

Heritage Worker Testimonials for Youth Heritage Symposium – Karla Rasmussen

Karla credits the influence of her late aunt and uncle for inspiring her with a love of history and museums at a young age; she and her younger sister would spend a week with their aunt and uncle in Winnipeg exploring numerous galleries and cultural locations each summer.



Originally from a small town in west-central Manitoba, Karla grew up in her family’s funeral home business. After completing the Visual Communications course offered through her vocational high school, she went on to become the fourth generation of her family to work in the funeral industry, where she found her niche in creating custom memorial designs in their monument sales office.

Moving to Moose Jaw in 2008, she explored several diverse careers where she was able to use her education in developing graphics, campaigns, media relations, and promotional and fundraising materials for local non-profit organizations. In the fall of 2016, she accepted a position at the [WDM Moose Jaw](#) as the

Education and Public Programs Coordinator.

When she is not in the office, she enjoys traveling, camping, photography and exploring the back roads with her family. She has a passion for animals and volunteers with the Moose Jaw Humane Society’s new building committee.

Karla’s motto is “life is too short for boring clothes” and relishes the opportunity to dress up in period-appropriate costumes for the educational programming at the WDM. She thoroughly enjoys her job developing events and programs, talking with students and meeting visitors from around the world. Karla is a strong believer in the Museum’s vision of “a Saskatchewan where everyone belong and histories matter”, and works hard to help make the WDM a welcoming place for all.

Prompts:

1. *What is your name and current occupation/job title?*
 - a. *(Optional: Where were you born and where did you live as a child?)*

My name is Karla Rasmussen and I currently work at the Western Development Museum – Moose Jaw as the Education/Public Programs Coordinator. My job title is a big umbrella that covers things like greeting visitors, planning special events, promoting the museum with the media and helping to develop and deliver school programs. Our programming strives to tell the story of our province through the artifacts in our vast collection of artifacts. I also look after our volunteer program at

the Museum, where we have over 100 people who enjoy lending a hand to help with Saskatchewan heritage.

I was born and raised in a small town called Swan River in Manitoba (population 3,500), not far from the Saskatchewan border so we often spent time in our neighbouring province. My great-grandfather started a furniture and undertaking business in our town back in 1898. Later, my grandfather took over the funeral side of the business and moved the parlour to a residential house that he converted into a funeral home with living space for his family on the second and third floors. My dad also began working at the funeral home as a young man, and my younger sister and I were brought up in the business as well.

I spent a lot of my life in cemeteries; sometimes my dad often had to go to look at a memorial stone for an inscription that needed to be added after someone passed away or he needed to see if there was an existing stone already in place. He and I both enjoyed walking around the cemeteries to look at the designs, symbols and epitaphs. That might sound a little strange, but a cemetery can be a great place to learn about a community's local history, heritage and culture. Where I grew up, many people had farms, so a common design was images of wheat. Some people belonged to organizations like the Masons or the Rotary Club so their symbols could sometimes be seen on the stones. In the older part of the cemetery, you can often find lambs or cherubs on the gravestones of infants and children that stand for the innocence of children. An epitaph is a short verse, quote or saying that is often carved near the bottom of the stone. Some common ones are, "In Loving Memory," and "Rest in Peace," but sometimes you see poetry or on newer stones, parts of popular songs that the deceased may have enjoyed during their life. I encourage you to take a walk through the cemetery to take a look back in time.

2. What is your training/education and where did you receive it? Is/was the training you took available in this province?

My story might be a little different from the others in the symposium, in that I do not have a formal education. I graduated from our vocational high school with a major in Visual Communications (sometimes called graphic design) and I only have a Grade 12 diploma. Growing up, it was always assumed that I would join my father in working at the funeral home, however, I wanted to be an artist! I can distinctly remember my mom saying that I would never make a living by painting pictures but I continued to enjoy drawing, painting and being creative anyway. After graduating from high school, I did go to work with my dad at the funeral home. At first, I drifted between several different roles there, including funeral assistant, hearse driver, usher and more before

I found my way to custom memorial design. I was able to take our clients' ideas and transform them into illustrations that could be sandblasted onto the memorial stones. In this way, we were able to reflect their loved ones' lives on a tangible object and help to carry on their memories. One example was a woman whose husband had been a grain elevator agent for his entire career; she brought me several photos of the last elevator he worked at and from them, I drew a one-of-a-kind image of where he spent many years. My line art was then sandblasted onto the granite memorial stone where it will be for many years to come.

I worked at the funeral home for twelve years before I moved to Moose Jaw in 2008. My parents had passed away suddenly and I realized that I should start living the life I wanted to live rather than the one my family wanted me to. I wanted to stretch my wings and become my own person. Even though I still did not have any further education, I was open to new possibilities.

My first Saskatchewan job was working at the Moose Jaw Humane Society. I started as a kennel attendant and adoption councilor and then moved up to the role of fundraising and promotions for the shelter. I learned so much working at the humane society and am forever grateful for this opportunity. Not only did I learn about animal welfare but I also learned a lot about making connections. I helped to grow our volunteer support and raised money for the care of the pets while they waited for their forever homes. I learned how to "network" (which basically means to meet with people from different backgrounds) and met many people in our community while learning about what other organizations in our city were doing. I also found my love for non-profit work. I learned that I wasn't camera shy and didn't have a fear of public speaking, and I became confident in speaking to the media, doing interviews and acting as an ambassador for the shelter.

