

A Visit To The Kings Park Heritage Museum

By Stephen Pravato

Walking into the older section of the RJO school building is practically like taking steps through a time machine. All at once, the musty aroma of “Grandma’s Attic” (one of the many rooms) reminds me of my own Grandma’s house in certain ways. There are so many treasures just bursting to tell their secrets of a century or so ago. As you walk down the first aisle, you can hear the player piano echoing a forgotten melody, check out the bed warmers by the fireplace, swing by the old wringer washing machines, and get a nostalgic taste of what life was like for our great grandparents.

I love the room with the general store, antique cars, old post office, bakery cart, and much more. There are fifteen rooms in all and each one lures you with another piece of our collective history. There is the Cusick War room which houses replicas of Fort Slango (later called Fort Salonga) and the first purple heart ever given by General George Washington. The room has a very respectful resonance, and that is because it honors the great sacrifices made by people from our town. Without these heroes, we would not have the lives we cherish so much.

Other rooms have Native American long houses replicated, and many artifacts like arrowheads from you guessed it, “Indian Head Road.” There is the room filled with antique toys and communication devices, like a telephone booth and old victrolas that need to be wound up to play a vinyl recording. There is a display about Grumman, and how it relates to Long Island, and Kings Park. Across from it is a picture of the “Platt House” still present on Sunken Meadow Road, with its rich Revolutionary War history, and the inspirational stories of the brave Patriots and the hardships they faced at the hands of the British.

The Museum is so much more though, than the rooms filled with eclectic artifacts that in an instant transform the reflections of the past into personal, tangible, items right at your fingertips. The Museum also holds monthly cultural events (for free) which educate and celebrate the many different ethnicities that make up Kings Park. Performers take the stage to offer a taste of their heritages and share their culture with the audience. Books have been written and published by the museum (some of the smaller books are called “Light and Livelies”) by local historians who have preserved historical facts about our firehouse, Howard’s Colored Orphanage, St. Johnland Nursing Center (which was once an orphanage) and many prominent

Kings Park families, buildings, and properties of significance. The Kings Park Psychiatric Hospital is the topic of much documentation, as well as some fact based fictional stories. There are even films based on the hospital. The many publications are a forever recorded history of important facts and events that are now preserved.

How did we come to have such a place in our school district, you might wonder? The answer is a retired Kings Park High School English/ Humanities teacher named Mr. Leo P. Ostebo. He started teaching here in 1958, and fell completely in love with this town. Mr. Ostebo explained to me that Kings Park reminds him of a small town in New Hampshire. "The environment seemed familiar, it was a natural thing." said Mr. Ostebo. He told me that the concept of the museum was first tossed around in 1992. The hospital was about to close (and later did) and Mr. Ostebo was about to retire. Students were excited about it. Many complained "the town was boring and there was nothing to do." Mr. Ostebo went before the school board, and before long, they asked him if he could be the Advisor. In 1994 the museum opened.

Asked what his favorite of the fifteen museum rooms is, and without hesitation, he declared "the Cusick War Room." He added, "It is very symbolic of the Kings Park town--who gives so much due to the upbringing of the citizens and the immigrants who came to this town."

Mr. Ostebo is quick to mention that everyone associated with the museum does all of their work as volunteers. He praised them for their selfless dedication. There are so many people who give of their time and abilities because they love the museum and understand how it elevates the town. If you would like to learn more about the Kings Park Heritage Museum, please visit www.kpheritagemuseum.net. You are invited to purchase the books and Light and Livelies, and learn more about the town. You are welcome to come and visit the museum, and consider becoming an intern and lending a hand. Mr. Ostebo always tells our students, "This is YOUR museum." There is so much to come and see and learn about. This article could hardly scratch the surface. There are opportunities for students to earn community service, conduct Eagle Scout projects, perform research projects, and learn about your particular place in the history of your town where you have grown up, and what part of it you will take along with you.