

Culture Builds Community!

Engage

Fall 2024
Volume 15 Issue 1

Sask
Culture



Life-long learning opportunities enrich musical landscape in Saskatchewan

Community art project inspires inclusion

Contents

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and the

diversity
of activities

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and Recreation.



ON THE COVER:

From painting murals to exploring
new cultures, cultural activity builds
community throughout the province.

(Photo by Todd Hansen)

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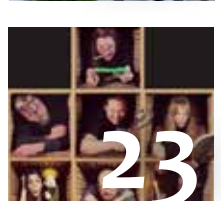
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Message From the CEO

No matter what strategic plan or organizational focus that SaskCulture has maintained over the years, *Culture Builds Community* has always been a foundational belief for our organization. Fourteen years ago, when I first started working at SaskCulture, I didn't realize how integral this idea was in supporting quality of life in this province.

Meaningful cultural activity and partnerships contribute to healthy lifestyles, tourism and economic development, life-long learning and education, open-minded and civil thought, increased social capital, community pride, as well as individual confidence, self-esteem and academic success. This issue of *Engage* highlights numerous examples of how culture is making a difference in communities large and small.

Thanks to funding from Sask Lotteries, SaskCulture is supporting many of these cultural activities, which are designed to support and build community throughout the province. SaskCulture believes that community leaders, artists and cultural workers and other like-minded people know what is best for their own communities. To ensure that dollars support community needs throughout the province, we continue to listen and engage a diversity of people. We have structured our peer assessment process to ensure accurate representation during adjudications. We continue to listen to community leaders and members of assessment panels on how to improve the adjudication process and to make our grants more accessible. Our board members come from all across the province and reflect the diversity of our province's population. On a daily basis, our staff members are in conversations with those endeavouring to bring cultural vibrancy to their communities. We provide training and professional development activities that help strengthen the capacity of our cultural network.

Through Sask Lotteries funding, SaskCulture supports communities in offering cultural activities that meet *their* needs. Community leaders know what is best. You see, SaskCulture is simply a mechanism to help culture weave its way into communities. We understand that communities, organizations and individuals know what is best for their communities and they understand the impact cultural activity has on our province. Any part we can play in making sure culture thrives and, in turn, impacts people across the province, we are ready, willing and able to work with you.


Dean Kush



Cultural activities across Saskatchewan, supported by Sask Lotteries, enhance life and build community.

(Photos courtesy of the Melfort Arts Council, Denae Bruce and the Val Marie Heritage committee)

Life-long Learning Opportunities

ENRICH MUSICAL LANDSCAPE IN SASKATCHEWAN

BY JACKIE LEDINGHAM

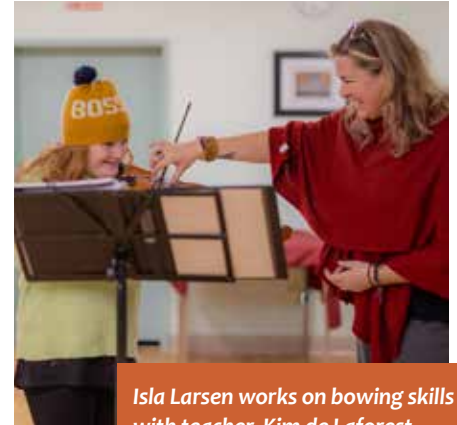
From their Beginner Player Program to the world's only Saito-based conducting workshop, the Saskatchewan Orchestral Association (SOA) supports ongoing learning opportunities for string players and conductors in the province. Opportunities for these musicians to enhance their craft are key to the continued growth and enjoyment of orchestral music as part of the province's vibrant cultural community.

Elaine Kaloustian, executive director, SOA, says the organization is the only support for orchestral development in Saskatchewan, as string playing is not subsidized or supported in school band programs in the same way as other instruments. "Our organization provides a healthy opportunity for people of all

ages to participate in the performance of orchestral music," she says, "and, for audiences across the province to enjoy the artistic, intellectual, and emotional stimulation that performances provide both at amateur and professional levels."

Celebrating their 40th anniversary next year, the SOA continues to adapt and respond to the needs of the community they serve. It offers grassroots initiatives for youth and amateur musicians, provides wages to professional musicians as instructors and supports new orchestral groups, such as the Latinas en Regina, a new Mariachi ensemble.

Adrian Casas, president, SOA, says because of the organization's support for development of skills, it builds the



Isla Larsen works on bowing skills with teacher, Kim de Laforest.

orchestral community and creates new opportunities for musicians and conductors in the province. For Casas, when he took the Saito-based conducting workshop, his technique in conducting not only improved,

Every year, the SOA holds the world's only Saito-based conducting workshop bringing together musicians from all over the world. (Photos by George Charpentier)



but he also gained connections with musicians around the world. In addition, new opportunities came his way when the Regina Community and the University of Regina orchestras invited him to conduct.

Overall, the study of music and conducting develops other essential skills that grow community, says Casas. “If you’re in an ensemble, you have to make sure you’re leading as much as following. That develops leadership skills. And when you’re a part of an orchestra you have to pull your own weight or the entire group falls apart. So you learn collaboration.”