After almost five years at the humane society, it was time to move on for me, as it was starting to take an emotional toll – it was difficult but also extremely rewarding to work at the shelter for those years. I worked in the newsroom as a reporter for Golden West Radio for almost two years where I learned about concise storytelling and covering what was important to our city and the surrounding area. I then moved on to a position at the Canadian Cancer Society as the Volunteer Pathway Coordinator for the province of Saskatchewan. I was able to build on my past experience in helping to recruit and schedule volunteers. Following that, I worked briefly at a seniors' retirement community in sales but quickly realized that I was not fond of "for-profit" work after spending so much time in philanthropy.

Then the opportunity at the WDM came up and I jumped at the chance to work at the Museum. I had had a membership for a number of years (even before moving to Moose Jaw) and was quite familiar with the Museum and some of its events and programs. To be perfectly honest, I was later told that I was hired because of who I was (my personality, my life experiences, and my enthusiasm) rather than what I knew. I was told that what I would need for this heritage job could be taught to me, but things like creativity and passion were much harder for someone to learn.

I've embraced my position here at the WDM and have taken several courses offered through the Museums Association of Saskatchewan (MAS), including *Museums and Education*, *Museums and the Community*, and *Research*. I've also been fortunate to have been able to shadow other Museum education staff at the WDM to see how their programs work and what might be adaptable for my location.

3. *How did you develop a passion for heritage*? Was it something that you always wanted to pursue?*

We had a small settler village museum in my hometown and I enjoyed going to visit each year during their annual harvest festival. When my sister and I were a little older, we used to take the bus to Winnipeg (about a seven-hour ride one way!) to visit my dad's sister and her husband. Our aunt and uncle were the people who were the greatest influence in my interest of heritage. They opened our eyes to a world beyond our backyard by taking us to a number of museums, galleries and historic sites in southern Manitoba. Working in the heritage field wasn't something I necessarily had dreamed about, but I was quite fortunate to be offered the opportunity at the WDM.

4. *How do you integrate heritage into your work?*

When we develop programs for the WDM, we try to frame the event around the items in our collection and/or our vision for the Museum, which is, "We believe in a Saskatchewan where everyone belongs and history matters," and that heritage drives the planning process. Sometimes we want to make a program about something that we might not have at our museum but that is still important to the province's culture. An example of this is our annual fashion show. It showcases real pieces of clothing (some from the early 1900s) and while the models display the garments, a Master of Ceremony speaks about some important historical events that happened in our province during the time period that the clothing is from. These pieces of clothing are normally kept in storage at our Corporate Office and are sent down to us in advance of the event. Clothing is something that is very personal, so it is a great way to show what was popular at different times in our province's past.

5. *Why is heritage important to you? Why is heritage important to our society?*

Heritage is important to me because it isn't necessarily something we can touch and feel – it's also things like dance, food, and stories. I think it's important to preserve so it is not lost for future generations; the tangible and the intangible are all things that speak to why things were done a certain way in a different time or place. Heritage is happening all around us so it's not just things that are on exhibit in a museum.

6. *Is the career path that you took (or are undertaking) still a viable option for students today? Are there different options that you would recommend that were not available to you?*

I still feel incredibly lucky to have attained the position I am currently engaged in at the Western Development Museum. Maybe it was just luck or some of the connections I made along the way during my time in Saskatchewan, but I feel that if you want to pursue something that you are passionate about, don't necessarily let the educational side of things hold you back. By all means, explore further education, but sometimes things like volunteering at an historic site and interacting with visitors in this way can provide you with more firsthand experience than a course ever could. Go explore the world and (safely) make friends with strangers!

7. *If you could do (or have done) anything differently, what would that be?*

If I could do things over again, I would look at more post-secondary education options. Because of my remote location at the time, online or correspondence courses could have offered a greater platform or jumping off point for me. I also wish I had had more courage to do something like becoming an exchange student and spend a year abroad in a different country to learn about a new culture and heritage.

8. *Anything else that you would like to add about yourself and your work?*

I think that I have enjoyed exploring some low-key learning opportunities when time has permitted in the way of webinars and online workshops as of late. They may not provide a degree but being able to hear about different cultures, heritage and how they have been and are represented has been quite valuable to me. Learning to design programs with partners (and not to design a program and then invite a partner after the fact) has been a terrific experience to learn and grow in my own pathways.

9. *What advice do you have for high-school-aged students?*

My advice for high school aged students is to do what interests you, even if it isn't what your friends are doing. Don't be afraid to make new friends and connections –

even if you start off in one direction and then change it entirely, there are still experiences you will never forget and will always learn from along the way.

**As per Heritage Saskatchewan's definition of heritage as "those values, beliefs and ways of living we inherit from past generations that we still use to understand the present and make choices for the future" as well as history, community involvement, and cultural background.*