

Arts and Culture: A Rural Perspective

Alison Baird



Rosebud, Alberta – Bernie Nemeth

We've all heard how beneficial arts and culture can be to cities that embrace them. We've all heard how music lessons can keep an inner city youth from joining a gang or how a mural can help deter graffiti on a city street. Sure, arts and culture have a place in large urban areas where museums, art galleries, theatres and music venues are plentiful, but what about towns, villages and counties?

Rural communities have fallen on hard times. With large urban centres presenting opportunity and convenience at every turn, rural communities are struggling to keep up. Rural populations are steadily declining and aging, making it difficult to retain youth who grew up in these communities and to attract new residents. According to Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, Alberta's rural and small town population declined by 4.5 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

Alberta's communities have tried a variety of ways to address these issues, but the potential of arts and culture has been largely ignored. Can arts and culture fix the problems facing today's rural communities? How can rural policy-makers use arts and culture to help sustain and develop their communities?

A Picture of Potential

It's a warm Sunday afternoon in Pipestone, Alberta, 73 kilometres south of Edmonton, between Highway 2 and Pigeon Lake. The local school is swarming with county residents, leaders and business owners. Surprisingly, parking is hard to find. It's not often that visitors to the school circle the parking lot, only to realize they'll need to park on the street.

But today is different. Today, local pastor Tim Wray and about 70 young residents have taken over the gym for a photography

exhibition. And the turnout is more than Wray, or anyone in the small rural community, expected.

Wray organized the PhotoVoice project with one main goal in mind: action. Younger citizens of Pipestone were generally absent from local decision-making organizations like the community association, the recreation commission and the church. Wray set out to change that. "PhotoVoice itself was invented as a way for a voiceless population to get a voice so that change could be made," he says, admitting that his goals were modest. "Locally, I hope there [will] be a policy change. It might not even make it into written policy, but it would become a practice."

During the 10-week project, young adults between 18 and 35 learned photography skills, shared photographs taken in the community and discussed the life of young

adults in rural Alberta. The culmination is the photo exhibit, attended by residents, local politicians, members of various organizations, employers and government agencies, which is aimed at creating awareness of issues and opportunities facing young people in rural communities.

A Role Unplayed

According to a 2009 report commissioned by the Creative City Network of Canada called *Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Culture*, arts and culture are largely absent from the rural landscape for a variety of reasons. One reason is the lack of access to information or programs, due largely to the geographical distance from arts and culture organizations. That isolation also makes inclusive Internet coverage hard to facilitate, further restricting residents' opportunities to educate themselves on arts and culture. Opportunities for learning about arts and culture and building new skills are in short supply, as are the opportunities for artists to perform or showcase their work. And when there is some sort of arts and culture festival or organization, it often lacks funding, volunteers, participants and performance opportunities.

These issues, added to the fact that rural communities are coping with more pressing challenges and limited funding, mean arts and culture are often put on the back burner. Yet these kinds of initiatives might actually offer a tool for fixing some of the problems. The report suggests that rural communities that embrace arts and culture have found such initiatives can help sustain and develop the community, create jobs, drive tourism and boost the local economy. They can also bring a sense of purpose and belonging to citizens, a morale boost, and create a reason for youth to stay in a rural setting by increasing economic and social opportunities.

Getting arts and culture to work for a rural community requires leaders and policy-makers

to put the needs of the community before growth and development. According to the report, community buy-in is essential, and integration, engaged youth and leadership development should be encouraged. There should also be increased funding support that is community-driven, sustainable, controlled from the bottom up and, when desired, supported by government. Rural policy-makers need to have a strong sense of what is best for residents, businesses and the community's future growth.

When Arts and Culture Meet Tourism

So what can happen when rural communities embrace arts and culture? Well, one possibility is that they become destinations for tourists and artists alike — become, in a sense, a haven for artists. With tourism as the third most important economic driver in the province, that's nothing to scoff at. The Canadian Badlands Ltd. (CBL) is a not-for-profit corporation that encourages tourists to visit southeast Alberta, areas like Drumheller, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge. Alberta's badlands might be better known for dinosaur bones and hoodoos, but the area is slowly developing a niche as an arts community.

CBL makes it clear that artists and performers, as well as those who admire arts and culture, will get their fair share of it in the area. On top of the Heart of Art festival in Brooks, the photography tours throughout the Drumheller area and the historical Rosebud Theatre in Rosebud, there is the Hive in Medicine Hat; the arts collective in the city's downtown is becoming known as the "arts district," bringing people to the stores, restaurants and community events. "We've been certainly trying to facilitate and move arts and culture along, because we recognize it is a viable tourism entity," says Jody Lamb of CBL. "There are people who simply vacation for arts and culture."

Crafting a Strong Community

Other arts and culture initiatives are creating a sense of community. Take Creative Campus in the Hinton area, east of Jasper National Park. What began as a local piano festival has turned into a multi-city arts and culture festival that brings in 1,000 people each year and facilitates arts and culture learning throughout the year. The initiative brings art into the lives of citizens in Hinton, Jasper, Grande Cache and Edson.

"Everyone wants to have that one thing that makes them feel alive, feel happy and feel a part of something," says Melissa

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Pattison, business manager for Creative Campus. "For many, arts and culture can be a great source of these feelings."

Snapshot of Potential

Back in Pipestone, Wray and his team of amateur photographers share the voice of the community's rural youth through 10 weeks' worth of photography.

As Wray surveys the crowd at the exhibit and plays host to the swelling audience, he's excited about the possibilities. Maybe these young people will gain the confidence to organize more arts-related events. Maybe the county will see the positive impact arts can have and invest funds. Whatever the case, Wray can already sense the potential.

The value of arts or cultural events in rural areas is often underestimated or undervalued, but the impacts can be far-reaching. By recognizing this potential in Alberta's rural communities, residents and decision-makers will have another tool for sustaining and growing the places they call home.

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