

Breaking down barriers and remembering a beloved daughter



By Brock Weir

Dierdre and David Tomlinson have shared their garden, Merlin's Hollow, with countless Aurora residents free of charge since ground was first broken over 30 years ago

Now the Tomlinsons will share something a bit more personal in a public tribute to their late daughter, Melinda, next month.

To anyone who visits Merlin's Hollow, Melinda's name is a familiar one with the thriving rock garden dedicated in her honour. In an upcoming exhibition at the Aurora Cultural Centre, however, the family will share artwork, the written word, and other mementos in tribute to their daughter who battled extreme bipolar disorder until her death in 2004.

For them, 'Melinda's Room' will not only be a way to show the community who their daughter really was, but also break down barriers and create a dialogue on mental illness, an affliction that affects so many but so often goes undiagnosed.

'When you think over the centuries the people who have delighted millions of people, whether they are composers, artists or authors, have struggled with difficult lives themselves,' Mrs. Tomlinson tells The Auroran. 'In spite of her struggles, she had an incredible sense of humour and was a very compassionate person. Her son was five when she died, so she taught him to be like that too.'

'She drew many, many people to her through her life. That was very evident in the wake we had for her. There were healthcare professionals, musicians, and writers, and we wanted it to be within reach for the residents of Strachan House (the Toronto support service for the homeless, where she worked) and I could see in their faces how much they loved and respected her.'

When one takes stock of Melinda's art, it is difficult to put it in any sort of category simply because it is so eclectic. Some pieces are on the grander scale inspired by other great works, while other examples include paintings or collages intricately made on the backs of matchbooks, and often with a bottle cap or two thrown in for good measure.

'She was able to make such unusual things with such incredible detail,' says Mrs. Tomlinson. 'Some of the things were religious, some of them were about the environment, and some were about old film stars and politics.'

The Tomlinsons came to Aurora from the United Kingdom in the summer of 1973. Melinda was seven at the time and despite the occasional hardships, they say she and her elder sister Beth made everything fun.

'With Melinda, the fun began on the first night of her life,' recalls Mrs. Tomlinson in a written piece she will share at the opening of Melinda's Room on Thursday, May 2 at 9 p.m. at the Cultural Centre. 'We were living in England in a temporary house. For the birth, we planned to move the old mattress downstairs to cover the couch in the living room, the only heated room.'

?When I went into labour, David was teaching night school. Between contractions, I wrenched the mattress off the bed, lugged it to the landing, and attempted to drag it down the stairs. That proved to be difficult, so I flung it down but it pinged open trapping me near the top of the stairs. When pushing and pulling didn't work, I took a run at it from the top and ended up in a tangled heap at the bottom of the stairs. I then had to leave Beth, 16 months, to walk half a mile to the phone box to call the midwife.?

Bitten by the acting bug, Melinda took part in a number of plays, including *The Tempest*, which is memorialized in her rock garden, rocks for which she purchased as a gift to her parents. An inscription reads ?Hell is empty but the devils are here.?
?Unfortunately, this was a foreboding of what was to happen,? says Dierdre.

Following high school, she studied history and Arabic at university and travelled the world before finding her calling working with the homeless and poverty stricken in Toronto, all the while honing her art. Eventually, though, her illness left her unable to work or care for her son.

?We had a full and loving friendship that left me with no regrets, no words unspoken, no action delayed,? Deirdre wrote. ?David, Beth and I had had long years of practice for her death and all independently felt a sense of relief for her that she was out of her misery before our grief set in. I had wanted her friendship for as long as I lived, but that wasn't to be.?

This friendship, however, will be remembered with select letters between mother and daughter collected over 20 years, letters which illustrate the love and the sense of humour shared by this family, such as missives sent back home from Cairo when she was on a trip to put her Arabic into full conversational practice to tell her mother she had settled in a \$10-a-night hotel.

?She wrote the next day and said, ?I have got a cheaper one. Three bucks and no bed bugs. The rats have eaten them all!?"