

We can learn from the Day of the Dead, says local artist



By Brock Weir

Linda Welch always breathed a sigh of relief once November 1 rolled around. It meant Hallowe'en was over, disguises and decorations were soon to be packed away for another year, and going out to the community would mean more treats than tricks.

One Hallowe'en many years ago when Ms. Welch was just 12 or 13, teen vandals threw a Molotov cocktail through her parents' dining room window. Her father, a high school principal, had just expelled a student and this was seen as retribution.

Although neighbours helped the family put out the fire before the fire trucks even arrived, Ms. Welch says that was a turning point. Living in the country, she came to distrust people who came out for Hallowe'en in subsequent years, a feeling that still continues into adulthood but has since been given new perspective after travelling to Mexico to participate in their Day of the Dead.

Ms. Welch shared her vivid photographs of this very important day in Mexican culture at the Aurora Cultural Centre as Hallowe'en approached. Her work was the subject of a one-day-only pop-up gallery and, come nightfall, played host to a large crowd eager to learn more about the celebrations.

Over the years, Ms. Welch had many opportunities to visit a friend's farm in Milton, where she came to know many of the Mexican itinerant workers. Every year, she says, their contracts were timed so they could go back home at the end of October for the Day of the Dead and their excitement piqued her curiosity.

'I couldn't understand it myself, and they didn't have the language to explain why it was so important to them [so I decided] to get out of Town, avoid Hallowe'en, go to Mexico, see friends and experience this celebration, not really knowing what it was about,' says Ms. Welch, president of the Society of York Region Artists. 'It was very challenging because you have your own impressions of what you think it is going to be and you're confronted with variations of that. It was a celebration I was not totally comfortable with here because with all the disguises, masks, and not really knowing who you are going to meet.

'There, it is all about the masks, all about the decorations, lots of drums, lots of music. It was very active, but I was surprised with the emotional side.'

Ms. Welch found herself pulling an all-nighter with friends, visiting numerous cemeteries 'something she has always been reluctant to do here at home ' along with mothers, fathers, grandparents and teens. The presence of teens hanging out on a night like this was something she says 'blew her mind', but there it was.

?They just chatted quietly among themselves and visited, just like we would on a Sunday afternoon, but this was from midnight to dawn,? she says. ?It was so moving to see how respectful they were and to learn about their reasons behind it. It is more important to them than Christmas would be to us. This is the best way they can honour their ancestors. It is not honouring their death, but welcoming them back. If they can only come back for 24 hours, they have to be there otherwise they have missed her chance.?

The experience may have dulled some of Hallowe'en's edge in the eyes of Ms. Welch, but the contrast left a stark impression, particularly the compassion, which is something she said is sorely lacking here.

?It made me question what we do,? she says. ?Here, Hallowe'en is all about how you can frighten people in the best way. It is all fright nights, fear and terrorizing. There, it is inclusive, warm and welcoming, and it has nothing to do with fear. I think we can incorporate a little of that into our own culture. Maybe the elderly facing the end of their own life wouldn't look at it in such a fearful way too.?

?But, it's not going to happen,? she sighs. ?It's too deeply engrained in our cultures, but it was certainly interesting to contemplate what made it so different.?