

Museum and School collaborate to mark more than 70 years of education history



As the final days of Dr. G.W. Williams' presence on Dunning Avenue nears, students have collaborated with the Aurora Museum & Archives on a permanent reminder of the storied school and its historic home.

This year's graduating class will be the last to celebrate at the 73-year-old building, which opened in 1952. Graduation might be the start of a whole new world for the students, but it will also usher in a brand-new chapter for Williams as they prepare to move the school community to its new home at Bayview Avenue and Spring Farm. They will be leaving not only with memories, but a yearbook that pays homage to past and present.

The historic yearbook is the brainchild of teacher Jessica Pin, whose students recently collaborated with the Aurora Museum and Archives to ensure this volume is as much about the current roster of students as it is about the generations of students who made Williams what it is today.

"This is a big year for Williams," says Pin. "We have been here for 73 years and, of course, our history goes further beyond those 73 years. The focus of the yearbook has been on 39 Dunning because we're moving from this location this year. In talking to students [we looked at] how do we want to do this? How do we want [the book] to reflect this year, but also be very, very reflective of the 73-year history of the school?"

Teacher and students soon took to social media, forming a group for alumni which attracted dozens of former "Wildcats" who shared their memories. Through former Williams teacher Bob McRoberts, they also connected to the Aurora Museum & Archives to see what Williams-related treasures might be within their collections.

"It was very exciting for us," says Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum & Archives, on when she first got the request from the Williams community. "Having a whole class of students interested in looking through our archives? my first reaction was, 'This is amazing' to have a full class of students really engage with our collection, which we take care of for this very purpose. To have it all unpacked and on-hand for the students to look through with our guidance and actively use it in a meaningful project? we were over the moon!"

The Museum team soon realized it was actually their biggest research request from the public since its inception. They were able to access more than 700 files from the collection to get the job done.

The goal of the teacher-student team was to have a historical connection on every single page of this year's yearbook, from photos charting the history of the building itself to photos of school teams and clubs from days gone by and how they relate to the clubs and

teams the school boasts today.

‘The yearbooks we looked through were so reflective [of the times],’ says Pin. ‘We had a rifle club, which we don't have anymore. They had military training outback, and we don't have that anymore. We just took a staff photo and there were 110 staff from Williams in our last staff photo at 39 Dunning’ and, in talking to the Museum, in the earliest photo of our staff from 1956, there were just 12. When you're able [to make that comparison to today] it's a testament to how much history has been covered over the last 73 years.

‘The yearbook is a piece of history and the importance of what we do in the yearbook reflects what is important to us now and’ there [will] be students doing the same thing with our yearbook 20, 25 years down the road.’

Sometimes making the connection between photos, documents and other items in the collection from Williams' early history to the present day proved a bit of a challenge, Johnson notes. For example, Williams now has a Computer Engineering Club, so what could that relate to in images from history? Photos of students sitting the school's first computers in the 1990s can certainly show how technology has progressed.

‘One of the yearbooks from the 60s was called The Atom because they had just split the atom and the cover was very scientific because of that major thing that happened in our global history,’ says Johnson. ‘While there weren't necessarily photos of people engaging in scientific processes in the yearbook, it spoke to the importance of that scientific discovery and the zeitgeist of the 1960s.’

Additional photos and memories shared by Williams alumni from the Facebook group will also be woven throughout the pages.

Students came out to explore the archives over December and January, making something of a full circle moment as artefacts were arranged in Brevik Hall at the historic 22 Church Street, where the foundations of what's now Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School were first laid.

‘It was very surreal and hard to put into words,’ says Williams, noting that it also underscored to her the importance of maintaining these historic collections for the community. ‘We know they're treasures. As soon as somebody from the community approaches us and wants to learn from these items, that's why we're caring for them. That's why we're keeping everything in an archival box so it is still here 50 years later. Yes, we do exhibits with these materials and we create programs around them, but it is all to provide access. This tailored level of access that we worked with Williams to provide for their very specific research request, it's what drives us.’

By Brock Weir