

## New nationwide program redefining retirement for local teacher



By Marni Walsh

Launching the national digital history program 'Defining Moments Canada' has radically redefined retirement for former history teacher Neil Orford.

'I jumped in with both feet,' Mr. Orford said. 'People often ask me how retirement is going, and I always tell them that I have failed miserably at retirement.'

Once in charge of a classroom, and a department head for 17 years at Centre Dufferin District High School in Shelburne, Neil is now in charge of a nationwide program for the federal government.

'Today, I run a business; employ a team of national project leaders and creative digital developers; contract scholarly research; design curriculum for a national audience; travel weekly and write grant applications,' says the Orangeville resident. 'It is a very different lifestyle, yet every skill and experience I acquired in teaching is being put to good use. There's no question that teaching has prepared me well for the transition to the business world but still, my learning-curve was huge.'

With its roots in the Digital History Project that began in Dufferin County, under Mr. Orford's leadership, in conjunction with the Museum of Dufferin, the concept has 'blossomed into a national program teaching Canadians how to tell our history in new and exciting ways,' says the former teacher.

'Being awarded the contract to lead the official Canadian national commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Spanish Flu Pandemic was our first 'historical moment' to do so. Young Canadians are our particular audience and using the Digital Historian Project methodology as a 'model', we are able to help teachers do history differently in schools that register for the platform.'

He added, "Digital creative team leader Blake Heathcote's innovative web design makes the Defining Moments Canada website truly unique."

The Defining Moments' platform went live for the first time at a media launch in Toronto last May, with its initial focus commemorating the centennial of the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918. "We had sourced research from so many experts and written so much original content for the website, and seeing it live on the internet was a powerful experience for the whole team."

In September, the team was represented in Oslo, Norway, at a major European conference, where an international audience was exposed to Canadian stories about the Pandemic and the Digital Historian Project. September also saw the launch of a national travelling exhibit with stories of the Canadian pandemic experience shared in communities across the country.

There have been many other accomplishments and milestones in the first year, including being part of National History Week, but Neil says the most rewarding by far, "is seeing the website used by students in their classes across Canada, designing really amazing local history projects on how influenza affected their community in 1918."

Amazingly, several Canadian provinces do not have mandatory Canadian history programs for secondary students. "It is often not a requirement at all in some provinces. This means that a site like Defining Moments Canada has to be flexible enough to speak to Canadians who may know very little about their own country's history."

Over 200 teachers and schools across Canada have registered for the site; close to 50 museums have registered to use the research and model the Digital Historian Project methodology pioneered in Dufferin County; more than a dozen heritage groups have also registered with plans to complete digital projects for a national contest called "Recovering Canada;" and the website has been visited over 30,000 times in its first year.

Neil says the hope is that more "universities, school boards and museums will see the value in interdisciplinary learning opportunities," because "embedding more maths in history class, and more history in math or science class can enrich the experience for so many students."

Going forward, Mr. Orford says the team has approached the Ministry of Canadian Heritage with several new proposals for 2019-20. "We also hope to be working with the Juno Beach Centre to develop the commemorative program for Canadian schools to honour the 75th Anniversary of D-Day on June 6th, 2019.

"I am very proud of our achievements in two short years," he says of his retirement project. "We have in many ways redefined the way Canadians can commemorate their history. Where once we built statues and monuments, in the 21st century we will increasingly build digital memorials, where 'citizen-curators' can contribute as successfully to commemorations as professional public historians " this is where Defining Moments Canada excels."

To experience Defining Moments Canada visit: [www.definingmomentscanada.ca](http://www.definingmomentscanada.ca) .