

Enderby and District Community Play Project

A project report presented by Cathy Stubington at the Inaugural Creative City Network Conference, November 2002.

ABSTRACT

Artists and Communities award: \$50,000

This project was a collaboration between Enderby and District Resource Centre Society and the artist /writer Cathy Stubington. A steering committee was formed when Cathy Stubington approached local artists Jaime Seward and Donlea McCombs, the Enderby Historical Society Curator Joan Cowan, Neil Brooks from the Kingfisher Interpretive Centre, highschool teacher Carol Welhan, Spallumcheen Band member Bev Thomas , and Lee Nobles a service provider who worked with young single mothers . The steering committee spearheaded a year and a half's worth of community arts and fundraising activities to interest residents in participating in a community play. The play, *Not the Way I Heard It*, was presented ten times in the last two weeks of May 1999 on the banks of Shuswap River in Enderby. Local actors, musicians, visual artists, and seamstresses joined their talents with several theatre professionals from outside the community. The number of different people involved was estimated at 800.

The play drew on local historical elements, focusing on stories of the Shuswap First Nations people and the early White immigrants to the area. Promotional materials for the play promised pageantry tied together with the themes of the Shuswap River and the cycle of the salmon. The degree of participation of First Nations people far exceeded planners' expectations and has built a foundation of trust.

The Enderby and District Community Play Project did an unusually thorough job of preparing the community for the play through skill-building workshops, information sessions, and a series of community cultural events, some of which may become annual cultural activities. Through participation in dozens of events, local people learned to work together in new ways. Pride for the local community event was expressed in dozens of local news articles, highlighting the event as the first community play in western Canada.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

To improve trust between groups by offering opportunities to work together.

To redefine community as people who have something in common.

To create collaborations that allow for diversity of opinion, change prejudices, and clarify misunderstandings

- The play was co-written and co-directed by Native and nonnative artists and there were many examples of collaboration. Band members created First Nations dress for the entire cast to wear in the opening scene of the play, and lent materials, equipment, and use of the hall for readings and rehearsals. Many people in the audience cried during the scene about the effects of the White culture on the First Nations. When the closing song about the Shuswap language was first performed in outdoor rehearsal, an eagle flew low with three others circling above. The First Nations people were happy that the eagle came, meaning that their spiritual guardian had reassured and affirmed them in the project.
- Rosalind Williams, the Band historian, saw the play as a bridge between Shuswap and nonnative cultures: " I am so proud of our young as they've taken on a challenge... They have just blossomed. I don't want to embarrass them, but I see such a difference. They seem so confident now." One observation in the project debriefing was that the respect shown by First Nations youth to their Elders infused the rest of the participants and changed behaviors of other youth toward older adults.
- A headline in the local paper summarizes the sentiments of much of the new coverage: " Play brings out the best in everybody." A news reporter noted that " what strikes one most when sitting in the audience is the sense of companionship between actors, musicians, crews, and audience." A letter to the City of Enderby from the mayor of Salmon Arm that was published in the local paper said, " the UNITY and SPIRIT of your community were very touching." Early in the project, as a result of making connections with the local newspapers, project organizers noted increased coverage of Band affairs.
- When participants in the project were asked in a follow-up questionnaire about the best part of the experience, they most often noted; the artistry and professionalism of the organizers; meeting the people of their community; seeing a community become aware and grow; learning new skills; seeing the First Nations involved; and gaining self-confidence. By far, the most noted value was the opportunity to make new friends and interact with people they had seen but not known; several specifically mentioned getting to know First Nation peoples. Benefits to the community were noted: the play brought people together in a way that lets them see how much others can contribute to the community; it built a sense of pride that we can do such an event; it brought different cultures together and has given more of a voice to the First Nations community; integration of age groups and people.
- In the month following the play presentation, Cathy Stubbington who had known only three people in Enderby when she began the project, was named Woman of the Year by the Enderby Women in Business.
- Some play content has been used by Rosalind Williams in cultural sensitivity training for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Other scenes and songs were presented at the Kingfisher Reunion and many people from the play participated in the July 1st parade.

To bring heightened awareness and a sense of responsibility to social issues, especially to issues related to single motherhood.

To support solutions to social issues.

- In the debriefing, there was an observation that social and serious issues were brought up in the play and dealt with in a non-intrusive way. Descendants of some characters in the play saw representations of their relatives in positive light that they had never perceived before. One family that was depicted in a scene found themselves looking at their mother - who had been a single mother - in a new way.
- A young single mother involved in the play gained the confidence to pursue social work as a career and was accepted into a social work program with a grant for tuition based on her hours working on the play.
- Interest has been sparked in the project to revive the Spallumcheen language.
- As a result of an article about youth involvement in the Country Start paper, the Silverstar ski resort is developing an employment training program for Band youth.

To encourage ongoing participation in arts rather than consumption only.

- The cast included 163 cast members, exceeding the original expectations. Estimates were that more than 800 people contributed in some way to the play. In a wrap-up questionnaire for those involved in production, about 80% indicated this was their first participation in such an event. Comments about the event noted the enjoyment and worth of the experience, its professionalism, its value for individuals and community, the unusual magnitude of the production.
- CBC Radio broadcast the play and spots were done for CHBC and Vision TV. There was coverage by newspapers in many local communities. Newspapers in Vancouver and Calgary also covered the play. There will be a review of the play published in the "Canadian Theatre Review" magazine. The Penticton Arts Council has already expressed interest in creating another community play. A community in Ontario has contracted the core committee for help in planning a community play project.
- Some community events will possibly continue. The Lantern Festival is planned again for this year with students making lanterns. A group of local youth has already presented dinner theater using props and costumes from the play. Other cast members have signed up for other community productions and there is interest in forming a theatre group. Rosalind Williams has been approached by an Elder to do a production with more stories. Williams' daughter is organizing acting workshops. The community now has a costume bank and archival collection for use by others. The costumes have already been borrowed frequently.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

The project faced the **public relations challenge** of receiving a large grant for an idea that had not had a long history of development locally and had been initiated by someone new to the community. The project moved quickly to deal with any possible backlash by involving many people immediately in concrete activities. The project initiator reached out to people by engaging them in creative activities and offering them support to help groups accomplish their own goals. The project offers good examples of outreach to help a variety of groups build ownership in the project. In the words of one social service provider who at first was upset that money had gone to the arts: " if you're on an island and the flood waters are rising and you've prayed for a boat..... and no boat comes, but a helicopter comes... get on the helicopter."

A theme throughout the project was identifying and **building on strengths** with the result that participants were continually amazed at the talents of their neighbors and proud of their community. The decision in the planning phase to use **few outside professionals** to supplement local strengths was accepted well after some initial hesitation. The three outside professionals were paired with local talent in their roles, and took up residence in the community for a substantial and sustained time period. Director James Tait saw his role as staying in a neutral position to identify and nurture the talent of local individuals.

The only truly disappointing aspect of the entire project was the **breakdown of relationships** with the Resource Centre Society. Clearer agreements and understandings at the outset would likely have helped. The Society wanted a social worker staff position - while the related outcomes of the project were much longer term and about changing attitudes and interaction. Also, the Society might have benefited by contact with funders or others who have done similar projects to build an understanding of the appropriateness of various project expenses and the likely pattern of cash flow.

The project paid an unusual amount of attention to building involvement over a long period of time. The goal of keeping the project open and the invitation broad was supported by well over fifty workshops, community events, and outreach activities over a sixteen-month period. This long process of engaging the community accomplished the goals of connecting individuals in enjoyable and productive activities. Barriers between people, especially those between First Nations and town residents, were broken down. While the play was an end product and a goal to work towards, the core committee began implementing the goals of forging connections among people almost immediately. The success of those events in building involvement contributed much toward sustaining the energy needed for the major event. Some of the buildup activities now have become a continuing legacy of community cultural activities. It is difficult to find better evidence for the success of a project than continued community cultural activity.