

New curator charts path forward for re-established Aurora Museum



By Brock Weir

History and heritage has always been a significant part of Shawna White's life.

This love of history extends not only to the sweeping epics of Ancient Rome and Greece ? and particularly the relics they left behind for archaeologists today to discover ? but also the lore and photos associated with her own family.

After taking her love of history through school and beginning a long career working for museums and historical collections throughout North America and Europe, her family set her on a very different course of direction.

When Ms. White's brother died in 2008 just shy of his 45th birthday, his younger sister decided that then was the make or break time to put her vision into force and she co-founded Cultural Asset Management (CAM), a Markham-based company spearheading the evaluation, preservation and exhibition of a variety of historical collections.

It was through CAM that Ms. White was introduced to the Aurora Collection and now, she is at the forefront of re-establishing the Aurora Museum for the community at large.

?I really wanted to do this project,? says Ms. White of the chance to head the museum, revived by the last term of Council and set to be re-installed as early as this spring in a room at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Ms. White's CAM was originally in the running to tackle the museum project on a contract after working with the Aurora Historical Society on evaluating the historical collection before it was transferred to the Town in 2013, but Council initially rejected their bid despite coming in significantly lower than competitors. With a reversal last year, that initial rejection is now part of history and it is full steam ahead with Ms. White's vision for the new museum as an individual.

?I was understandably disappointed with the whole RFP project, but I started looking as to why I was disappointed,? she explains. ?The work was interesting and exciting, I invested a lot in it and when the job description [for a curator] came up, I wanted to go for it.?

Her first day on the job was December 1 and when she was able to get back into the Aurora Collection, it was much the way she left it after completing the evaluation.

?No magic fairies came in and took things off the floor,? she says with a laugh. ?The collection has been well cared for while in

storage, but now it is time for a new chapter.?

The first chapter in Ms. White's love of history started as a child when her parent took her to museums. Fascinated by ancient history, she followed classical archaeology throughout high school and into university. Her life-long interest and hobby became a career with her first summer position giving tours and cataloguing items at the Markham Museum, eventually moving on to work on the collections held by Brock University and the State University of New York, the Royal Ontario Museum, and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England.

After further positions with Sotheby's as their Canadian Art Specialist, as well as assistant curator of the McMichael Canadian Art Gallery in Kleinburg, she left to co-found CAM.

?I look at history in a larger picture,? she says. ?I don't look at it so much in terms of the actual stuff, objects and artefacts, I look at it for what the artefact tells me and the story behind it. Now, in Aurora, I am interested in the stories that will elicit something more about history. You always hear about the famous people like the politicians ? and there are tons on that ? but I am interested in what life was like for a student in 1890.?

Collecting oral history is all well and good, she adds ? and an invaluable resource to historians ? but often these histories are recorded when the individual is looking back on their experiences through decades-old lenses.

History is happening now, so let's strike while the iron is hot, she says.

To this end, one idea she is floating around is a project called ?I Am Aurora? which will take a sampling of everyday people today who call Aurora home.

?What is their routine like?? she ponders. ?What I want to know about people 100 or 200 years ago, somebody 200 years from now is going to want to know and get that. Let's capture it while we can.?

Going forward, Ms. White has a three-prong vision for the Aurora Museum, which she hopes to take to Council this spring, or by the early summer. The first area she is concerned about is the conservation of the collection and the physical needs of the items contained in it. The second is how the collection is managed. The third and most important is outreach and access.

This covers how she is able to get the collection and stories out to the public. Everyone expects exhibitions, but there are other ways to do it, including an online presence.

The first exhibition, which will take place in the Aurora Room is tentatively planned for this summer. Although Ms. White is mum on what that will contain, her teaser is this: ?it is very pertinent to where the collection is.?

Now that the museum is up and running, residents once again have the opportunity to donate items to the collection. But, she cautions, this is not a drop off. There has to be a compelling reason behind why it should be in the Aurora collection. She also says she hopes community donations are able to help fill in some of the gaps she has found in Aurora's history as far as artefacts are concerned.

?There is not much in the collection from the 1980s and 90s,? she says. ?The collection is very strong in certain areas, then it just kind of stops. When you think of collections, you think of historical collections, but the time to collect history is today when it is still in good condition.

?There is very little about the Aurora Horse Show. That was a big deal here and it wasn't that long ago. Where is the stuff? Where are the posters and programs? There are little things here and there, but not really enough to tell the story.?

But, she can't do it alone. Ms. White says she is interested in volunteerism from anyone who has ideas for shows or would like to make a ?positive contribution? to the museum.

?I am not really interested in any negativity towards what happened in the past, what people should have done and what they didn't do,? she says. ?That is done. I am interested in moving forward. If someone wants to make a positive contribution?I would really like to hear from them.?