In addition, Kaloustian says, “Music plays a significant role in life-long learning by engaging multiple aspects of our cognitive and emotional development. People have written PhD dissertations, and a plethora of studies have been done, about how the study of music develops cognitive skills, emotional intelligence, cultural understanding, creativity and innovation, social connections and life-long engagement in music.”

“Music plays a significant role in life-long learning by engaging multiple aspects of our cognitive and emotional development.”

- ELAINE KALOUSTIAN

Overall, the larger community benefits by the SOA’s existence. She says, “We regard music in general, and orchestral music specifically, as an essential human element, as music is an important way through which people can be educated.” In addition to educating and training performers to play their instruments in a way that enhances emotional responses, she says, “the broad community finds value in feeling excited, calmed and every other emotion through experiencing music.”

She notes that the SOA’s summer workshops and youth orchestras in Regina and Saskatoon have significantly



More opportunities to conduct came to Adrian Casas after improving his technique through the workshop.

contributed to building a solid foundation of skilled performers. These programs have helped cultivate talent that now supports professional organizations, such as the symphony orchestras in Saskatoon and Regina, who benefit from the contributions of local musicians.

The Saskatchewan Orchestral Association receives Annual Global Funding from the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.





PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

Instills Multicultural Understanding

THROUGH MOMENTS OF JOY

BY HEYWOOD YU

Community art projects, such as the Mosaic of Black Joy and Wellness in Saskatchewan, demonstrate the power of imagery and how it can help build dialogue and understanding around racial discrimination, while also promoting diversity.

Mosaic of Black Joy is a travelling photography exhibit that features the stories of 16 Black Saskatchewan residents. Using a participatory research method, known as photovoice, participants submitted photos and reflections that share their perspectives and personal meanings on joy and wellness. The exhibit kicked off during Black History Month on February 6, 2024 at the University of Saskatchewan, then travelled to universities, colleges, libraries and museums across the province. It served as a catalyst for dialogue about diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism. The photographs invited viewers to explore the joys, challenges, and complexities of Black life in a way that is both engaging and enlightening.

“Art is powerful. People can engage in a topic of anti-racism in an easier way, in digestible content, without completely shutting down,” says Florence Mudzongo, founder of the Saskatchewan Association of Black Social Workers (SABSW), who led the Mosaic of Black Joy and Wellness project. “It’s a way of engaging with the community without the usual resistance or discomfort that comes with directly addressing racism.”



According to Mudzongo, this traveling exhibit is more than an art display that celebrates happiness and joy within the Black community—it’s a powerful statement of resistance against racial discrimination. “Racism is painful, but we find that joy is actually an entryway for people to heal and to continue to move forward,” says Mudzongo.

“Art is powerful. People can engage in a topic of anti-racism in an easier way, in digestible content, without completely shutting down.”

– FLORENCE MUDZONGO

JUST DO IT
 Illnesses like diabetes, cancer and heart diseases plaguing the Black community, the promotion of healthy eating and regular exercise boosts wellbeing among our community.
Empress Welch, Jamaican Canadian
THE MOSAIC OF BLACK JOY AND WELLNESS

She goes on to say that, “Through joy, we maintain our humanity.” By focusing on the moments that bring joy to Black individuals, she says, it reminds viewers that in the face of adversity, joy is not just an act of resistance—it is a celebration of life and a reclamation of humanity.

“This is a display, an exhibit that people can attend, engage with, and learn about diversity in a way that’s accessible to all,” Mudzongo says. “We gave them something that they could actually use, that is a tangible way to talk about diversity, learn about diversity, and understand how to be inclusive.”

The Saskatchewan Association of Black Social Workers received support from SaskCulture’s Multicultural Initiative Fund (MIF), funded by the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.

THE SECRET OF THE EVERGREEN TREES
 I used to wonder what protected the evergreens and kept them thriving in harsh winter conditions and poor soil. Then I learned that they have adapted their growing patterns to stay green all year and that they thrive on all continents. Their pine needles contain essential oils in their bark and needles to prevent them from freezing in winter. As a Black immigrant, I adapt without losing my identity. To cope with racial battle fatigue, I find solace in prayer, spending time with family, hiking, listening to African music, eating African foods, and being part of a supportive community. These activities are like my BlackJoy essential oil.
Mkuli, South African Immigrant.

THE MOSAIC OF BLACK JOY AND WELLNESS PHOTOGRAPHY

The photo exhibit demonstrated how imagery can create understanding about the benefits of diversity within the province. (Photos by Florence Mudzongo)





POWWOW PROJECT

Empowers Youth to Lead

BY NICKITA LONGMAN

Denaë Bruce believes that traditional mentorship encourages youth to gain a deeper understanding of who they are, which helps build their confidence. It also inspires them to participate in other forms of cultural knowledge-sharing and exchange.

These beliefs led to The Small Fires Indigenous Mentorship Program (SFIM) that was created to engage and connect First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, as well as non-Indigenous students, through cultural-based programming. Entirely volunteer-run, the program, offered through the Lloydminster Public School Division (LPSD), is the school's direct response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action.

