



Touched by Fire event showcases art of people with mood disorders

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Taking pictures of forgotten spaces and historical buildings is a longtime passion for Leslieville photographer Olena Sullivan.

Thursday, Nov. 26, that passion will be showcased as part of the third annual Touched by Fire art show and sale.

Put on by the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario, the one-night event takes place at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), 100 Queens Park.

Sullivan, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1996, said capturing real life scenarios on film is therapeutic.

"It's my way of releasing, keeping myself grounded, maintaining my balance," said Sullivan, a graphic designer by trade who has been exhibiting her work professionally for the last five years.

The Montreal native who moved to the area about 11 years ago said she's especially thankful for the love and encouragement she's received from her husband David.

"He's extremely supportive," Sullivan said, explaining David knows right away when she starts exhibiting certain signs of her mood disorder and encourages her to channel her energies in positive ways.

"He appreciates the benefits that photography brings to my life."

Sullivan, a founding member of the Shadow Collective (www.shadowcollective.com), photo editor for Heritage Toronto and chair of the programming committee at Queen Street East's Hang Man Gallery, said being involved in the Touched by Fire event as an exhibiting artist is a special experience.

"There isn't anything like this out there. It's a safe environment for artists (with mood disorders) to come together," she said, adding many participants are often a little hesitant or face various challenges to exhibiting their work.

"It's really a chance to meet like-minded artists, share stories, and support each other."

This year, the event has moved from the Gladstone Hotel over to the ROM and Sullivan, who is showcasing her photographs for the third consecutive year, couldn't be more thrilled.

"It's going to be wonderful. It's so exciting to think that my art is going to be in the ROM," she said.

"I look forward to Touched by Fire every year. Even if I didn't get in I'd still support it and go. I'm amazed by the artwork that is there, especially by people who have never exhibited before."



Touched by Fire event showcases art of people with mood disorders. Leslieville photographer Olena Sullivan shares her longtime passion for snapping photos of forgotten spaces and historical buildings at the Touched by Fire art show and sale, Nov. 26. *Photo/COURTESY*

The Touched by Fire program, which also includes an online gallery where artists with mood disorders can post and promote their work for free, was created back in 2007 as a result of an endowment fund from the family of young artist Rebecca Burghardt, who suffered from severe bipolar disorder and ultimately took her own life in 2005.

The term "touched by fire" lends itself to the connection between mental illness or mood disorders and amazing artistic talent.

"For us, it was about creating a safe and welcoming community for artists with mood disorders," said Ellen Ostofsky, the organization's director of fundraising and special projects, crediting the ongoing support of the Burghardt family and presenting sponsor Raymond James Ltd.

Ostofsky said in the show and sales' first year the association received 178 submissions, but this time around more than 450 artists requested to be in Touched by Fire. Due to spacing, only 75 works can be showcased at the ROM.

"We're really excited about this new venue. It's going to be a stunning awareness raising event," she enthused.

"We're trying to bust all of the stigmas. We want to show the world that people with mood disorders come from all walks of life."

Visit www.touchedbyfire.ca for more information about the program.

Email carlinb@mooddisorders.on.ca to reserve your spot at the Touched by Fire showcase and sale.

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