

Cultural Centre re-tooling programs amid COVID uncertainty

One of the few things certain in a global pandemic is uncertainty, and the Aurora Cultural Centre is rolling with the punches.

As some facilities gear up to welcome visitors once again at the end of this month, the Cultural Centre has grown adept to making quick pivots in order to make sure the show can indeed go on.

‘We’re getting better with uncertainty, and we’re getting better at quick moves, flexibility, and how we talk within the organization and with our artists,’ says Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre. ‘There’s always pain and it takes courage to move through that; it is how do we build through this? As a team, we all sigh because it is painful to lose something we programmed. We thought that the very first time in March of 2020 and now we have some precedent to look at on what possible health protocols might be in place, what that might look like, and what we might need to consider.

‘We have learned a lot and that learning has helped us in where we can communicate, where we can commit, and what we think is possible for the community.’

Being able to translate their gallery programs to an online platform has been a significant factor in maintaining arts delivery in Aurora.

When the latest lockdown was announced, plans for their annual Mayor’s Celebration of Youth Arts was one of the first elements of the program that needed to be retooled.

Students, says Ms. Haines, were excited about coming in and hanging the show themselves as they customarily did pre-COVID, but the latest health restrictions rendered that impossible.

Staff were tasked with hanging the show ahead of its formal launch next week, but students have been able to participate in showing their work even in a digital format.

‘If it has to stay that way for the entire show, that’s okay, that’s what we need to do,’ says Ms. Haines of the show, which is slated to take over their temporary gallery space at Town Hall – a venue which is yet to fully open back up to the public. ‘The next show we look at is whether we can have it in person. The gallery has that foundational program that continues to drum along.

‘Education and performing arts are different. We’re hoping for a full in-person education term like we had in the fall and what we’re hoping is we might still be able to do that. We have pushed that off later into February.’

Not all educational programs, she adds, are able to translate to virtual simply for practical reasons, but performing arts programs continue.

‘Our first digital concert is February 10 with Sounding Thunder,’ says Ms. Haines. ‘We’re thrilled that is going forward. It is part of our Great Artists music series and it is an incredible show we were hoping to run last year. It’s going to be a performance like we have done in the past where we have it available for a week and on February 10 there will be a digital reception with the artists.’

Sounding Thunder is based on the life of Francis Pegahmagabow, a member of the Ojibwe nation, who became Canada’s most decorated Indigenous soldier and the most accomplished sharpshooter in the country.

‘There’s an incredible story and beautiful music that is tied to it and spoken word attached to it. It is quite a compelling piece,’ says Ms. Haines, adding an in-person concert with Cultural Centre favourite John Sheard, previously scheduled for February 10, was moved to later in the year, along with a family concert that was supposed to take place on Family Day.

As much as it has been a challenge to continually pivot to a digital format ? and to pivot back again with little notice ?has allowed the Cultural Centre to open its programs to patrons well beyond Aurora.

Going online has allowed the Centre to tap a broader base of arts educators to facilitate programs and, in turn, reach students and participants from across the country ? and even internationally.

?When we moved to digital last time, we had people from all over the world join us,? says Ms. Haines. ?Because we don't offer materials, we put up material lists and people came in prepared in whatever country they were in. That is really fascinating we have that kind of draw and I think it speaks to the quality of instructors and what we're doing is we had this interesting mix. What a benefit for those other students who are meeting people from all over the world for workshops and classes.

?What an opportunity for the Aurora Cultural Centre to have that kind of impact around the world, which we really didn't understand would be the outcome. We saw that in our performing arts as well when we went virtual. We will see that with Sounding Thunder. Those who can't access us normally because of location, that barrier is gone.?

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