

Leslieville resident delves into the history of homes

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Robin Burgoyne is fascinated with bringing the history of homes alive.

The Leslieville resident runs her own home-based business called Caerwent HouseStories, which specializes in chronicling and compiling the history of her clients' homes and properties.

With a long family history of being involved in the real estate and housing development business - her great-great grandfather ran his own brick works, her father was a city planner and real estate appraiser and her brother is an architect - Burgoyne said she felt naturally drawn to the field when considering starting up her own venture.

"Houses and that sort of thing are in the family blood," the Calgary native smiled.

Having worked in the film industry as a production coordinator and in market and social survey research, Burgoyne said she wanted to do something that would make good use of her Master's Degree in History from the University of Calgary.

"I felt it was time for a change, to try out new opportunities," said the eight-year Gerrard Street East and Greenwood Avenue resident, adding she's always had an interest in houses.

To help her along the way, Burgoyne enrolled in a government-funded, self-employment benefits program that provided her with 10 weeks of instruction on how to start her own business, financial support and the guidance of a business counsellor.

In 2008, Burgoyne started Caerwent HouseStories, which is named in honour of the region in Wales where her grandparents once lived and where her father spent a great deal of time as a child. Caerwent is also believed to be the home of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, she added.

Burgoyne's first project was to research the history of her own home on Richard Avenue. She also studied a friend's home.

She learned that her circa-1912 house was built by a certain Mr. Buckner, a father of six sons who was into local property development and real estate.

Located in a former working-class neighbourhood, several borders, many of whom had jobs at nearby brickworks, once lived in her house. At one point, it was home to a professional bowler.

To source information, Burgoyne spends a significant amount of time online. She also visits local libraries and the Reference Library and is a regular at the Toronto Land Registry Office.

"I'm also a fixture, you'd say, at the (City of) Toronto Archives," she chuckled, adding the Ontario Archives at York University is another spot she visits for her research.

Burgoyne combs through old newspaper clippings, birth and death notices, photographs, maps, advertisements and tax records to uncover the history of her clients' homes and those who once lived there.



Leslieville resident delves into the history of homes. Robin Burgoyne runs a home-based business, Caerwent, that researches the history of your home. *Staff photo/JOANNA LAVOIE*

"I also try to find and link up with people who lived in that house," she said, adding on average each house takes at least 100 to 150 hours to research.

One of her favourite projects was exploring the history of a Cabbagetown home at 182 Seaton St. That home's first owner was a wealthy Scottish immigrant by the name of John Taylor, a well-known manufacturer of safes. For this project, she was able to track down a former resident who shared stories and memories during a walk-thru of the house.

"A lot of people when they first buy a house are curious," said Burgoyne when talking about what motivates people to want to learn about the history of their home.

"I get very excited when I find out something very interesting about a home (I'm researching). Every house has a story."

In some cases, Burgoyne's even been able to come up with possibilities about why unquiet souls still lurk in a grand old home's hallowed halls.

Aside from researching homes, Burgoyne can also be hired to conduct workshops about how to research your home and is available to study the history of non-residential buildings.

Visit www.housestories.ca for more information.

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