

Looking backward is looking forward for local photographers and subjects



By Brock Weir

If you're still sticking with them, you're about a week into your New Year's resolutions and if you've made it this far, you still have your eyes set firmly ahead on a goal.

Recently, however, some members of the Aurora community have been looking back in order to look forward, setting pen to paper on words of wisdom they would like to go back and pass on to their younger selves.

The result is "Note to Self", a new photo exhibition and accompanying book launching this week at the Aurora Public Library featuring portraits of residents from Aurora and beyond alongside recollections, recommendations, and maybe even a warning or two about pitfalls ahead they would give to themselves as a kid.

The project is the brainchild of Aurora-based photographer Angela Durante Dukat and the Aurora Public Library Camera Club.

"The idea was born in an Aurora coffee shop where some friends of mine in a local photography club were talking about how wintertime tends to be a slow season for some photographers who are doing retail work and we thought, 'Gosh, why not just do something fun?' We started playing around with the idea of shooting portraits of people we know and then portraits of people in our community."

Starting off with people in their club, they quickly branched out to family members, then friends, and then the community at large. "We wanted to give it depth beyond portraiture and we wanted it to be meaningful for the people we were inviting to sit for us," says Ms. Durante Dukat. "Being a historian, the natural thing for me is for people to pull from their past because I think that has the greatest value for others. The point is not for the project to be, but for the project to influence and strike a chord with other people."

Once they set their game plan, the project became even more ambitious after Ronen Grunberg of the Aurora Public Library Camera Club invited Angela to speak to the group about the idea. Her pitch of doing 100 portraits might have caused a titter or two but, before long, they were well underway.

"This task was really big," she explains. "It was not just about photographing people, it was about teasing out of them their stories and their reflections. It was an extra level of challenge because for people to come and look their best is something we do regularly, but to dig deep and try to produce something that will be meaningful to others is just far more difficult and something we have never been asked to do."

The results are a heady mix of poignant memories, pearls of wisdom, and some home truths about everyday life. As the results from the eight participating photographers began to roll in, Ms. Durante Dukat says she has come to see that for the people of this community age doesn't matter in the slightest in determining what people have experienced and how reflective they can be.

It has also taught her, she says, to be more empathetic to friends and strangers because until you ask those all-important questions you don't get insight into who they are and why they are the way they are.

Before this project, had she been asked what words of advice he would give to herself, Ms. Durante Dukat says she probably should have said something cliché like 'believe in yourself.' Valuable advice, to be sure, but after taking over 70 photos herself and collecting her subjects' written words, she's thinking deeper.

'It has encouraged me to think more deeply about the lasting impact of the note I write; that the note I write is not just an exercise in time right now, it is something I am giving,' she says. 'It is my legacy to the people who read it. Because this project developed organically, we weren't encouraging people to be as reflective, as deep, as thoughtful as we did later on because we just didn't know what we were looking for. In the beginning, I might have just used some quotations, reached into the annals of wise people around the world and pulled from there. Now, I would have used my own voice because I feel I have something more to contribute having met all these people I didn't know.'

Although the Note to Self project might have evolved organically, it is a natural fit for this photographer who is a historian. Both of these hemispheres fit together well, she says, in a symbiotic way, because the end result has turned into a unique social history project.

'This will be a potentially life altering exhibit for people who are willing to delve through the notes,' she says. 'I really think this is an exhibit platformed on personal growth and self-acceptance. I think when you read through these letters and see the childhood images and now, you see the portraits now and you see there is a lot of wisdom in the people who we walk by in the grocery store and the people we sit beside on the bus or at the coffee shop in our own Town.'

The Note to Self Project, featuring the works of Ms. Durant Dukat, Ronen Grunburg, Rhodri Ford, Melanie Hillock, Holly Thomas, and others, opens at the Aurora Public Library's Colleen Abbott Gallery this Saturday, January 9, running through February 20. A special opening reception, featuring the book of all 100 portraits, will be held at the Library next Thursday, January 14, from 7 ? 8.30 p.m.