Lest We Forget: 'He lived on my street'

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They Walked These Streets: one Toronto teacher is putting the fallen back on their own front lawns

On November 9, 2020, during the loneliest Remembrance Day most of us can remember, 13 poppies went up on a lawn in Toronto's west end. Ian Da Silva's children had made them from pool noodles on bamboo skewers. Next to each poppy was a name. All 13 belonged to men who had once lived within a few minutes' walk of that lawn, and who went to war and didn't come home.

A small group stood for a moment of silence. A neighbour played "Reveille" on a cellphone. That was the whole ceremony, and it was the start of something.

The person who made sure those names were right is Katy Whitfield, a history teacher at Bloor Collegiate Institute in the Toronto District School Board. In 2015 she won the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching, and she was once education coordinator for the Vimy Foundation. Alongside her teaching, and with a growing network of volunteers, she has built They Walked These Streets… We Will Remember Them into one of the most moving acts of remembrance in the country.

The idea is simple: Remembrance usually happens at a cenotaph, in front of a wall of names that most of us can't connect to anyone. Whitfield's project takes those names back to where the people lived. Each November, displays go up on the lawns of churches, schools and homes. Each one carries information cards with a soldier's name, photograph and story, the school or church he attended, and a QR code linking to his record in the Canadian Virtual War Memorial.

> Click here for the Google Map of Soldier Stories

So when you walk down Durie Street, you meet Pte. Charles Jesse Twist, 20, of number 513, killed at Gallipoli in August 1915. A few doors away is Pte. Donald Barrington Taylor, 21, of number 257, killed at Dieppe. Up the road is Seaman Harold Steven Porter, 24, of number 296, lost when HMCS Ottawa went down in 1942. Then there's Pte. John Ross Pollard of number 582. He was 18.

These are not abstractions. These are your neighbours, separated from you by a few decades.

From 13 names to more than 1,300

What began with 13 soldiers grew to 60, then 240. By last November the project had prepared more than 1,300 soldier cards across seven neighbourhoods, from Humbercrest United Church to Bloor Collegiate in Parkdale. It now co between the Humber River, Dufferin Street, St. Clair Avenue West and Churches, schools, local historical societies and families have joined in family now living in the house where brothers Leonard and Leslie Dutt asked for a display. Both brothers died in the Second World War.

All of it rests on careful, painstaking research. Whitfield started from jo Cain's Poppy File map of fallen Torontonians' homes. From there she a network of volunteer researchers work through archival records, cross and track down families. She protects the accuracy of that research fie has to be right, because every card is a person.

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"He lived on my street!"

The part that matters most is what happens to the kids.

Whitfield's Bloor Collegiate students curate exhibits and build scrapbook pages for individual soldiers. During a sabbatical, she took the project into other schools, where each child chose one soldier to learn about. She recalls the reaction: "That pilot lived right in my house. He lived on my street."

"I've had students shriek at me, 'He lived on my street!'" Whitfield told Canada's History. Grade 12 student Lauren Dick said she was "very surprised by the number of soldiers who attended Bloor." Her own school's hallways had sent young men to Vimy, Ortona and the North Atlantic.

What comes next

Whitfield is open to working with others who want to bring it to their own part of the city, as long as the research holds to her standard.



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