

## Wind phones are powerful outlet for the bereaved, reflective



The holiday season can be a difficult time for those who have lost a loved one they wish could be seated at the table just one more time.

It can bring forward a roller-coaster of emotions that are sometimes difficult to express to those who don't understand.

But a new installation in Sheppard's Bush is now available as an outlet to express and process one's feelings.

On Friday, a new "wind phone" was unveiled by Mayor Tom Mrakas and members of Oasis Bereavement along the Klaus Wehrenberg Trail.

The result of a partnership between Oasis and the Town of Aurora, it was built by Aurora residents Vern Cunningham, the Town's 2024 Citizen of the Year, along with Brian North, and is intended to be a "unique, peaceful space where individuals can engage in one-way conversations with deceased loved ones."

Resembling a metallic rotary-shaped phone, the wind phone is an unconnected device where people can unburden themselves, with their words taken on the wind. It's a Japanese concept popularized as a tool for healing, "allowing those grieving to express their emotions in a private, reflective moment."

"The concept of the wind phone intrigued me when I first heard about it," says Lisa Snow, a director at Oasis, which is a volunteer-run charitable organization with the mission to help community members navigate the grieving process. "After learning about the power of the wind phone, I brought the concept to [our] Board and our dream to bring this innovative tool to our community was born."

Snow thanked the Town of Aurora for their support, along with Cunningham and North, for helping to make the new installation a reality "as did fellow Oasis director Juliet Irish, who said the wind phone concept helps people "say a proper goodbye to their loved one" if they were unable to do so before they passed.

The site selection in Sheppard's Bush was perfectly serene, she added.

"We hope that everyone in the community finds this as really therapeutic" on their grief journey," said Irish, adding they would like

to see an installation such as this in each York Region municipality.

With a design by Snow, Oasis approached Cunningham and North, a past Citizen of the Year himself, with bringing the concept to fruition.

Cunningham is a grief facilitator for a number of community-based bereavement organizations and said he immediately knew the value of a wind phone like this would bring to those grieving the loss of a loved one.

‘It was an easy decision [to get involved],’ he said. ‘I saw the value for it in the community and I am really pleased it has gotten as much traction as it has. If you’re sitting on a bench somewhere and you’re grieving, you can’t speak into the open air, it’s not a natural thing, it’s not intuitive. To pick up a phone and talk is something we have been doing all our lives, regardless of whether it is connected or not. That’s why this concept resonated with me personally, knowing that it would be an easy thing for people to get used to.’

The concept resonated with North on a different level. He recalled his days as a Scout leader when they would sometimes encourage the kids to write a wish or a prayer, ‘whatever was on their mind that nobody else would see,’ and carefully place the notes on the fire to take them into the wind.

‘It was kind of a spiritual thing,’ says North, who also helped build a similar phone with Cunningham in Newmarket. ‘When we did a photo shoot with the Newmarket one, when we arrived there were two vases [inside the wind phone cupboard] with cut flowers. Inside was a picture of a young ten-year-old boy. On the one hand, we felt bad because of the picture of the boy, but on the other hand we were happy that at least we were providing some comfort to someone who was grieving. It’s like everything in life – there’s a good side and a bad side for everything.’

At Friday’s unveiling, Mayor Mrakas shared his pride in the Town partnering with Oasis to make this new installation happen.

‘The reality is that everyone has or will at some point in their lives experience the loss of a loved one,’ he said. ‘We know that the grieving process and the healing process is different for everyone. For some it can be quick, for some it is an evolving journey that never really ends. The one thing that is universal is that people need support and outlets to help them as they grieve.’

‘That’s why I’m incredibly supportive of this really special project and I have no doubt that many community members will find solace in using this wind phone in connecting with their loved ones. In fact, we have already seen people posting photos of the wind phone on social media. We saw a post the other day, probably about 300 likes, I think, and over 100 comments, which is just incredible that people are seeing it, engaging with it. They love it and it has already started to help people in our community.’

**By Brock Weir**