"These kinds of experiences empower youth by reinforcing their cultural identity while teaching them the importance of community and continuity," says Bruce, an Indigenous coach, at LPSD. "Through this empowerment, they are encouraged to become leaders in their own right while advocating for their culture and contributing to its overall preservation for future generations."

Upon learning the Lloydminster Museum + Archives would host the "Powwow! Ohcîwin The Origins" exhibit in January 2024, Bruce recognized there was an

opportunity for a collaborative project that would benefit the students involved in the SFIM. With many skilled traditional dancers in the school, Bruce also knew the project would be beneficial for all students and would help foster a deeper understanding of culture for the division and community overall.

"These kinds of experiences empower youth by reinforcing their cultural identity while teaching them the importance of community and continuity."

- DENAË BRUCE

"I knew our involvement would align with our division's mandate and be particularly meaningful to the students," Bruce says. "It is so important for Indigenous youth to be mentored by Elders and Knowledge Keepers who carry deep wisdom and are there to guide them through cultural teachings."

The project enhanced each student's existing dancing skills while sharing a deeper understanding on the traditional

meaning behind each dance category and further explanations about the dance regalia. These meanings were shared with a larger audience, which promoted an environment that celebrated cultural teachings and traditions, further enriching the Lloydminster community with Indigenous history, traditions and insights.

"Cultural projects, such as the "Powwow! Ohcîwin The Origins" exhibit, invite the wider public to engage and learn while fostering an understanding, mutual respect and inclusion," says Bruce. "Ultimately, they build unity, resilience, and a collective sense of purpose, which are essential for a thriving community."

Bruce goes on to say, "Perhaps the most impactful moments were witnessing the younger students come out of their shell and dance with so much pride and joy. The project, as well as the partnership with the mentors, provided a powerful sense of connection and validation for the students involved. It elevated their experience while deepening their pride in their culture."

The Lloydminster Museum + Archives received support from SaskCulture's Aboriginal Arts and Culture Leadership (AACL) Grant, funded by the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.



Students in the Small Fires Indigenous Mentorship Program benefited from their involvement in the "Powwow! Ohcîwin The Origins" exhibit gaining a stronger sense of connection to their culture. (Photos courtesy of Dena Bruce)

Podcast Builds Understanding

AROUND DISABILITY CULTURE

BY ANA CRISTINA CAMACHO



Wanting to create a sense of belonging and community that transcends barriers, Natasha Urkow and Maria Doyle launched the successful Mixed Crips podcast, now in its second season.

According to the founders, the podcast's mission is to show people living with disabilities that there are others like them out there —brought together by disability culture. In each episode, artists Urkow and Doyle discuss their experiences with art, relationships, employment and more, through the lens of disability, often bringing in guests from Saskatchewan and beyond to the conversations.

“Community is at the forefront of our podcast,” Urkow says. “That is what it's for. It's to build this community to have a safe place where people with disabilities can listen, talk and give their opinions.”

Doyle first had the idea for the podcast years ago. She and Urkow frequently shared candid conversations that “came from shared understanding of a life within disability”. The duo formed a strong bond through sharing their experience with, as Doyle describes her undercover disability, (ADHD) and Urkow's acquired disability (a spinal cord injury). The podcast was a way to bring in more people together for these important discussions.

“One of the big drives behind creating this podcast was for there to be a voice and a lens to answer some of these questions, these topics that people might be searching for but are too afraid to ask,” she says.

Having now surpassed the milestone of 1,000 listens over the past year, Urkow and Doyle are grateful to have received positive feedback and support from listeners both local and international. The podcast is accessible from anywhere in the world. The pair is also proud to have built community with the many diverse guests featured in the podcast who have experience with physical and cognitive mixed abilities.

Urkow says, it's a privilege to host a safe space where people can share their stories. “Sometimes it's hard, sometimes it gets emotional. We are talking about



Natasha Urkow (left) and Maria Doyle (right) created the Mixed Crips podcast to bring understanding and build connection through discussions about disability culture. (Photos courtesy of Urkow and Doyle)

“Community is at the forefront of our podcast. That is what it's for. It's to build this community; to have a safe place where people with disabilities can listen, talk and give their opinions.”

— NATASHA URKOW

things that can be tense, or can be a trauma for people — we've all struggled in one way or another to be accepted, to learn about disability, or getting treatment from outside the community,” she says. “We are privileged to be able to have these intimate moments.”

Recording and producing the podcast itself has been a “raw experience” in storytelling, says Doyle. When editing the episodes, the hosts frequently question whether to include or delete unfiltered

moments. For example, there are moments in the recording when Urkow is calling for her care support. Or, there are moments where Doyle is burnt out from a week of recording and feels she is not making sense. “We intentionally leave it in because that is part of my experience with my disability,” Doyle says.

Going forward, the pair hopes to garner more support to continue hosting these conversations around disability culture. As a long-time member of the local arts community, Doyle says that, “the needle is moving too slow” for support for disability in the arts, which is why community-building projects, such as the Mixed Crips podcast, are important.

