



Arts as a Tool for Community Engagement

The Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria demonstrates an artistic approach to community engagement. **By Jean McRae**

A non-profit cannot meet its goals without some level of community engagement. “Community engagement” is that often elusive and difficult to measure connection that individuals make to a purpose or cause. The type and depth of engagement will vary considerably depending upon the mandate of the organization. Sometimes engagement takes place in very visible ways; for example, a volunteer tutoring a student to help her build literacy in English. Sometimes engagement is

less visible. It’s hard to see an attitude change until it manifests as behavior. My organization, in part because of its unique history, has seen arts programming as especially important to engage the public in becoming more accepting of the cultural and ethnic diversity which immigrants introduce to our community.

The Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA) was formed by ethnic community groups in 1971 to mount an annual multicultural celebration, FolkFest. The mission of ICA

was “to promote harmony among all people” which may today look a little unclear, but was meant to address racism and exclusion. The founders of the organization felt that sharing culture in the form of food, music and dance was the answer. Over the years the society has changed and the organization has changed as well, but the central goals of addressing racism and issues of inclusion have remained central to our work. Since the late seventies ICA has provided services to newcomer immigrants and refugees. We see our work as focused on two target groups: first, the immigrants to whom we provide the information and support they require to make a successful transition to life in our community, and second, our local schools, employers and service providers to build a community that is welcoming and accessible to immigrants.

ICA FolkFest was a manifestation of the earliest days of Canada’s approach to multiculturalism. As one of the main tenets of multiculturalism is our shared Canadian identity, the nine-day festival always included Canada Day in July. The ethnic communities shared their culture through performances of dance and music, and the sale of ethnic foods. Through those food sales they raised funds to support the activities of their cultural groups such as language lessons, dance and music classes, scholarships, and gatherings to mark special cultural days. The engagement of the groups in FolkFest followed a pattern related

to the process of enculturation; the process where a group’s culture is shared and learned through socialization. When immigrants arrive they tend to focus primarily on survival issues – housing, learning English, employment – but as time passes parents realize their children are losing facility in the home language and there are fewer opportunities for experiencing cultural activities. Parents often look to provide these experiences. They need to raise funds and FolkFest provided an excellent opportunity. To become eligible to join ICA as a member group, the community members must work together to form a non-profit organization and in the process learn about principles of Canadian

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democracy. They pull in members of the community towards a common purpose and learn from what other groups have done. Over the years as the groups become more settled, their focus for fundraising turns outward to assisting with general community concerns, or the groups fall away as the needs shift. It is important to say that ICA FolkFest grew over the thirty-six years of its life from a small amateur event to a professionally produced event, with international artists performing alongside local ▶

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- ▶ ethnic performers, with a budget of \$850,000 and well over 200,000 attendees each year.

Luminara is another arts-based project run by ICA. Luminara is a lantern festival, now in its eighth year of operation, that was developed by a committee sponsored by the City of Victoria and was in part modeled after Vancouver's Illuminares festival. The lantern festival was a natural fit for ICA because of the cultural component and its potential to resonate with many cultural groups. Lanterns, flame, and light in the dark have resonance across many nationalities. We also looked at the potential of the event to bring immigrant newcomers together with established members of the community. We liked the idea that newcomers could participate in lantern building workshops alongside their neighbours, and could collaborate in the creation of beautiful lanterns without necessarily sharing much of a common language. We've seen some occasions when new immigrants with limited English have taken the lead in the creative process. Both Luminara and FolkFest are favourites of the general public in Victoria, and year after year compete against each other for the "Best of Victoria" awards. We think this says something about the 'art' of community engagement.

Through its youth, women's and seniors' programs, ICA has often used theatre as a medium to achieve its mandate. ICA partnered many times with Puente Theatre. Puente means "bridge" in Spanish and focuses on building bridges between immigrants and their new

community. Youth Against Racism was an award-winning project that brought together the stories of immigrant and visible minority youth and crafted them into vignettes, which the youth staged as an interactive production in which audience members could change the flow of the story and help the characters resolve their differences. The group toured the production in schools. Youth talking to youth about their own experiences as immigrants and minorities in this style of theatre creates an authentic voice expressed through an artistic medium that engages the audience in solving the problems.

One of the advantages of being a long standing organization is that we are fortunate enough to hear about the long term impact of our work. We hear from the grown up children who danced on the FolkFest stage that they have chosen careers that embrace cultural diversity. We hear from the now grown youth of the Youth Against Racism theatre project how much of a difference the project made in balancing their pride and comfort in their family's culture with their adult role in Canadian society. It tells us that ICA programs make a positive impact on the lives of immigrants and immigrant communities in our region. Both the immigrants and the society they share have changed. The arts have a powerful influence on how we interpret and live in our community and have the ability to engage people who would be unlikely to participate in other types of social service and educational programming. ■