

ArtBridge's Raison d'Être

October 2008

TO ENHANCE THE COMMUNITY ARTS SECTOR ACROSS CANADA (CAPACITY BUILDING) AND HIGHLIGHT THE POSITIVE EFFECTS THAT ARTS CONTRIBUTE TO UNDER-RESOURCED COMMUNITIES:

- Art makes a positive difference in communities that need hope and opportunity the most; art is a vehicle for social change.
- By enhancing and highlighting the community arts sector we will draw resources to it, which will in turn improve services.
- There is a lack of public recognition of the value and benefits of community art projects and centres operating in under-resourced/marginalized communities. Benefits to everyone include crime-reduction, safer neighbourhoods, improved mental and physical health, greater success in education and employment, community involvement and engagement as well as neighborhood revitalization.

AN ASSET-BUILDING, NON-COLONIAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNITY ARTS EXPANSION IS BENEFICIAL

- There is not just one community arts project development model that works. If we focus on recognizing assets within each community and if projects are initiated by each community (as opposed to imposing a model or franchise of an existing community art centre) the project will be more likely to succeed in its unique way. (Greater ownership of the community, letting the community drive it, own it, be its own special thing).
- There are many ways of setting up and operating art centres in these communities, and we would like to share lessons learned, and set up a forum for exchanging models and best practices.

THERE IS A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

- Professionals directly and indirectly involved in community arts projects (including art galleries, educational institutions, staff and boards of community arts agencies) have a lack of knowledge of other community arts projects that operate in under-resourced, marginalized communities in their own city, province and across the country. There are no pathways and connectors. For

example, recently, upon asking, two directors of two of the highest profile community arts charities in Toronto could not name similar centres in Montreal, Vancouver, or Saint John, etc. A faculty member of a leading Canadian Art College was unable to name one community art project operating in an under-resourced community in the same city.

- There is a lack of knowledge amongst the public at large as well; if an individual wants to donate or volunteer with an art centre in an under-resourced community, it is difficult to find out where they are.
- Remote communities in, for example, the far north or rural areas have even less access to direct knowledge of other community art centres across Canada due to prohibitive flight costs, time and travel challenges. Few people in larger urban centres of Canada travel to remote communities in the far north or even across the country, and our knowledge of community arts projects and the people who run them is minimal to non-existent.

CONNECTING, COOPERATING, SHARING BENEFITS EVERYONE

- Our service is about managing opportunities; there are many people who want to help but don't know how or where to give—professional artists who want to teach, individuals who want to donate, school children who want to help raise funds or supplies, galleries that want to link with under-resourced communities, etc.; ArtBridges will connect those that want to help with those that need and want the help.
- Connecting helps on several levels for an arts project/centre in an under-resourced community: linking with established arts organizations, galleries or institutions brings recognition which in turn brings credibility which then attracts more increased donations.
- There is a wealth of professionals to be on boards, to volunteer, event plan, etc. By creating a network, these resources can greatly enhance the development of community arts projects and organizations across Canada in under-resourced communities.
- There is strength in partnerships; our network will facilitate sistering, mentoring and information sharing.
- Opportunities for resources, organizational development and access to information should not depend on where you live and who you're connected/not connected to; our service will provide equal access to everyone equally.

THERE'S NO ROAD MAP, NO HOW-TO GUIDE, AND LITTLE SUPPORT IN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- There's a need for a road map, a guide of best practices and models for organizational growth (including policy, fundraising and staff development) for arts projects or organizations working in under-resourced communities.
- Currently, projects have to figure out organizational growth as they go along, starting with relatively no money, no board, no policies, no HR or legal support, no strategic direction. Some are more equipped than others and this can determine their success or failure and ability to be sustainable.
- There may be a collective of people that desperately want to have an art centre in their community but don't have the resources or know-how to set one up. Or, other communities may not even have the idea, this will give them the knowledge.

THE TIME IS RIGHT

- Larger institutions have outreach mandates. Many don't know how to access or find community arts projects and organizations in under-served communities.
- Community Arts is becoming more recognized as a field. It is on more and more people's radars and is endorsed by more politicians because it fulfills an important social service and arts mandate, translating into greater resources, such as grants. Corporations also have more of an outreach mandate and budget a certain percentage to charity. Corporations also want to align with communities, social services and the arts for public recognition. Individuals are looking for opportunities to engage.

COMMUNITY ARTS NETWORKING IS PROVEN TO BE BENEFICIAL

- The Community Arts Network website in the USA received 70,000 hits a month, and it ran for over 10 years. It was positively evaluated for effectiveness to users (academics, academic institutions, funders, government, artists and practitioners) by an external examiner. see www.communityarts.net -*archives*.
- Since 1980, the Community Arts Network of South Australia Inc. has operated as another active and networking service in the field. See www.cansa.on.net

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY ARTS CAN BE INSULAR

- Many arts programs/organizations in under-resourced communities work in isolation and have little time or resources to network with similar organizations due to intense community focus.
- There is competition for funding within the community arts sector as well as with all charities in the city seeking support from largely the same sources.
- Because of fundraising challenges and demands, each art centre focuses intensively only on its own “turf” or community served.
- There is a lack of time and resources for professional development and networking forums or conferences to get together with similar organizations. This is often due to prohibitive conference fees and lack of staff resources (e.g. time and hourly cost of sending staff, closure of program if staff are to attend).
- There is a lack of information sharing and a disconnect between arts communities due to geography (from coast to coast to coast), language, education, financial status, immigration status, professional art status vs. outsider art status.

Seanna’s Story: Inspiration Behind the Idea and the Need for ArtBridges

In March 2008, I left my position at ArtHeart Community Art Centre (ArtHeart) as founder and executive director. ArtHeart had morphed from a volunteer-run community arts project into a thriving inner-city charitable organization over 17 years, in Regent Park. After months of careful consideration I had come to the conclusion that ArtHeart was finally a successful and sustainable organization that could be lead by someone else.

In my last few years at ArtHeart I began to wonder what went on in other under-resourced/poverty challenged communities outside of Canada’s oldest and largest government housing project Regent Park, Toronto, where ArtHeart operated. Aware of the “poverty by postal code” study done by the United Way, and the Vital Signs community indexing done by the Toronto Community Foundation about the 13 priority Toronto neighborhoods that statistically met all the criteria for being “communities in poverty or neighborhoods at risk”, I started to want to get the model of ArtHeart out into more communities.

I left knowing that ArtHeart, or centres like ArtHeart, could be of benefit in countless other resource-challenged communities, but I was not sure the “franchising” or duplicating ArtHeart idea was the right one because each community in Canada is unique; projects need to be initiated and wanted by a community (not imposed), and that, possibly, there are better models or ways of doing programs differently from ArtHeart. I questioned the rationale of imposing one community arts centre model (ie:ArtHeart) on another community that may have a totally different way of doing things and different demographic.

In the past few years at ArtHeart, staff started to get e-mails and calls from community centres and individuals who wanted to start art programs in similar communities but didn't know where to start or how to do it. We were able to assist a few, minimally, but the majority we turned down, as they were able to offer no money, and had wanted us to lend out our staff on our time, on our bill. We found that the work and intensity in running our own project in our own community was all-consuming, our organization and our community needed all of our attention.

We also found that there was very little connection with other similar organizations throughout the city. Each organization seemed to be maxed out with their resources, time and urgency in fund-raising and the demanding and unrelenting needs of their own community. And there was an underlying competitive aspect, as we were all going after the same funding resources. We found that each organization had become really good with their particular demographic, whether with youth, adults, children, people with mental health issues, homeless women, etc.. But no one shared their successes, or their challenges and as a result, each one followed their own road map, in relative isolation. Organizational growth, size and success were a lot about how connected the individuals running the organizations were, and how good their fundraising machine was, especially being in Toronto, the financial capital of Canada.

I left knowing how to start a volunteer project with no money and how to end up with a charitable arts organization, with 20 part-time staff, numerous volunteers, and how to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars. However, I left not knowing if there is a similar organization in Regina, Montreal, Nunavit, or even in the "priority, at risk neighborhoods" of Jane-Finch or Scarborough, in the GTA. Why, after 18 years with a community arts organization, did I know next to nothing about other communities across Canada delivering similar projects? I wondered why I did not know. Particularly, I felt ashamed that I knew nothing about what was happening in the North with regard to visual arts in under-resourced communities and in First Nations communities. I left wanting to know more: how do other art centres run? What are their models? Best practices? What marks their success? – Their uniqueness? How do their projects and programs make a difference in a community demographic marked by poverty? I wondered why our Board of Directors struggled with all the set up of a charity in this field as if it had never been done before, as if there was no road map, no supports available, no mentors, no art centres that had gone through it before.

I felt like I could advocate and talk about the value of art programs for Regent Park Government Housing residents and street-involved participants, but why couldn't I talk beyond what was happening in the one community? Why wasn't there national advocacy for arts projects, programs and organizations in under-resourced communities—if they were proven to be successful in addressing and alleviating poverty, and positively contributing to better quality of life for people and communities who need hope and opportunity the most? These centres were proving through quantitative and qualitative evaluations that they were making a difference; indicators were a reduction of violence, safer communities, kids staying in school, people getting training, – volunteering, – employment, – housing, – taking better care of themselves, finding greater self-esteem and pride, making improvements in mental health, community economic

development, and community involvement. Why was there such a gap in information sharing in the field?

In my last year and a half with ArtHeart, I felt as if I had stopped “begging for donations” and instead was managing opportunities between donors and recipients. I met people who wanted to give, who had time, money or things, and they were so happy to find a great venue to give through. I felt like I had become a conduit, a connector between those who wanted to give and those who needed support. I felt that ArtHeart had as much to give the “donor” as it did to the recipient (the participant). I left feeling that if people knew what was going on in this sector, we could connect them far and wide across Canada, and through “managing opportunities” could make a great difference in bringing more arts to under-resourced communities. There could be so much more involvement from the public at large, if they knew how, who and where to help.

I left ArtHeart with a lot of questions. Soon after, I met up with my friend, Kate Austin, an artist and entrepreneur; we explored these questions for hours and then together came up with the idea of ArtBridges.