“I think that arts and culture is the best way to affect change,” Urkow adds. “We truly believe in it, and I think that's what we're trying to do. That's the reason why we need to believe in it and keep it going.”

The second season of the Mixed Crips podcast was produced with support from SaskCulture's Small Grant Accessibility Program (SGAP), with funding from the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund.

ART COUNCILS CONTRIBUTE TO Quality of Life Within Communities

BY KATIE DOKE SAWATZKY



Arts councils bring communities together to enjoy a shared love of music, visual art, and performances. Thanks to a well-coordinated system, local arts councils are able to work with their provincial partner to select and book entertainment that ignites interest and builds community.

There are 45 volunteer-run art councils located across Saskatchewan. Along with 80 different schools, the arts councils are part of a network of community organizers that connect to the Organization of Saskatchewan Arts Councils (OSAC) to access professional artists, support in running quality exhibitions and performances, and other professional development opportunities. Last year, arts councils and schools offered 258 shows around the province, engaging over 52,151 people.

Kevin Korchinski, executive director, OSAC, says that this system works to ensure that communities can have access to quality arts and performance, selected through the organization's criteria and lengthy experience with booking entertainment. He says, OSAC's role is to make it easier for local art councils across the province to access these artistic opportunities for their communities. "All the scheduling and contracting with artists comes through our office," he says. "We make it a turnkey operation for the volunteers."

Joanne Bolen, chair, Melfort Arts Council, helped choose her council's roster of artists for the 2024-2025 season from OSAC's "Showcase" conference last September. "The fact that OSAC is there to say, 'Here we've curated all these shows, take your pick,' it's just like, 'I want that one and I want that one,'" she laughs. "They're really great to lean on. If you feel like you're doing this work alone then it's daunting, but if you've got people that really want to see you succeed without strings attached, it's great."



Melfort Arts Council brought in three of OSAC's recommended performers, which included Diyet and the Love Soldiers, Ellen Froese and Jack Garton. One hundred people turned out for each of the shows at Melfort's Kerry Vickar Centre, and the local animal shelter received funds from the food sales at the first two. Twenty-eight school groups toured visual art from OSAC's exhibitions in Melfort, and three exhibitions at the Kerry Vickar Centre brought in 10,100 people. The Council also offered an arts adjudication and workshop by Leah Dorian, attended by six artists.

Besides bringing out audiences, Bolen says partnering with local non-profits at their events helps connect with new people and surrounding communities. By doing so, "we are reaching out to people who may not necessarily come to Melfort for a concert," she says.

Melfort Arts Council organized a launch last September, for the first time, to celebrate its upcoming season. The event was such a hit that the Council now holds one every year. "Someone said it was like a family reunion," says Bolen, who noted the idea for the launch was suggested by OSAC.

Korchinski emphasizes the impact of art councils in bringing arts and culture to their communities. "It's a real community-builder when people see how volunteers are bringing this quality of art to their community."

The Melfort Arts Council is supported by the Organization of Saskatchewan Arts Councils, which is funded by the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.



OSAC'S 2023-2024 IMPACT

PERFORMING ARTS TOURED

39 artists in
35 communities with
170 performances to over
27,151 audience members

SCHOOL TOURS REACHED

74 schools in
52 communities with
88 performances to over
25,000 audience members

15 VISUAL ARTS EXHIBITIONS REACHED

42,000 visitors in
57 venues with
590 guided tours

TOTAL ARTISTS FEES PAID OUT

\$717,792

Art councils across Saskatchewan brought performing artists and visual art tours into 52 communities this past year. (Photos Courtesy of Melfort Arts Council and OSAC)

Drum-making Teaches Youth

RESPECT, PRIDE AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

BY JACKIE LEDINGHAM

Due to the growing popularity of the Seven Stones Community School Drum Club, Chase Shingoose realized he needed more drums. He recognized that if each student had their own drum, they could practice at home, perform at other events, and deepen their connections to their culture.

Shingoose, a Dream Broker and drum leader at the school, says, when kids learn to make a hand drum there are cultural teachings that go along with it. “Not only do they learn the process of making a drum, but they learn how to respect it and take care of it, as the drum is a symbol of pride and identity.”

“Not only do they learn the process of making a drum, but they learn how to respect it and take care of it, as the drum is a symbol of pride and identity.”

– CHASE SHINGOOSE

Thanks to the Creative Kids Dream Broker Program Grant, the Seven Stones Community School in Regina was able to take 17 Indigenous students, from grades one to eight, through the tradition of making a hand drum last June. Shingoose says, having their own drums wouldn't have been possible without the funding. The Dream Broker program helps inner-city youth facing financial barriers access sport, recreational and cultural activities during school hours evenings, weekends and over summer break.

During the drum-making sessions, Shingoose taught the boys the Cree tradition of drum-making as he was taught. He told them, “the drum has a spirit within it, like a Mooshum,” and that is why it's important to honour and take care of it. He also talked about how the



This past year, the Dream Broker program connected students from Seven Stones Community School to the cultural teachings of drum-making.

(Photo by Carol Daniels (above) and Chase Shingoose (below))

drum will give them courage and keep them safe.

