

NH celebrates first Culture Days

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By Nate Smelle

Last weekend, more than 40 local artists and businesses joined forces to help North Hastings host its first ever Culture Days. Each September for the past 10 years, millions of people have been exploring communities and learning about local culture across the country through this national celebration of culture. Funding for the weekend of events in North Hastings was provided by the Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization, Hastings County, Ontario Culture Days, Algonquin Arts Council and The Chocolate Harlot.

Originally inspired by the success of Québec's Journées de la culture, Culture Days was designed to give participants opportunities to engage in a "hands-on and behind-the-scenes" experience of arts and culture. Between the collective mural painting at the Art Gallery of Bancroft, the community scarecrow build in support of Harvest the North's community gardens, the Bancroft and Area Autumn Studio Tour, the Consensus Bus, and several food and beer tastings offered by local business owners there was no shortage of these opportunities in North Hastings.

As one of the organizers of Culture Days in North Hastings Robin Tait was out front of The Muse Gallery and Cafe in Bancroft Saturday morning to make sure everyone got on the Consensus Bus safely. She explained that the idea of bringing Culture Days to North Hastings originated after she and co-organizers of the event Tara McMurtry and Dora Yateman participated in the Ignite experiential tourism program. Tait said the concept of the "Consensus Bus" - a free four to eight hour bus ride to wherever everyone on the bus agrees to go - came from artist Alex Snukal, and was part of the 2019 Ontario Culture Days special exhibition curated by Dave Dymont called "Do Blue Butterflies Eat Parts of the Sky?"

"We are one of three lucky communities to have the Consensus Bus along with Newmarket and Brockville," said Tait.

"It is a performance piece and the theme is consensus. It's all about the conversation, having a discussion, talking about what consensus is, how we come to a consensus, and the feelings around consensus."

Tait said it was also worth noting that the spontaneous bus tour would not have been possible if not for the partnership between Ontario Culture Days and Bancroft Community Transit.

Paul Prentice was behind the wheel of the Consensus Bus during Culture Days on Saturday. Looking back on the experience, he said "It was a really informative day out for me as I drive the Consensus Bus around town. The number of different cultures in our area is amazing. Next year we will have to get more people on the bus because it was really quite a fun day."

Tara McMurtry was another of the co-organizers responsible for bringing Culture Days to North Hastings. She was thrilled to see so many local people, businesses and organizations come together to make the weekend of arts and culture events such a success.

Having hosted one of the events locally herself - a chocolate tasting at her business The Chocolate Harlot - McMurtry said the most inspiring thing about Culture Days is how it fosters a "culture of sharing." One of the best examples of this "culture of sharing," she said was the community scarecrow build hosted by the North Hastings Community Trust and Harvest the North.

"High capacity organizations, high capacity communities all have a culture of sharing, collaborating, caring," said McMurtry.

"There's a reason the scarecrow build was such a huge success - that is because the North Hastings Community Trust has built deep roots in this community, and is leading by example."

Although this year's Culture Days in North Hastings featured a wide variety of events and activities, McMurtry said next year's celebration will be even bigger and better. Noting how organizers did not find out that North Hastings would be accepted as a Culture Days host destination until this past August, she said they are looking forward to having more time next year to market the event and build their network of artists and volunteers.

"Next year we will have more hubs of activity, more partnering," explained McMurtry.

McMurtry added that anyone who participated in North Hastings Culture Days is welcome to connect with them and share their input with organizers via their Facebook page. To assist organizers with building on their successes even further, McMurtry said there is also a survey available online at: www.culturedays.ca.