

## Essays by Orria Nielsen, P&DCI

### Recipient of 2024 Tay Valley Township History Scholarship

1. *Describe how you have demonstrated your interest in history, both in and out of school.*

History class in elementary school was phenomenally boring to my 10-year-old mind. My Grade 4 teacher would have been disappointed if she realized how little I actually knew about our prime ministers. Aside from learning about Indigenous cultures, I thought the subject was tedious. If you had told me then that I plan to dedicate my life to history, that the prospect of sifting through soil for pottery shards excites me, I would have laughed in your face.

My interest in history grew over the next two years. Greek and Egyptian mythology was my introduction, and I am still fond of the Percy Jackson books. In Grade 6, I won the multicultural award for my Heritage Fair project on the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows. I really started to enjoy history then, but as a pastime. A career in history could only be as a museum curator, or an archivist, I thought.

Then the pandemic hit, and life changed. Everyone would say, "This is what it's like to live through history." History was miserable. My emotions were a whirlwind, and everything on the news seemed to make things worse, except the articles about what archaeologists were doing. I started to take solace in exploring the past, but then I realized that this was something I wanted to do. Everything about my future clicked. Suddenly, ancient Babylon, Rome, Cusco, and Ur seemed within reach. I found a path where I could explore the past, explore the modern world, and explore the lives of people around the globe.

That was two years ago, and I am now on the brink of starting my education in archaeology.

I have spent the time in between learning about the connections between our modern world and the world of the past. I went on a cultural exchange to France and was able to explore cities older than our own, here in Canada. I wondered about the generations of people who walked those streets. How has life changed since the builders of Lyon, France, lived? There is still so much to learn about our past.

I listen to archaeology podcasts at work and occasionally bombard my friends with fun facts about the Inca or Easter Island. In English and French classes, I have gotten the chance to read older texts. From *Cyrano de Bergerac* to *Frankenstein*, we have explored language and society from different times. In Biology class, learning about genealogy and pedigrees has only increased my excitement for university next year—discovering how we are connected and intertwined with each other and our ancestors on a cellular level.

While the past has already happened and cannot be changed, there is still so much for us to learn. And I never intend to stop exploring it.

2. *Explain the importance of understanding history in today's society.*

Everything we are taught in school is an accumulation of centuries, or millennia of history. From the discovery of the atom, to the evolution of language, to the foundation of mathematical systems, the work of countless famous names, and even more forgotten minds, has brought us to where we are today.

I watch as the world seems driven on moving forward at top speed. We progress and advance and develop as we have always done so, and will continue to do so. My mom handwrote her essays; my classmates and I are lectured on not using AI.

Today is an age of social media, fast consumption, bold headlines, flash trends, cancel culture, bandwagons, performance, misinformation, extremism:

- “If you don’t share this on your story, you don’t support [this cause].”
- “This celebrity said [this] in 2015; I’m blocking them. If you still follow them, we can’t be friends.”

We form opinions based on 30-second videos and pull truths from headlines without reading the articles. We wonder what is real and what is AI. People scream about politics, having done no research outside of Instagram. I understand. I was once guilty of these same habits, before I realized there are layers to the issues we learn about.

As we strive to harness our collective power, understanding history and being well informed becomes more and more important.

The cities of Pompeii and Stabiae did not know the danger of building near volcanoes, and now we learn from their stories.

As conflicts, such as between Israel and Palestine, hold the spotlight, historical context becomes key to understanding the situation, no matter where you stand on the issue.

Indigenous land-defenders fighting Big Oil are defending their history, their land, and their culture. They know what they’re fighting for, and we must do the same.

The youth of my generation are poised to inherit this earth, and it is key that we understand the past in order to know where we want to go. We are in a time of change, and one thing that adults tell me, which I know to be true, is that any single one of us can change the world. Spartacus, Emily Howard Stowe, Irena Sendler, Martha P. Johnson, and Joan of Arc were all average people who saved lives or brought change to the world.

As we speed towards the future, we must stay grounded in the past to remember and understand how we arrived where we are. We must recognize our power and use it intentionally, not blindly. We can use the past to shape the future, so as to create the world we want to see some day.