He says, the students had so much fun making the drums and were proud of their accomplishment. They wanted to show everyone when they were done. Now, because they have their own drum, they can participate in singing and drumming outside of school hours, as well as practice at home.

Having their own drum creates more opportunities for the students. Shingoose says, “It's a pathway that leads to other cultural teachings and cultural involvement. When they take the drum home it creates conversation with their parents, their friends and siblings. They aspire to learn more about their language or ask their parents, ‘can you take me to a round dance?’ and seek out time with Knowledge Keepers and Elders.”

For Shingoose, one particular student stands out as a testament to why cultural connection is important for Indigenous kids experiencing the effects of intergenerational trauma. He says he invited a grade one student, who was in foster care and was often in the principal's office due to behaviour issues,



to participate in the drum program. Even though this student struggled in his regular classroom and with playing with others, he never struggled in the drum club. According to Shingoose, he learned quickly and asked to drum all the time. He kept asking if he could have his own drum. It was apparent that the student's behaviour began to improve as “he found a connection, his voice, a sense of belonging and something that made him experience joy”.

Shingoose adds, this student, “is always number one on the list to send to performances in and outside of the school because he is so respectful and has become a very strong leader”, all from learning to play a drum and its connection to his culture.

The Dream Broker program, offered in 11 schools in Saskatchewan, is supported with funding from Sask Lotteries Trust Fund. This program received additional support from Creative Kids.

PAINTING TOGETHER Inspires Inclusion

BY HEYWOOD YU

The Rosthern “Paints Together: the Circle Project” exemplifies how creative initiatives can unite people, enhance local pride, and breathe new life into communities. When a community paints together, it grows together.

The “Circle Project” brought together locals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities, creating a series of murals that celebrate inclusion, creativity, and community spirit. This unique initiative also brought together a community partnership that included the Station Arts Centre, Affinity Credit Union, Valley Action Abilities and the Town of Rosthern.

It was one of the events held to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Valley Action Abilities — a local non-profit supporting adults with intellectual disabilities through various community programs. “This wasn’t just about celebrating our 50th anniversary. It was about creating meaningful connections,” says Cameron Nicolle, executive director, Valley Action Abilities. “We wanted to do something that would bring people together.”

On May 31, the Town of Rosthern was filled with smiles and laughter, as its town centre transformed into a colourful and vibrant art hub. Over 300 people, including schoolchildren, adults with disabilities, and members of the broader community, gathered to participate in circle painting—culminating in the creation of 12 large wood-panel murals.

During the brainstorming stages, Nicolle had reached out to Nicole Thiessen for help. Thiessen, director of programming, Station Arts Centre, suggested the Circle Project — an idea inspired by various circle painting and collaborative art projects happening around the world. “The beautiful thing about circle painting is that it’s something everyone can do,” she says. “It’s about inclusion, it’s an opportunity for different generations and abilities to connect and create something beautiful together.”

Local businesses, proud of their town’s artistic flair, have embraced the murals, displaying them on their buildings and committing to keeping local artwork alive.

“The beautiful thing about circle painting is that it’s something everyone can do. It’s about inclusion, it’s an opportunity for different generations and abilities to connect and create something beautiful together.”

– NICOLE THIESSEN

Each mural features a QR code that links to more information about its creation, inviting residents and visitors alike to engage with the stories behind the art. The murals, now displayed around town, will remain for the next two years, serving as a lasting reminder of the collective effort.

According to Nicolle, “The permanency of this project is particularly meaningful. Every day, our community members can see the work they contributed to, which sparks conversations and allows them to relive the experience.”

For Thiessen, the most rewarding aspect of the project was witnessing the connections formed between participants. “It’s those moments that build community in a very real way,” she says.

The Town of Rosthern and the Station Arts Centre received support from SaskCulture’s Community Cultural Engagement and Planning (CCEP) Grant funded by Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.



Rosthern residents came together to work on a mural that inspired inclusivity through the medium of circle painting. (Photos by Todd Hansen)





Sharing Stories Over Soup

BRINGS COMMUNITY TOGETHER

BY BUSAYO OSOBADE

Sharing stories can go a long way to building lasting community connections, especially when they serve a good cause.

About 50 residents came together during Culture Days in Nipawin to make soup and share their stories at The Big Stir Soup Stories event held in October. While stories brought community together to foster new understanding, the event also supported stocking the community's food bank's freezer with 250 litres of chili for those facing food insecurity over the winter months. Information shared among participants also hoped to change the misconception that food banks primarily serve individuals on social services.

Laura Nycholat, founder, Rise Up Community Foundation, explains that, while making soup, volunteers were invited to answer a series of questions on culture and community. Questions such as, 'What is one thing you can do to influence culture and community?' were intended to invite conversation and create change.

"Awareness is the key to creating change. When folks write their answers it allows them to see different perspectives," she says, "which also helps to show that we are all truly on the same page when it comes to culture and community. It allows us to learn from each other and find common ground."

Participation in the arts can relieve isolation and promote identity formation and intercultural understanding.

—THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE. ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF THE CULTURE SECTOR: ONTARIO CULTURE STRATEGY, MAY 24, 2016

She notes that participants were initially a bit nervous upon arrival, but as the event progressed, everyone grew more comfortable. "We appreciate it can be nerve-racking to show up out of fear of judgement [but] sharing our cultures helps make diversity and inclusion our norms as a community. It adds value to our lives as we appreciate our various strengths."

One participant shared their experience, saying, "Instead of being alone, I was able to connect with people in the community and meet new people. We talked about our lives and where we came from. Various Christmas traditions circled the event."

Another participant said, "I need connection with my community for my well-being. I really appreciated coming together with different people from different walks of life!"

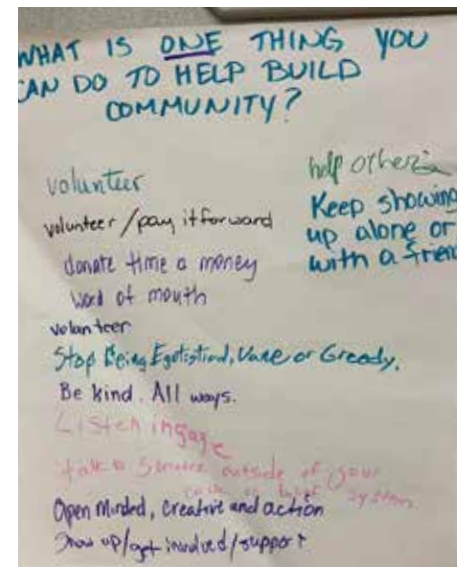
Nycholat says, that the event helped young children, teenagers, people with disabilities, and families experience volunteerism, while fostering community connections centered on a meaningful cause. "It's important residents understand that the food banks also help people from all walks of life to get through

hard times," Nycholat notes, "whether they've lost their job or have too many mouths to feed for a period, the food bank could help any one of us."

She adds, "It's a huge part of mental health and community. The volunteers were in a safe place to make chilli (or soup) among diverse community members. This opens their mind to working alongside different peoples and cultures in a positive way."

Many communities across the province continue to use Culture Days events as a great tool to unite and develop a sense of community. SaskCulture offers the Culture Days Hub Sponsorship (CDHS), with funding from Sask Lotteries Trust Fund, for community organizers to work with partners to host several events during Culture Days. In 2024, approximately 39 hubs received the CDHS support, including the Rise Up Community Foundation in Nipawin.

Other community partners for Culture Days in Nipawin included: Nipawin Chamber of Commerce, RBC, Royal Canadian Legion #120, and The Salvation Army.



Members of the Handiwork Crew shared stories over soup at the Big Stir Soup Stories event. (Photos courtesy of The Rise Up Community Foundation)

Festival Experience, LOCAL HISTORY SITES AND RURAL CHARM Attract Return Tourism

BY JACKIE LEDINGHAM



Great music, fantastic food and shared experiences for visitors help build community at the Gateway Festival in Bengough. (Photos by Chris Graham)



Started as a one-day fundraiser in 2005, the Gateway Festival has grown into a two-day celebration of music bringing in more artists, tourists and business to the town's shops and restaurants. For the town of Bengough this has meant rising tourism and a sense of community pride.

The Festival, held the fourth weekend every July, is known for big name bands, such as Steve Earle and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. It also places importance on supporting local Saskatchewan talent, such as Jess Moskaluke, Tenille Arts, and the Northern Pikes. In addition to music, there are artisans, pancake breakfasts, a car show, children's activities and lots of food choices. Festival attendees can also take the opportunity to explore the Bengough & District Museum, shop on Main Street, and make a trip to the Big Muddy badlands to learn about the area's unique history.

With so much to do, the town's population quadruples around this festival and its cultural draw. Organizers say there is often four times as many people camping at the Festival than the number who actually live in Bengough. This past year, over 1,500 people attended.



"We now see hundreds of campers start to arrive on Wednesday to spend a couple of days on site before the music starts on Friday night," says Michael Dawson, artistic director, Gateway Festival. "We present close to 25 artists each year now. Although the Festival remains a community fundraiser, I feel it also fills an important cultural space in the province."

He adds, "We see a lot of folks make it an annual event. I would estimate that 75 per cent of our audience attends year over year. They come from across the province, but we commonly see people from AB, MB, BC, ON, and Montana."

After 18 years, Dawson says, the importance of the Festival is still in the way "It builds a sense of pride and togetherness," he notes. "The Festival brings together a huge group through volunteerism, which includes the local arts council that coordinates the event. Everyone works together toward a shared goal."

Delee Foley, volunteer, Bengough Municipal Arts Council, says making sure the event is family-friendly was one of the priorities in establishing the event as a destination festival, as well as leaning into the small town charm and encouraging people to experience the local history. "Children under 12 attend for free and much of our programming reaches young audiences," she says. "In addition

to always having a significant portion of our festival site open to all-ages, we also offer children's programming and entertainment. Folks are encouraged to take in all the area has to offer."

Besides tourism and community pride, the Festival supports community in many other ways. For example, proceeds from the Festival have contributed to new playground equipment and a new firetruck for the town, as well as economic benefits. Foley says "We know that the Festival brings an influx of revenue for the local parks board through camping and the swimming pool.

