

AHS launches Youth Mentorship Program to give students hands-on experience in museums



It's often said that you can't determine where you're going without knowing where you've been ? and sometimes knowing where you've been is all about interpretation.

The Aurora Historical Society (AHS) is hoping to help local students learn the ins and outs of interpreting our history, curating artefacts, and managing museums through the launch of their new Youth Mentorship Program.

Meeting biweekly, the Youth Mentorship Program is available for students in Grades 9 to 12, giving them the chance to not only learn about working in the arts and culture field, guided by experts, but earn community service hours required for their high school diploma in the process.

The program is the brainchild of Selin Kahramanoglu, the AHS' Programming and Outreach Coordinator, who got their start as a volunteer at the Society's Hillary House National Historic Site and Koffler Museum of Medicine.

?I was a volunteer before I worked here and I was just helping take down exhibitions because I was a youth interested in exhibitions,? says Selin. ?I was allowed to help with the labour of taking down exhibitions and learning a bit of the behind-the-scenes. As I started to learn more about the history of the property and how unique it is, not just this Region but generally in Canada, I thought, wow, this is a story that other people should probably learn a little bit more about. When the opportunity came up after my schooling to work here instead of just volunteer, I got very excited and I got to try a little bit of everything. I started in collections so I got real up close with the family who lived in this house and now in my new programming and outreach role I get the chance to develop programs that complement that new history that I learned about and help share it with the wider community.

Giving this experience, and those shared by youth volunteers who spoke of how they enjoyed their getting their volunteer hours behind Hillary House's gothic revival walls and wanting more ?consistent? volunteering opportunities, the idea for further mentorship was born.

?We wanted to create a program that provided them with consistent volunteering hours, but in an environment where they felt safe to develop their own skills and also help them take away some new skills as well,? says Selin. ?We developed the program that would invite high school students to come twice a month at the end of their school day to learn about work in the arts and culture field, so they could learn about the nuances of what our museums or not-for-profits, what kind of programs they run, the different cultural institutions they can work for in the future, while also learning general job skills. We want to give them a fun project, too, so they have something to look forward to and it's not just dry information.?

Near the end of the school year in June, the participating students will launch a full exhibition that will take over Hillary House that month.

“I want them to be able to understand the different roles they could have at a museum,” Selin adds. “We have staff who have different specializations so they we can leverage that and they can learn from what really piques their interest. They get a chance to take field trips and go to other cultural institutions in the area. They get to see what it's like working at an art gallery versus our historic house museum and working at a library which is another parallel field in arts and culture. I wanted them to see the breadths of opportunities they could have but also giving them the basic job skills to give them that confidence as they're getting into that age where maybe they're thinking about part-time jobs, how they're getting nervous about how to apply? it's building that confidence and helping them take advantage of their own personal interests and taking it to the next level, really.

“If I just have one student say I feel a little bit better about my job application, confidence or just generally their confidence in engaging with the public then I consider it a success, but maybe a little bit beyond that, I am hoping that they put themselves out there a little bit more and they're encouraged to reach out to their community and see what else they can participate in and take initiative in their own learning for the future. If we see some students coming out of this program saying, “Hey, thanks to this program I now have some of the basic skills to be able to apply for this position at this place I really wanted to go to then I would be really happy for them and I would consider that a success, too.”

For more information on the Aurora Historical Society's Youth Mentorship Program, email Selin Kahramanoglu at programming@aurorahs.com.

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