

## **Northern Ontario Community Based Arts Practitioners Circle**

A post forum discussion about our collective identity, potential, dreams, and challenges.  
Wikwemikong Hub Centre, June 10, 2007

A Supplement to

The Report on the Provincial Gathering for Bridge Building and Bridge Builders in the Art of Communities of Northern Ontario  
Edited and Prepared by Ron Berti from videotape recordings conducted during the *Breathing Northwinds* Northern Ontario  
Community Based Arts Practitioners' Circle

Text Version

Also available with full-colour photos from the forum

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The Department of Canadian Heritage – Arts Presentation Canada Program.

## Northern Ontario Community Based Arts Practitioners Circle

### Backgrounder

During the first week of June, 2007 a provincial gathering of arts practitioners and stakeholders was held on Manitoulin Island called *Breathing Northwinds*. Organized by Community Arts Ontario in partnership with De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group, it was hosted in the neighbouring communities of Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve and the town of Manitowaning. For three days, over 120 delegates came together to reflect on the collective identity and potential of *Northern Ontario* arts practitioners and cultural/arts organizations. The gathering would be the inaugural event of a multi-year initiative supported by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Additional support specifically for the artists at the forum was provided by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Over 75% of the delegates were from Northern Ontario - Kenora, Atikokan, Summer Beaver, Sioux Narrows, Peawanuck, Thunder Bay, Moose Factory, Wikwemikong, Birch Island, Timmins, Sudbury and North Bay. There were conversations among and between French artists and English artists and Ojibway artists and Cree artists, representing all disciplines and genres, both individuals and organizations, youth, adults and elders, professional and emerging, mainstream and community based, traditional and contemporary. And we discovered that everyone, no matter where they started, went through one of five cities to attend the gathering – Kenora, Thunder Bay, Timmins, Sudbury, or North Bay. This discovery alone is useful, perhaps fundamental as a building block in the evolution of an effective, inclusive, Northern Ontario arts and culture infrastructure development plan.

### The Community of Artists of Northern Ontario Ad Hoc Steering Committee

Over the weekend, there were many significant realizations on how to organize and be represented as a sector. And then we began to organize. At the conclusion of the forum, a circle of Northern Ontario community based arts practitioners was called to establish an ad hoc steering committee to provide initial stewardship. To give some dimension to the emerging organization and to facilitate communication, it was given the temporary name of *The Community of Artists of Northern Ontario (CANO)*. Everyone present at the start of the meeting agreed to sit on the ad hoc committee.

Avoiding lengthy discussion around definitions, we agreed that what we are endeavouring to represent, is the art and creative expression of communities, and the practitioners, programs and organizations dedicated to nurturing this practice across Northern Ontario.

We acknowledged collectively that our very practice as northern community based artists, our art, and our ability to be effective creators, is influenced by environment, by geography, and by climate, and that these shared and common influences supercede the need to keep the participants of the sector separated into streams by language and cultural background. (Franco-Ontarian, Native, mainstream) While it is imperative that existing funding remain intact (we cannot deconstruct what already exists, hard fought over decades, in order to move forward), it is recommended that new funding opportunities be designed to help these streams come together, plan together, and work together more easily.

We acknowledged that we are each others best resources - Northerners inherently understand the context of other Northerners, and that collectively we cover the broadest range of expertise imaginable, and this consideration is paramount as we look for the human resources to support the evolving infrastructure.

A cultural mapping exercise to identify some of the arts practitioners of Northern Ontario who were not at the gathering, quickly resulted in an additional 140 names, and then another 260 more, and since then another 110 more and no end in sight in the growing list.

We discovered that the five cities of North Bay, Sudbury, Timmons, Thunder Bay and Kenora are logical places of convergence for activity throughout the north, and that working together like five fingers of a hand, would provide the strongest structural framework with which to share resources of relative scale, and to support the overall ecology of the arts sector.

