

Orford's Digital History Project receives Government award

It's been said that one of the best ways to get a student engaged in the subject they are learning about is to find a way to help them connect with that topic.

While that method is still often under-used, one local teacher found a way to apply it that has led not only to an increased interest in history, but to recognition for his incredible program.

Last year, Neil Orford, a history teacher at Centre Dufferin District High School (CDDHS), introduced a program called the Digital Historian Project, a project that marries history and math for students at CDDHS and Westside and Orangeville District Secondary schools, and opens the door to some of the less-known stories of people in Dufferin County.

The program has students working with the Dufferin County Museum and Archives (DCMA), which Mr. Orford has had his students doing in one way or another for about nine years, focusing mainly on the Battlefield program developed with the museum.

The program is an expansion of the Digital War Memorial, which was started by a veteran, Ken Wallace, who gathered stories and amassed information on about 700 different veterans who had once lived in the area. As he became older, he donated the program to the museum.

"Early on in the process, I proposed the idea as an extra-curricular kids could do, where they would research the people and their stories and help the museum create more content around those stories to commemorate and honour the veterans," explained Mr. Orford.

Mr. Orford and his students from CDDHS completed three successful projects with the museum in 2008, 2011 and 2012.

After those years, Mr. Orford began discussing the idea of a credit-based program that could be extended to all three Dufferin high schools. From there, the Digital Historian Project was born.

By 2013, Mr. Orford was ready to submit his completed proposal to the museum board, who embraced the idea, then moved on to both the Upper Grand District School Board and the local schools.

"I really thought it was going to take about 2 1/2 years to implement, but we were able to roll out the first program in the spring of 2015," explained Mr. Orford. "We had a lot of kids who really wanted to be a part of it."

The program is completed entirely on a digital platform, with students working each day from the DCMA, where they conduct archival research and focus on gathering data that helps them to develop a statistical analysis of history patterns. In particular, they focus on 20th Century Veterans.

"The key is that for a lot of kids, it's a pathway into history and math ? into history that is local to them," said Mr. Orford. "Sometimes it's like wandering through a forest, trying to find a path through the trees. The advantage to the program is that they are learning history and math at the same time. Strong math leads to strong history, and vice versa."

He added that he always had an idea that it would go well, but it was one of those things where it sounded and looked great on paper, but would be impossible to tell until actually putting it in action.

"The first group was kind of an experiment," he said. "The kids this spring were our guinea pigs, but they definitely rose to the challenge. To put it in baseball terms, I had hopes they would at least hit some doubles, but they continuously hit it out of the park."

This fall, Mr. Orford was named as the recipient of a Government of Canada History Award for the project. The award, sponsored by the Canadian History Society, looks at projects by teachers all across the country.

?It was a pretty rigorous process,? said Mr. Orford in reference to submitting his proposal for the award. ?I had to collect tremendous amounts of data from students, participate in interviews with the government, sit and wait, and have the judges determine whether the project had merit.?

During the summer, he took students from the first group to France to visit some of the historical places from the two world wars, he was given the opportunity to participate into an interview about the project, which turned into a podcast.

He found out he was a finalist, and said that he had a good feeling about it.

?I was absolutely thrilled they felt the project had merit,? he said. ?I didn't think it would lead to more, but was happy to be recognized as a finalist. All I can say was that it was a fantastic feeling.?

When he discovered he had received the award, he was even more elated.

?The only thing I can say, is that while my name is on the award, there were a lot of other people who were responsible for the success of the project,? he said. ?Teachers from ODSS, the education program at the Museum and more. I want to make sure they all get acknowledged because it took a lot of people. In a boat, you need many people pulling the oars in the same way. They helped pull those oars.?

The next group of students will begin in February, but Mr. Orford isn't entirely sure how long the program will be able to run. Currently, he is spending a lot of time speaking to other groups and schools to encourage other districts to be courageous or crazy enough to do the project too.

?The program relies on a lot of things that need to come together at the same time,? he explained. ?It's not a cheap program, and is very expensive. We need to work hard to encourage the right people that this is a worthy and important program.?

Although there are a lot of great and worthy programs out there, Mr. Orford feels that this is an avenue worth exploring.

?Schools have a lot of great programs in science, math, and athletics ? we need great programs in history as well,? he said. ?Having kids develop a historical mind is an important life skill. It informs everything that you do in life. The kinds of skills that come from a rich, historical understanding are as important as any other skill students are expected to have to graduate from high school.?