

Leaving a legacy

Westwood Collegiate history teacher reflects on both past and future following national recognition

EMMA HONEYBUN
STAFF REPORTER

WESTWOOD

This year, 35 teachers from across Canada were recipients of the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Teaching.

One of them, Kelly Hiebert, is a teacher at Westwood Collegiate.

Hiebert received the certificate of achievement for his work in social studies, Canadian history, IB history, and American history for students in Grades 9 to 12. The 39-year-old has been teaching for 17 years, and has been at Westwood for 16 of them. He's taught a variety of historical subjects, but has been most recognized for his work in Holocaust education.

Hiebert is also the founder of Westwood Collegiate's Historical Society, an extra-curricular group which aims to raise awareness and "inspire today's youth to have a voice in creating a more tolerant world."

The documentary film *Truth Against Distortion: Survivors Speak Against Hate* was a project produced by Grade 12 students involved in the Westwood Historical Society, with support from the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada. The film — which focused on the modern era of anti-Semitism and Holocaust distortion — went on to be shown at film festivals in Toronto, around North America and in parts of Europe. It featured interviews with Holocaust survivors orchestrated by the students under Hiebert's guidance.

Truth Against Distortion was also the recipient of a Governor General's Award in 2022. Hiebert calls it his "magnum opus."

"When I die, that's the last thing I wanna leave as a legacy," he said. "Because the students poured everything into it. From the creative process, to the composition of music, to archival research, to talking amongst

themselves, their families, their friends... they immersed themselves in the entire process and you see that in the film. So for me, that's definitely a shining light in my career. I never thought I would ever make a documentary — never mind get the support and visibility that it's had."

On an everyday basis, he said it is a "huge success" to see students being compassionate and vulnerable when addressing important and relevant issues such as genocide and racial violence.

Kevin Dueck, principal at Westwood Collegiate, said he always tries to support projects like Hiebert's.

"My approach when I have conversations with teachers who have passions for their subjects is that I ask myself the question, 'How can I support this?'" he said. "How can we overcome some of the barriers that may come up?" I just really like to collaborate with teachers and help them take the next step. And this one, the Westwood Historical Society, (had) lots of student support, family support and involvement. (It) just had a life of its own."

Hiebert is aware that history is always being made, and so looks forward to other issues that the Historical Society can bring to light.

"We meet at the end of every year to discuss what initiatives we'd like to kind of focus on," Hiebert said. "And for the last year and a bit, Truth and Reconciliation has been a big, big topic for us."

Hiebert added that he's been trying to bring as many knowledge keepers in to talk to the students as possible, including University of Manitoba professor Brian Rice, and residential school survivors.



Supplied photo

Kelly Hiebert, a recipient of the Prime Minister's Award for achievement in teaching, is the founder of Westwood Collegiate's Historical Society.

There are many other subjects students want to explore, he added — including Black History Month, LGBTQ2S+ rights, women's rights and suffrage — and any future projects will be up to them.

"No matter how old anybody is, you're always able to be open-minded, to learn to challenge preconceived notions that one might have. This is what I do on a daily basis, even though I would consider myself someone who's educated, there are certain things that I still have to kind of dig deep into to fully understand," Hiebert said. "If we want to create a better world, we have to start with ourselves. And sometimes we have to do some deep reflecting on who we are and what we are about to create that kind of environment."

Kim Greening, a teacher at West St. Paul School, also received a certificate of achievement.

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