

Son celebrates a celebrated "life well lived"



(Dorothy Clark McClure's son Andy and granddaughter Megan are seen with a portfolio of Dorothy's early work at Dr. G. W. Williams Secondary School. Auroran photo by Brock Weir.)

By Brock Weir

Andy McClure held vigil by the fire Saturday night, sitting beside a laid out piece of pecan pie and a slab of chocolate.

If he had his own way, he'd have put down a nice glass of white wine alongside the sweet and the smoke but, alas, alcohol is not generally permitted in a traditional Jibay ceremony. Nevertheless, he looked forward to having a few sips on his own time in memory of his late mother.

Mr. McClure put down the favourite treats of his late mother, Dorothy Clark McClure, in the traditional ceremony honouring her legacy, just over a year after her death. Over the past two decades, Mr. McClure has become close with elders from a variety of different native traditions and this was the perfect way to pay tribute.

“When my mom passed away, one of the ceremonies of honouring her was to light a fire and put out food and put down tobacco and just spend the night outside with the fire,” he explains. “Usually within the year you have a follow-up ceremony. I can't use alcohol, but if I could, it would be a glass of white wine. I'll have to sip that for her after.”

As the embers have died down, Mr. McClure has returned to his day job as an art teacher at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, but he continues pondering the legacy and art that his mother left behind. He's putting the finishing touches on *Bene Acta Vita (A Life Well Lived): An Exhibition and Sale of Works by Dorothy Clark McClure*, which will run November 20 through November 30 at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Since Ms. Clark-McClure's death in August 2012, her family has been trying to distribute a large inventory of her work to “the best possible places”, including her former schools, galleries both local and in the Toronto area, but there is still so much left to go.

“As much as it is hard to get rid of it, because it feels like giving away a part of my mom, she loved seeing her work on other people's walls,” says Andy. “I think she would be quite happy to see it get shown and possibly sold.”

The Aurora Cultural Centre is no stranger to Ms. Clark McClure's work. They had the distinction of holding the final exhibition of Dorothy's lifetime, which was intended to be a complete retrospective of her work “from drawings showing the budding talent of her girlhood, through her work in the high flying advertising world of the 1960s, to documenting the architectural gems of York Region before they met the wrecking ball, to finding new passion and expression in her last years through intuitive art.

Andy says the upcoming show will follow similar themes, with a wide variety of styles representing how her own style changed over the decades. As they go through her work, however, memories of his mom and growing up immersed in a world of art come flooding back.

‘It is interesting to see all the different hats my mom had to wear as an artist who made a living from painting and drawing,’ he says. ‘My dad was a writer and photographer and the only thing I ever knew from mom was art. From my earliest memories, the dining room table was an art table. I remember being two or three, sitting in a little crib beside the table and smelling the oil paints my mom worked with.

‘Some of my earliest memories are of traipsing out to various locations, sitting on stools, waiting for mom to draw or paint the landscape, or the building, or whatever it was. There was no real family vacation that didn’t include a watercolour pad or a set of art tools and there always had to be a stop somewhere.’

He recalls his mother's passion for ‘looking for the aesthetic’ in everything and things in everyday objects, people, and landscapes that might have been missed or disregarded by others. These things brought out her passion and they are the passions he tries to instill in his own students at Dr. G.W. Williams. But, to backtrack a moment, teaching and carrying on his mother's artistic legacy was not a path he intended to travel.

Whether or not this was his own dash of teenage rebellion on his own artistic parents, he grew up fascinated by the sciences, intending to be a doctor. When asked what got him onto the artistic path, he says, with a laugh, ‘it was my failure to get into med school!’ Once he was on that path though he knew he found a perfect fit.

‘That was my gift from my mom, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents being artists,’ he says. ‘I probably should have recognized it earlier. I would say like any creative person that grows up in the shadow of their parents it is always a struggle finding the balance between your own way and looking for recognition from your parent.’

To this day, he holds his mother as his technical teacher and he says he finds Dorothy Clark McClure emerging from himself all the time when he stands in front of his students only to find himself ‘repeating exactly what my mom has said to me.’ As he watches his elder daughter, 16, draw he says he's starting to see more of Dorothy emerge in the younger generation as well.

‘There was a certain vulnerability to my mum. She went to an art show in California in the 1970s called 100 Years of Women in Art and that was the first time she had actually seen herself in that lineage,’ says Andy. ‘Marriage and providing for a family requires a certain compromise with your art. I think in the last 20 years she finally had a chance to make work she felt was entirely her own and it wasn't made to be sold, it wasn't made to provide an income to put food on the table, but as her own original and passionately felt style.

‘I hope people see that vulnerability. Mum came across as really strong and strong-minded and she was, but she was also a woman who struggled to find her own self for her life.’