

## Indigenous artists and art therapy students to transform Bell boxes

Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists will soon be hard at work collaborating on a new exhibition set to be installed in Aurora ? and, to take it in, you might only have to go as far as the end of your street.

The Aurora Cultural Centre and the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe (CMHA-YRSS) have teamed up on a new art initiative that will transform nine run-of-the-mill Bell telephone boxes into art pieces, responding to Call to Action #83 from the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's Report: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process.

Each of the nine boxes will be allocated to one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous artist, who have been subject to an application process, inspired by themes developed in consultation with Indigenous artists.

?This project was initiated by Charlene Wong, who is with the CMHA,? says Samantha Jones, Gallery Manager for the Aurora Cultural Centre. ?We're seeing a lot of eagerness for artists to get involved. The themes have been developed in conversation with Indigenous artists and [some of these include] Aurora being a meeting place, with trade routes and cultural connections ? Aurora's Indigenous history is a place as a crossroads; Truth & Reconciliation; language, history and connection to the land; elements of working in harmony; and other themes on Indigenous culture and history. The themes were developed with Indigenous artists and our Outreach Coordinator, Glenn Marais, was definitely a powerhouse in developing them.?

Nine themes have been developed in total, one for each of the Bell boxes.

The selected boxes cover the length and breadth of Aurora, with a box on St. John's Sideroad being the northernmost ?canvas? and one at Henderson Drive anchoring the project in the south.

?I think the CMHA clients will see themselves as part of the community,? says Ms. Wong, an occupational therapist with the organization. ?Part of my role is to help people become a part of the community and part of that is contributing and being seen and heard.?

Ms. Wong says she was inspired to bring this idea to the Cultural Centre after seeing similar boxes in Toronto. It is, she says, ?an opportunity to really create and bring joy? to the world around us.

?This is kind of what we need. It's like being in a house without art ? it doesn't truly feel like a home until you add colour and life. The artists I hope to see as part of this project and to be at the table tend to be people who might not have the same access to having a voice that is heard within our community. Art is about empowerment. This is a way for people to become part of the community, to become contributors, to be someplace [where they] can be seen and heard and just shift from being a client or a taker of services to becoming an artist.

?I think it is also important in times like these to have that diversity of voices, to have these moments where we're kind of caught off-guard and are surprised and curious as to these installations.?

When all is said and done, Ms. Wong says she wants the public to be ?aware of the many voices that we have within our community.?

?I want people to enjoy, to have something that is surprisingly joyful to emerge in their spaces, too. I want people to feel a part of something as well. It's been so long since we have had this sort of thing happen, where we start to feel we're coming together again, and be curious and to have that feeling of connectedness.

?I hope we have something interesting that brings us together, brings us to think together, to celebrate together, and to reflect. We

need more moments of wonder.?

The boxes will be painted between August 23 and September 1, with responsibility for maintaining the boxes thereafter being taken on by Bell Canada.

?I think there are going to be a lot of opportunities for discussion [around the art pieces] especially because the themes of the boxes are so specific,? says Ms. Jones. ?The expectation is that on each box it is going to be a painted narrative to initiate discussions and the boxes are in pretty popular areas of Aurora so they will get a lot of traffic. It will be a place for idea-sharing and discussion.

?We also have a few programming ideas in the works. We expect to have a map that people can take if they're going for a bike ride around Town visiting each phone box ? almost like a gallery tour!?

Applications for the 2022 Aurora Bell Box Murals project closed June 30 and each artist accepted into the program will receive an honourarium of \$400 for their completed work (\$800 per box) and artists will be required to provide their own paint and supplies ? with the exception of white metal primer, which will be provided to contributors free of charge.

Bell Box Murals is an initiative undertaken by the telecom company since 2009.

Since the program's inception, more than 450 murals have been painted in over 40 communities throughout the Southern Ontario and Quebec.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter