

Who's A Good Boy? New documentary explores Aurora's love for furry friends

The restoration and recognition of Aurora's Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery has been a decades-long passion project for local historian David Heard.

A long-time volunteer at the south Aurora site as restoration work continues ahead of the heritage property becoming accessible and fully open to the public, Heard has been recording reactions of his fellow volunteers as they've helped uncover all the secrets the property holds.

The results of these recordings are set to unspool next week in the Aurora Town Square Performance Hall as Heard presents Who's a Good Boy? on June 3 at 7.30 p.m.

Billed as a 'journalistic-style documentary,' Heard, armed with a humble Flip video camera, documented a period of time, beginning around 2014, when volunteers first began clearing vegetation away from the overgrown plot of land.

'I was shocked at how the quality of the audio he was,' says Heard of trying out the Flip outdoors for the first time. 'I decided to document the day. I had no idea it was going to turn out. I've never done something with the camera before other than my schooling. I guess driven by passion and my love for the project, I just ran with it. We got dirty clearing [the land] and when I heard a little excitement or saw an expression on their face [when volunteers had uncovered something], I thought, 'I'm going to capture that.''

Viewers don't see Heard in the finished product. Instead, he's off camera asking questions, and letting his subjects' thoughts flow freely. In doing so, he says he found the authentic 'magic' in people's reactions.

'I am absolutely blessed to be able to record history,' says Heard.

Who's a Good Boy? is the second documentary inspired by the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery. Heard says while 'Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery: Uncovering History' covers the technical aspects of the site's discovery and restoration, this shows the flipside of what he hopes will become an 'awesome, unique roadside attraction' in due course.

'I wanted something where we could share the journey. We can tell you a story until we're blue in the face [but] people engage with pictures, connected pictures. When you show them, they're excited about it and want to go there, they're going to want to tell their friends, and I think that's exactly what this video is going to do: it's going to be like another Pied Piper for what Aurora is going to have to offer moving forward.

'I think the message with the Pet Cemetery is when people see it, they're going to see all these incredible ornate stones, chiseled faces in rock. A lot of money for the era. They spent so much money on their pets. I've heard stories of full-scale funerals with pallbearers and lucite caskets and music being played, and (original site owner) Victor Blochin literally when the grave was being built, it had to be perfect walls, the perfect depth. The respect for the pets was high, and I think the real message when people see it is we could also learn a little bit of a lesson that maybe we could spend a lot more care in caring for our families, our friends, our neighbors, because, like, they went the whole nine yards with the pets, it's clear.

'When people go there, I think they're going to find [the space] serene, peaceful and memorable. Now it's just the waiting game. The [Pet Cemetery] is going to be something big for Aurora, and I think a lot of people know it, and people are chomping at the bit wanting to see it. It's going to be worth waiting for. [With the documentary] people are going to see it with its raw, overgrown, vine-covered, nature covering up the history and protecting it to this stunning Oz-like oasis.'

For more on the screening of Who's A Good Boy?, including tickets, visit www.aurora.ca/en/town-square/whats-on.aspx.

By Brock Weir