

Local heritage organization sees massive success

By Sam Odrowski

A heritage organization started by a local history teacher five years ago, has seen massive success and growth across Canada.

What started out as the Digital Historian Project, where Upper Grand students would research people and places of interest through the Museum of Dufferin has grown into Defining Moments Canada, which commemorates 'definitional moments' for Canadians.

A lot of the times, these are small projects based on lesser-known people who had an instrumental impact on the area they lived.

'It was very successful, it was a nice little project focused here on Dufferin County, and had a great deal of collaboration between the school board and the County,' said Neil Orford, who created the Digital Historian Project, and launched Defining Moments Canada with Blake Heathcote in 2017.

'The program got a lot of attention provincially, it got a lot of attention nationally, as well as obviously here at home,' he added.

Since the Digital Historian Project launched in 2013, it saw great success and awards were presented to Orford from the federal government for it in 2016. The government later approached him to develop the project for a national audience. From there, Defining Moments Canada was born.

'What became obvious in 2016 and 2017, was that there was a way of characterizing Canadian history for the Heritage Market that was not being optimally done by some of the big players, like Historica,' explained Orford. 'They do an excellent job, but they don't concentrate too much on local history or what we call 'defining moments', which impact local communities and regions across the country, and how individuals have responded and participated in those historical events at the very micro level. That's the area where we are operating - what they call microhistory.'

The focus on microhistory allows Defining Moments to tell stories that don't get a lot of attention in the Canadian heritage marketplace.

'I think we have in the country prevailing narratives that have occupied our imagination about what Canadian history is' and our objective is certainly not to dispel any of that or to detract or even distract from any of that. Our objective is to say, well, in addition to all of those remarkable stories, at a macro level, there are these incredible stories that have happened in the community and at the regional level,' Orford explained.

'I think, in a lot of cases, it's important for Canadians to spend some time with the stories of what ordinary Canadians have done during extraordinary times.'

The content is geared towards an educational audience, typically students from Grade 6 to the post-secondary level.

Defining Moments is project-driven, and in a normal year they would run a series of projects nationally with the federal government and private partners.

'Those projects all have significant resonance in the classrooms, and all of our historical materials are developed with students in mind - most of that has been designed to be delivered in asynchronous learning environment,' noted Orford.

Currently, Defining Moments has a handful of projects on the go, which are all available online, at definingmomentscanada.ca under the projects tab.

The most popular project, which was made available in 2019, but has been kept up due to the volume of activity surrounding it, is on the Spanish Flu.

‘We actually thought [the project] was going to be completed by now but thanks to Mr. COVID, a lot of people are really in some cases for the first time in their lives really interested in what took place with the Spanish flu pandemic,’ said Orford.

‘It’s continued to live on our website and is one of our strongest, most visited portals on the website.’

When looking at other projects, for the last two and a half years, the organization has been leading the 100th anniversary of the discovery of insulin for the federal government, called ‘Insulin100’.

‘That has surrounded the really remarkable history of the discovery of insulin, starting in 1920, and rolling through the awarding of the Nobel Prize in 1923,’ Orford explained. ‘We’re very much following that trajectory ourselves, that chronology with that project.’

Another project available online is a commemoration of VE Day, which is the anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands and Canada’s victory campaign.

The commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Dr. Gerhard Herzberg receiving the Nobel Prize in Chemistry is available through Defining Moments website as well.

‘Dr. Gerhard Herzberg was perhaps Canada’s greatest scientist researcher as well who did a lot of his research in the 30s and 40s, at the University of Saskatchewan, and subsequently wrote a great deal of material. He became one of our finest teachers, researchers at the National Research Council in Ottawa,’ Orford said.

Defining Moments also has a project coming out in January 2022, which will commemorate all of Canada’s Nobel Prize Laureates.

Future projects commemorating Canadian history are expected in 2022, 2023, and 2024.

In addition to digital archives, Defining Moments offers heritage themed trips where Canadians can visit places of historical significance around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the trips on pause, but Orford said they’re planning to resume in summer of next year.

In 2020, a special tour was planned for the 75th Anniversary of VE Day, which was cancelled, but is now slated for July of 2022.

‘This tour is taking Canadians to a lot of the battlefields where Canadians were engaged in conflict in both the First and Second World War in Europe, but culminating with almost a full week in Holland, in the Netherlands,’ Orford explained. ‘The relationship between the Canadians and the Dutch people was formed and really sealed by the liberation of the Dutch people at the end of the Second World War.’

‘We’re really excited to be able to put that together again, for Canadians this year, cautiously optimistic that everything’s going to flow well and that travel will not be impeded by any more COVID restrictions,’ he added.

If everything goes according to plan and there are no future disruptions due to COVID-19, Defining Moments plans on getting back to running a trip once every two years.

Meanwhile, Orford said he’d encourage everyone to check out the Defining Moments Canada website, as everything’s easily accessible and free to view. Individuals with archival information themselves can also contribute to the website.

?A lot of videos that have been made, recording the stories of individuals who have made a difference, but your textbook at high school has perhaps never featured. Such as what went on in smaller communities and districts across the country,? said Orford.

?I think it's a chance for people to see what ordinary Canadians did, doing extraordinary things, at moments that are in our histories, that has really shaped the direction for the country.?