

Museum opens cupboards to show fabric of Aurora



By Brock Weir

Mary Beth Hess couldn't help but lean to get a closer look at the Aurora Museum & Archives last week ? after all, it's not every day your wedding gown is displayed on a mannequin for all to see.

Then again, not every woman walks down the aisle in a family heirloom.

But that's exactly what Mary Beth did when she tied the knot with her husband, Richard, donning the same gown her mother wore when she married her father a generation before.

This well-loved wedding gown is one of the centrepieces of The Wardrobes of Aurora, a new exhibition launched this month by the Aurora Museum & Archives.

Running through September and guest-curated by masters students from the University of Toronto, The Wardrobes of Aurora opens the closet door on the history of Aurora ? births, marriages and deaths ? as told through textiles in the collection.

?I am not from Aurora, I'm not from Canada, but working with this collection, I found it a way to connect with the past,? said University of Toronto student Rong Zou, who co-curated the collection with fellow students Rachel Dice, Carolyn Ben and Jessica Ho.

This was a sentiment echoed by other members of this quartet, who shared in the excitement.

?I just can't

believe we actually got this open,? said Ms. Dice, who worked as an intern at the Museum this past summer. ?I have been working with these textiles since July, so to see them out of their boxes and out of their wrapping, onto a wall and being used, appreciated and learned from is just amazing. We all get into museum studies so we can touch stuff, but we never actually think we'll get to show stuff. Being able to make those decisions and to work with my amazing teammates has been awesome.?

Ms. Dice has always

had an interest in textiles, growing up with a mom who works in the clothing industry. She came onto this project as a ?textile expert? but said going through this curatorial process, she came out the other side as an ?everything else expert.?

?It was so much fun

just to go into a collection and open a box,? said Ms. Ben. ?You would be amazed at what you would find inside. It was amazing to find the stories behind the objects and to learn about Aurora. It was just lovely to learn about the families and their histories here. As a group, we would just like to thank the museum, especially Michelle Johnson and Shawna White. They held our hands every step of the way ? and I would like to thank everyone who has donated clothing or just objects to the Museum over the years. Without them, we wouldn't have this exhibition.?

This sense of pride

was shared by Museum Curator Shawna White and coordinator Michelle Johnson.

Ms. White said she

was ?thrilled? to see the exhibition come into full bloom in this, their fourth partnership with the students at the U of T's Master of Museum Studies program.

?Michelle was the

first person who came here [from the program] and she just hung around and we had to hire her!? said Ms. White. ?The exceptional quality of work that is done by these student is consistent year after year and we are so pleased by it.?

Added Ms. Johnson to

the student curators: ?You were fantastic and very creative and inventive. This was a tricky exhibit for us because it was very textile-based. We hadn't done an exhibit that required so many mounting and display solutions for textiles, so it was a bit of an adventure for us and it was really exciting because we got to show off part of the textile collection which we have been working to rehouse for two or three years. We're almost finished, thanks to Rachel.?

For more on the Aurora Museum & Archives,
as well as The Wardrobes of Aurora, visit www.auroramuseum.ca.