

Remembrance Day goes beyond November for Rick Hansen Public School



By Brock Weir

Around the Commonwealth, the Red Poppy has become a symbol permanently associated with Remembrance and the month of November, but local students and staff at Rick Hansen Public School have been working on their poppy pride for far longer. The Poppy, so linked to the chill of the Canadian fall, was very much a summer flower for teacher Cathy May as she used her months away from the school sewing hundreds of poppies the students pass every day, sewn together into an elegant evening gown alongside a mess uniform proudly bearing the miniature medals of Ms. May.

It is one of the first things you see walking into the school foyer, but just an appetizer of things to come.

This week, the school's lawn fronting Mavrincac Boulevard will be a sea of red as they cover the grass with large poppies in memory of the fallen. Flying above this impressive display will be a banner signed by each student with messages and remembrance, a banner that has been ever-growing since the school opened. Finally, once it is all said and done, and the Grade 8 students have led their annual Remembrance Day ceremony, postcards and notes from the students will be winging their way to Canadian Forces members overseas.

‘This is where we started,’ says Ms. May, gesturing to the dress and the uniform. ‘We have exploded from a first showcase to a lot of spaces.’

Behind the uniform bearing her father's medals, and the homemade poppy dress bearing the ‘sweetheart brooch’ worn by her mother in the shape of the wings presented to her father by George V, is an evocative display of uniformed family photos and mementos pooled by the school community.

Beyond these first two cases is another showcase with period and more contemporary objects curated by students and staff to remember, including a group of military helmets collected by a student, and a jar of sand collected at Juno Beach by head caretaker Kathy Lacroix.

‘We have so much as a country. For me, going to Juno Beach, going to Normandy, and Dieppe, is my way of saying thank you and paying my respects,’ she says, noting her excitement of travelling to Vimy Ridge this April for the ceremonies commemorating the 100th anniversary of the decisive Canadian victory. ‘[This display] is another way to remind students of all the places we have served and serve around the world. The students' way is to write a postcard or poem and then soldiers get it at Christmas, which is when they need it the most, when they are away from their families. They are happy people care and are grateful for what they did.’

And each of the students is excited to set their postcards and hard work off to far flung corners of the globe.

‘We mostly say thank you for protecting us and giving us freedom,’ says Grade 3 student Zoe Leyderman. ‘Sometimes if you ask questions, they write back, but sometimes it is too private because they are in the Army and they're really secret.’

For her post card, Zoe chose to write to a member of the Royal Canadian Navy because ‘it is very cool that you're able to fight on water and not just land.’ She says she wants to know why their serviceperson decided to join the Navy rather than the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Fellow Grade 3 student Adamo Conrad, however, chose to write to a member of the RCAF.

?I am asking some questions like why do you need to use a big airplane to transport gas?? he explains. ?Why do you need to use an airplane when you have such a small and fast fighter jet? I got inspired when Ms. Lacroix talked to us. I pictured in my head they would use a special passport to go into the air.?

Older students are also flexing their creative muscles to remember. In addition to spearheading Friday's Remembrance Day Service, which is going to be attended by veterans from Hollandview Trail Retirement Community, they are working on art and poetry projects.

?We have started expressing metaphorically how we felt about Remembrance Day and using paint and pictures,? says Grade 8 student Eva Sherma. ?We started thinking about the different ways we can express our emotions through poems. It is about showing respect to those who sacrificed their life for us and how we're showing them we remember and we're thankful for what they did. We're also showing where we are today [compared] to that time and how they helped us get here, sacrificing our lives so we have a better life now.?

Adds fellow Grade 8 student Dennis Kapitanchouk, ?We want to show how we thank them for what they did for us, even though they didn't have to.?