

Feeling the pressure to be perfect? Artists, advocates have a four-letter response

By Brock Weir

Before he took his own life in the 1990s, James Peek said the pressure he felt to be 'perfect' had become too much.

It was a feeling that resonated with those he left behind, not the least of whom was his sister Michelle, who has dedicated her life to doing something about it - now armed with a simple and provocative message: Fuck Perfect.

Fuck Perfect is more than just a mantra, it's a philosophy Michelle and the Canadian Mental Health Association are bringing to Aurora, and they've adapted the mantra as the name of a new 13 week collaborative art-making experience that aims to help people not only access their creativity, but their voice within to respond to the messages and pressures all around us.

Fuck Perfect is an offshoot of the Art Not Shame project, an initiative founded by Michelle. Art Not Shame itself was born out of the James Peak Memorial Golf Classic, which James' family held for 17 years before refocusing their efforts based on the mental health needs and gaps they were finding in the community.

'We were always looking for a program that would work directly with youth in schools, and there just wasn't much out there in 1999,' says Michelle. 'We found ourselves giving to the Mackenzie Health Foundation to do in-patient and out-patient care, but at the same time this was happening, I was growing into my own critical consciousness and starting to ask the big questions about mental health: what is mental health? How can someone be well? To me, it always felt so much bigger than funds donated to a hospital and it felt like there was something missing in the bio-medical understanding of mental health.'

At the same time, Michelle was embarking on her own academic journey, including a PhD in Cultural Studies, which awakened an interest in the power of both stories and art. She eventually worked in art facilitation and here, she says, she saw the 'kind of beauty that can happen when you pair artists with community members and create something together.'

'This process is important to building community, building a sense of voice, and expanding possibilities for creative expression,' she says. 'As I started to do a bit more digging, I began digging into [the concept] of shame and how shame disconnects us, shuts down our voice, and cuts us off from our creativity. It does the exact opposite of what art-making and community in its ideal form can do.'

Art Not Shame was the result.

After pursuing different models, Ms. Peek says she knew collaboration was essential and established a non-profit with everyone serving the organization, creating together to build an organization that is 'accountable to the thing' rather than one person's vision. Tapping into already established fields of art-making, they homed in on retooling these concepts in a way that would benefit mental health, critical thinking, and cultural theories of depression.

The first chance to see this model in action was at McMaster University shortly after the Las Vegas shooting and just as the #metoo movement was gaining traction.

Ms. Peek found participating students were deeply immersed in the intellectual side of depression and the cultural understanding around it.

'We brought in canvasses and arranged everyone around a table,' she says. 'What we're starting to understand about ourselves is we match artistic processes to the community need. In this specific case, the need was another way to process these really heavy things they are experiencing and learning in our lives. We came in with canvasses, there were 90 students, about 10 students per canvas. We led them through a mark-making experience and something happened about 20 minutes in where the energy in the room broke open. I don't know if I can qualify it. The feedback we heard afterwards, one student said it was like a deeply therapeutic experience. It was not therapy, we were not trying to fix, save or heal anyone. It was another way of expressing some of the really things that they are grappling with on an intellectual level.'

Coming out of that, the first Fuck Perfect pilot project was unrolled last year, involving a 10-week workshop that ended in a community sharing event. The program led participants through processed-based inquiry for the first half of the session, exploring art mediums ranging from traditional visual art processes, to improv and movement. The second half involved inviting participants to 'tell their own 'Fuck Perfect' story' through their chosen medium.

'We're going to run a workshop in which we help facilitate participants speaking back to the pressure of being perfect through art and its various forms,' says Ms. Peek. 'We have hopes for what the outcomes might be, but we obviously can't control what they will end up being. My hope is that people walk away from the workshop with an amplified sense of the power of their own voice, feeling like they have permission to be creators of culture and not just recipients of culture.'

'[During the pilot,] we had this moment where we realised how incredibly powerful we are creating alternative messages for

ourselves and we are now the creators of culture, not just the recipients of these messages that we're not good enough. If shame disconnects and isolates us, then art making community might do the opposite of that through a shared art-making experience or a shared life experience. If shame silences voices, then there's the potential for art to amplify voice and self expression, and if shame shuts down our creativity, our goal is to create a beautifully supportive and welcoming space for people to feel permission to access their creativity.

?Our program goals are to broaden people's exposure to artistic mediums, build a risk-taking creative community, coping strategies for when the pressure to be perfect shows up, through art, confidence and self expression.?

Art Not Shame's Fuck Perfect program will take place Mondays beginning March 18 through June 24 from 4 ? 7 p.m. at the Aurora Public Library. To sign up, and for more information, contact Erin Howe at 1-866-345-0183x4248, or email ehowe@chma-yr.on.ca.