With the current plans being discussed to build a new performing arts facility in Sudbury, we discussed the role of these urban north public art spaces, and how one can operate a cultural arts facility to do well on the books, draw large crowds and present big acts. And you can import big artists names from outside the region/country to accomplish this. In this respect, it becomes a servant to the tourist rather than the community. However, if you want the facility to be the hub of a thriving arts community, if you want it to contribute to the quality of life of all those who do and who do not buy the tickets, if you want it to be authentic, then it has to be relevant to the local, regional, and provincial arts community, in all its diverse forms and mediums.

And by relevant, we mean

- making the presenting of the art of Northern Ontario artists an unequivocal priority.
- providing space and tools and services and audiences for all forms of artistic expression and engagement,
- paying attention to the current trends away from the pure disciplines, and towards more multi-disciplinary, and innovative forms

And if you want the arts activity in a community to reach its full potential of benefits,

- from increasing civic engagement, awareness, and social vitality
- to urban beautification
- to pride of place
- to integrated programming with the education, health, social service sectors, the justice sector and the eco tourism sector –

*then make sure the community based artists who currently animate artistic activity and social expression outside of the mainstream facilities, are given a permanent home, a strong voice, and a meaningful role.*

Our largest facilities in our largest centres need to be fed, stimulated, creatively challenged, nourished and supported by the artists, the artistic product, the organizations and the artistic services of the entire Northern Ontario arts sector. Maximum integration with community on as many levels as possible would ensure that all parts of the sector grow together. This is the foundation upon which the larger facilities success will be built.

How? By **Feeder Organizations** that are made integral to the programming of the larger facilities – being provided where required with space, tools and resources, while maintaining creative independence. Community based feeder organizations (eg. Myths and Mirrors, The Best Medicine Troupe, Atikokan Centre for the Arts, etc.) do the best job at outreach, at making sure that all segments of our communities have access to participation in the arts according to their own aspirations and inspirations, despite their location, their income, their education, or their age.

**Feeder Organizations** are delivery mechanisms for artists in the classroom, artists in the workplace, and artists in the community. When you have artists in the classroom and in the workplace and in the community, then you have a society that grows ever richer, ever more tolerant, ever more resourceful, innovative, and invigorating. This is the way to develop audiences – by maximizing participation in the arts on all levels, so that it is wholistic, integrated, and becomes a part of the life style of the people. This is how you bring artists and audiences together – you blur the lines between them, rather than reinforcing the lines.

Artistic elitism will not serve us well in Northern Ontario – fundamentally, we have different values as a result of the nature of our places – a series of loosely interconnected communities spread out over great distances that share common experience and subservience to weather and the environment, at the same time with very specific local histories. Survivalists.

So we know that **Feeder Organizations** of Northern Ontario are crucial mechanisms. What do they require to be healthy? They require 5 – 6 full-time employees dedicated to the artistic programming. This allows the organization to reach the critical point of having enough secured (paid) human resources to respond, develop, innovate, partner, and deliver, in a flexible and meaningful way. It is only in reaching this critical mass of human potential – 5 or 6 – that the organization actually has the means to contribute meaningfully to its own self sustainability, and therefore, to its future growth and potential. Insufficient staff remain tied to the office, there is little opportunity for innovating earned revenue initiatives and alternative revenue generating services and partnerships.

**An annual investment of \$900,000. would provide the 30 full time staff positions required across Northern Ontario to keep the feeder organizations productive and growing.**

In addition to the Larger Facilities in the five cities of convergence, and the Feeder Organizations, we recognize the important role of **Feeder Communities** across the north. They differ in size and in location while they provide important links between the individual artist, the individual audience member, the individual student, and the Feeder Organizations. **Feeder Communities** complete the linkage between individuals and the main facilities and resources in the cities of convergence.

**Feeder Communities** bring artists and communities together for shorter periods of time, provide direct services to artists, and can penetrate deep into the landscape to reach even our most isolated and remote colleagues. They host festivals and special events and gatherings for a wide variety of reasons throughout the year.

**An annual investment of \$375,000 would provide 15 Feeder Communities with the resources and leverage of additional resources, to address small local infrastructure and/or programming needs, so that the Feeder Communities can increase their service, capacity, and reach.**

And finally, recognition of **Individual Artists and Practitioners** across Northern Ontario. Of particular note, has been the realization that in the north, you are more likely to see entire families who are engaged in artistic practice. Perhaps this is an influence of social conventions like the native clan system whereby tasks and responsibilities were determined along family lines, since it was in the company of the family that the skill or trade or task was learned. This would also reflect the rural, resource-based lifestyle of many northerners that for generations has seen skills and trades passed down through the family. In any case, we see many, many examples of entire families engaged in artistic practice, and in realizing and recognizing this, we should be able to serve and support our artists better.

Our **Individual Artists and Practitioners** have professional development needs. They need access to materials and supplies, to new equipment, to specialized training, and a variety of others. They also need the ability and freedom to move about. This is how they become useful and accessible to the Feeder Communities and the Feeder Organizations.

**An annual investment of \$225,000 would give 25 Northern Ontario Artists/Families each year what they need to advance their careers/practice and their art, and contribute to the artistic animation of Northern Ontario**

The five main centres of convergence in Northern Ontario may have varying capital infrastructure requirements. A review of this has not been within our purview, nor have the needs of mainstream regional arts organizations, except to the extent that some of these run important outreach and education programs and services for the direct benefit of the community.

As Northerners in contact with the land and aware of our environment, we know that all things are connected. The health and vitality of one will affect the health and vitality of the other. Whatever is spent on bricks and mortar, *The Community of Artists of Northern Ontario* strongly recommend that an annual investment of **\$1.5 million dollars** be committed to invigorate the **Feeder Organizations**, the **Feeder Communities**, and the **Individual Artists**. This investment would ensure that the Arts Sector of Northern Ontario develops according to the values and ethics of the people of Northern Ontario, with two feet firmly rooted in the community.

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### Next Step

The **Community of Artists of Northern Ontario** ad hoc advisory committee will be gathering in the near future to continue to explore the nature of our emerging association. We will begin by inviting those who appeared in this initial circle, as well as several people from regions that were not well represented at the forum and who have expressed interest. We anticipate several meetings of the ad hoc committee before determining the structure and make-up of the first official working advisory committee.

And finally, about our fears ... delegate Esther Osche of Birch Island expressed our collective fears when she shared the following statement:

*"I was just thinking about the creative force and power that works through people, and definitions kind of lock you into a place, or get you to try and corral this creative force that is expressing through people, and as soon as you try and tinker with that, and you think you have the corral built up, and you go 'there, I finally got it', and everybody comes to look ... and it's not there. Where did it go? So it's better to just work with what is expressing, because I think the creative force defines itself, and in many unique ways, through people. I understand that you need a structure, to bring everyones' minds together, to acknowledge and define how we are going to work amongst one another with this force. And I understand how mission statements and terms of reference are important, to communicate to others our intent, but I get concerned when we try to get it all fenced in and packaged. It starts to loose its meaning."*

It is our hope and our intention that it remains flexible, organic, living, and relevant to the people of our communities.

When the first circle was held of the **Community of Artists of Northern Ontario** on Sunday June 10, 2007 at the Wikwemikong Hub Centre, those present agreed to stand as the ad hoc advisory committee to provide initial stewardship. This includes:

Alan Asher	Sudbury
Joahna Berti	Manitoulin Island
Nathan Cheechoo	Moosonee
Moreen Cox	Atikokan
Jennifer Garrett	Atikokan
Jane Grann	Thunder Bay
Alex Goss	Owen Sound
Catherine Cheechoo Gull	Moosonee
Don Kavanaugh	Kenora
Laurie McGauley	Sudbury
Monique Monatch	Moose Factory
Joe Osawabine	Wikwemikong
Esher Osche	Birch Island
Celeste Scopelites	Sudbury
Bob Yellowhead	Summer Beaver
Becky Ziegler-Girouard	Sudbury
Deborah Barndt for Zainab Amadahy	CAO Representative
Ron Berti	Debajehmujig Representative

Friendly associates of the Advisory Committee present in the circle:

Linda Albright	ANCY (Toronto/Tillsonberg)
Denise Bolduc	Independently, Sault Ste Marie/Toronto
Cheryl L'Hirondelle	Independently, Various Places in Canada
Marilyn McIntosh	OAC (Thunder Bay)