"We also see local small businesses flourish all weekend," she adds. "And, there is a spillover to surrounding communities as well."

In order to create more experiences for attendees during the Festival, recent tourism partnerships have formed with the nearby golf courses and other tour groups, says Dawson. The aim is to continue to draw people back from outside the region to continue to build the Festival community, "through building relationships and making our destination a way of discovering new things about our community."

The Gateway Festival receives annual funding from SaskFestivals, administered by SK Arts, with funding from the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund.

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HISTORIC ELEVATOR MUSEUM A Tourism Draw for Val Marie

BY ANA CRISTINA CAMACHO



For many of the 20,000 annual visitors to the Grasslands National Park, the small nearby village of Val Marie is a popular stop for tourists. The rich and intriguing histories found in small communities, such as those shared at the Val Marie Elevator Museum, are often an added bonus for visitors to the many parks in the province.

The Val Marie Elevator Museum is a volunteer-run organization that interprets the history and workings of a 1927 country grain elevator. Working closely with its partners, the Prairie Wind & Silver Sage EcoMuseum, it entices park visitors to visit the community and enjoy some memorable cultural experiences.

Alex McPhee, chair, Val Marie Heritage, Culture, and Youth Elevator Committee, believes it is important to encourage as many people as possible to explore small-town Saskatchewan life and history during their visits. McPhee says that “Val Marie is lucky” for having a community that has supported and maintained the grain elevator building over the years, appreciating its contribution to the village.

“For the last couple decades that the grain elevator has been a heritage project, it has been very well supported,” McPhee says. “The preservation was totally driven by the locals for years and years,” she adds, “a bunch of hard-working volunteers who fundraised to save the building.”

McPhee notes that quite often, “A lot of people who are inbound to the park will stop at the visitor centre and then turn around and go straight to the park, out of town.” The community noticed that “diverting more of that park traffic, and encouraging people to ... stop at our stores”, was a helpful strategy.

To achieve this, the elevator museum and the eco-museum worked together to direct tourists to one another, encouraging them to walk through the village in the process — the two museums are in opposite corners of the community. Through this partnership and some new signage, the elevator saw tourist traffic increase to 200 visitors in the summer of 2023 — a significant influx for the small community. Without these efforts, the Val Marie community would miss out on a lot of tourist traffic, McPhee says.

Thanks to their efforts, the museum has grown to now offer guided tours, movie nights, and, recently, school tours and a concert. Hosting new types of activities is a way to revitalize the museum, McPhee says, and to attract bigger, more diverse crowds. When the museum hosted its first concert this year, for example, the elevator reached its full capacity of 90 people. That

day, McPhee adds that, there were more people inside the elevator than there were normally in the entirety of Val Marie.

As one of the interpreter guides, McPhee sees first-hand how much the building means to people across the province. The museum receives many visitors within Saskatchewan — often, it is grandparents bringing their family to share a part of their history with them. “The emotional connection that people in Saskatchewan feel to these buildings still surprises me — I am always amazed at the power that heritage has,” McPhee says.

The museum’s volunteers plan to keep it growing and reaching as many people as possible in Val Marie and beyond. “We can do more to bring all this history to everybody in Saskatchewan,” says McPhee.

“It makes me so energetic to feel like we are adding things that weren’t there before. Everything we are doing adds to the totality of what Val Marie is like.”

The Val Marie Museum Elevator was supported for the first time this past year through SaskCulture’s Museum Grant Program (MGP), with funding from the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund.

“The emotional connection that people in Saskatchewan feel to these buildings still surprises me — I am always amazed at the power that heritage has.” –ALEX MCPHEE



Attracting 200 visitors last year, the Val Marie Elevator, built in 1927, was restored and is maintained by community volunteers. (Photo courtesy of the Val Marie Heritage, Culture, and Youth Elevator Committee)

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY PRIDE AND Connection Through Storytelling

BY NICKITA LONGMAN

Recognizing the importance of storytelling as a way to strengthen cultural connection and nationhood within the Métis community, Gabriel Dumont Local 11, began an annual storytelling series in 2017. As the series continued, many of the people who attended formed stronger connections and friendships as a result.

Wilfred Burton, program and membership chair, Gabriel Dumont Local 11, says, one of the outcomes from the Local's events are the relationships that are built when sharing space together. "Some of our earlier events felt quite siloed. People sat alone and the room would remain quiet, as they were from different Métis communities across the province and didn't know each other. Now, we are starting to see relationships build and strengthen and seeing people spend time together after the events."

Historically, storytelling was a way for Métis people to gather while passing the winter months. Burton says, keeping that tradition alive is a priority for their local. "We as a people have so many relations or connections in many ways. It is important to understand that the stories we share with one another are also our stories as a nation."

This past year was another successful year of storytelling for the Local that specifically focused on matriarchs within the community. "We wanted to showcase women's stories, because in most Indigenous nations, women are the strength of our communities," says Burton.

The sessions were held under themes, and covered topics, such as 'Matriarch Stories', 'Courting Stories', 'Aunty Stories', and 'Making a Living Stories'. Storytellers were invited to share from a wide variety of communities and included both in-person sessions and online sessions for as much outreach as possible.

"Coming together to share stories is one way to enrich our understanding of what it means to be a Métis person."

- WILFRED BURTON

"Our membership is made up of a variety of different people, including many young people who haven't heard of certain storytellers before," Burton explains. "We wanted to bridge that learning and captivate a wide audience. Elderly folks in our community are like encyclopedias who have so much knowledge and history to share."

In an urban space, such as Saskatoon, he describes how many people come from different communities and the importance of sharing space. "Coming together to share stories is one way to enrich our understanding of what it means to be a Métis person," Burton says.

One attendee shared with the Local that engaging in the sessions helped her take great pride in her ancestry. "To hear these stories enriches my understanding of what it means to be a Métis person and through the stories of each of the storytellers, I feel proud of my heritage," she wrote. "These events are important to me and to our Métis community as a whole."

With a focus on culture and language, Burton says, the storytelling events are a vehicle in which these values can be interspersed to those who attend. As with many Indigenous nations, aspects of culture and language are always at risk of dying. "If you're not sharing these elements, or if you are not passing them down, how else will it continue?"

In the future, the Local hopes to include more cultural components to the storytelling events, including traditional arts, such as willow basket-making, walking sticks, and more. "We are looking forward to hosting a more hands-on approach to learning, while also inviting a wide range of people to participate in craft," Burton says. And while the Local hosts 330 members in total, Burton hopes to see many more in attendance, including the general public.

The Gabriel Dumont Local 11 received project funding from the Métis Cultural Development Fund, administered by Gabriel Dumont Institute, on behalf of SaskCulture, with funding from the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.



To connect the Métis community in Saskatoon, Gabriel Dumont Local 11 started a yearly storytelling series. (Photos courtesy of Wilfred Burton)

THEATRE COMPANY

Builds Community

THROUGH PERFORMANCE COACHING AND ENCOURAGEMENT

BY KATIE DOKE SAWATZKY

Getting people on stage provides people of all ages the opportunity to share talents, creatively express themselves and build confidence. Newly formed theatre group Castwell & Company opened its doors in Biggar, SK to set the stage to make theatre experience part of town life.

Like most theatre companies in rural Saskatchewan, Castwell & Company is entirely volunteer-run. Incorporated in April 2024, their mission is to create “inclusive, accessible and collaborative performing arts opportunities” for the community. Their company pillars are to create, connect, inspire and evolve.

Erin Hadden, treasurer, Castwell & Company, emphasizes that the company aims to support life-long learning. “The goal is for people to have fun, to connect with each other, to stretch and grow in areas where they wouldn't have been able to before.”

The theatre group began with a successful cabaret event in June followed by an open karaoke portion of the evening aimed at encouraging people to get on stage. During that first event at Biggar's historical Majestic Theatre, audience members enjoyed 18 pop music performances by community members. To encourage participants, the company lined up qualified volunteers to offer performance coaching. Cabaret admission was by donation.



Michaela Hoppe, chair, Castwell & Company, says the night went better than expected, “People did not want to go home. One girl who had never performed on stage before said the environment that we created, with the supportive audience, gave her the courage to get up and sing for the karaoke night.”

Hadden adds that, “We're making sure that everybody is absolutely positioned for success, so that they can walk down the street after their performance with their heads held high, knowing that they smashed it.”

She has already met with teenagers who want to perform for the company's next—musical theatre-themed—cabaret in September. “They're so excited about it,” she says, emphasizing that this type of event offers people low-commitment opportunities to perform. “It's not going to interfere with hockey or dance. It's a quick turnaround and they're thrilled about it.”

Nena Hawkes, executive director, Theatre Saskatchewan says, “It's exciting to see Castwell's new, fresh take on what community theatre looks like and how we can use our platform to help people think differently and grow their empathy.” Theatre Saskatchewan supported the company in its beginning stages by connecting them to other community theatre groups across the province. Hoppe and Hadden also travelled to North Battleford for Theatre Saskatchewan's TheatreFest in April 2024.



“We're making sure that everybody is absolutely positioned for success so that they can walk down the street after their performance with their heads held high, knowing that they smashed it.”

– ERIN HADDEN

Based on recommendations from community members at its open house in May, Castwell & Company will run its first play, “Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors,” in October 2024—a new endeavour in a community with a strong musical theatre tradition. Hoppe, a visual artist, is directing, which is a new experience for her. Even the founding members of the company are learning new skills. “I'm giving it a go because I have this huge supportive team behind me,” she says.

Castwell & Company is a part of Saskatchewan's theatre network supported by Theatre Saskatchewan, which is funded by the Sask Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation.

Erin Hadden (left photo, top box) and Michaela Hoppe (left photo, bottom left box) started Castwell and Company a theatre company aimed at connecting the community of Biggar through inspiration and growth. (Right photo) Performers at the company's first cabaret benefited by being mentored by theatre professionals. (Photos courtesy of Castwell & Co.)



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*At any age, participating in cultural activity builds community!
(Photo by FSI Studio (2024))*



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