has shared her family's very personal story of being interred along with hundreds of other Japanese Canadians during the Second World War through a very visual lens ? including a recent online exhibition and podcast with the Aurora Public Library.

Soon, her moving work, which she has shared at schools throughout York Region, will be reaching new audiences through a graphic novel, a collaboration between herself and Jeff Chiba Stearns, a fourth-generation Japanese-Canadian.

?On Being Yukiko? tells the story of a Japanese-Canadian grandmother sharing her family's story of internment and forced relocation by the Government of Canada with her mixed-race granddaughter, and, through the story, explores issues of identity for young people.

?I have been doing presentations on my mother's story that is based on her experience of being forced from home in British Columbia,? she says. ?I have been trying to tell this story in my artwork since I first showed in an exhibition at the Aurora Cultural Centre in 2012. It took me that long to even tell the story from a third-generation Japanese-Canadian. It took me a long time before I could even talk about it.

?I have been trying to tell the story in different ways to try and reach different groups of people. I wanted to educate young people because I was a teacher and really wanted to get this into the curriculum in terms of a part of Canadian history that very few people knew about. I wanted this in the hands of children, so I wanted to turn it into a graphic novel.?

In doing so, she approached Jeff Chiba Stearns, who has racked up an impressive and award-winning resume as an artist and animator. From there, the collaboration morphed into an independently-published graphic novel due out this fall that Ms. Michiko-Blakey acts as a springboard to have this difficult chapter of Canadian history explored more fully in the classrooms.

?My children and grandchildren are all mixed race and that is his particular interest. We decided to do it as a grandmother, me, telling the story of how the family came and what happened to them, to her 12-year-old granddaughter,? she explains. ?To add interest, Jeff is adding conversations between the girl and two of her friends at school. By the end, you get into the whole talk about racism and systemic racism and so forth, and identity as a Canadian.

?I don't know what is going to happen in the schools after the pandemic, but what I would like to see happen is have the graphic novel field-tested in schools because they are being mandated to look at anti-racist education in schools and I have been doing that for 30 years.

?I hope it will be a springboard for discussions on different cultures and try to include their story ? telling the story of one group of people can lead us to discussions on how their families came to Canada, what they experienced and so forth. It could be a whole curriculum unit, I hope, because it is part of the social studies curriculum but most teachers didn't even know the story. They also don't know what to do with it because there are no resources suggested by the Ministry when they put out the curriculum guide.

?This is the kind of thing that can really turn around racist attitudes when they start to realize all human beings basically want the same things and have the same feelings. When they get to know other kids, the fear is gone. That is what is important for me. I think it is really needed, especially today.?

For more on ?On Being Yukiko?, including how to order a copy of your own, visit meditatingbunny.com/store.

By Brock Weir