

Notable AX

For KCR, February 7, 2017 edition
Jane Simpson, Executive Director, AX
Peter Powning, Board of Directors, AX

As promised, we will occasionally feature a guest writer for our Notable AX column. Today's piece was written by artist Peter Powning. Peter is one of the founding AX Board Members, and his award-winning work has been shown in more than 60 galleries and museums across Canada and around the world. Peter lives in Markhamville, just outside of Sussex. Thanks, Peter!

AX stands for the Arts and Culture Centre of Sussex. The “arts” part is self-explanatory, but what about “culture”? What is culture? Simply stated, culture is defined as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, made up of everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts.

Canada boasts a rich, diversified culture. While our local culture is perhaps not as diverse as urban centres like Toronto, we've been fortunate to welcome refugee families fleeing strife, and other newcomers from different countries now call Sussex home.

The culture of our region is deep and rooted to the place we live and the succession of ancestors who lived here before us. Our oral history is strong, and the memory of ancestral places is rich and passed through the generations. Culture isn't something separate from us – it's part of who we are, influenced by our music, what we read and watch, and all the myriad choices we collectively make.

It's more important than ever to recognize and celebrate our cultural strengths, to broaden our cultural perspectives and understand who we are, and to understand that we actually make our own culture, all of us.

It isn't just musicians, artists, writers, dancers, actors and chefs that create our culture. Culture is also influenced by what we eat, the design of our houses and cars, the clothes we wear, the songs we sing, what we read. The Sussex region has strong traditions of knitting, rug hooking and quilt making. There are many amateur musicians who nourish our lives, community choruses and church choirs that add richness to the lives of the singers and their audiences. There are people who make exquisite fishing flies, there are gardeners and dancers. I'm sure you can think of many ways that we're all involved in cultural activities once we realize culture isn't only created by others but by the accumulated activities and choices we make.

Sussex is fortunate to have a strong sense of community and local identity, enriched by newcomers from other regions. For all the differences we may think we have, we have much more in common than not. Our differences add diversity and interest, and the commonalities draw us together. It all goes into the cultural stew that makes where we live such a special place.

I answered a call the other morning, a wrong number. The woman asked if we still had any white potatoes. I hesitated, said I thought she had the wrong number, but that we had plenty of red potatoes and were out of white. We shared a laugh, chatted about potatoes for a while, hung up and carried on with our lives having made an unexpected connection. I have no idea who she was or if we had anything in common other than potatoes, but the encounter underlined to me that the openness we have with each other is an essential part of our communal culture.

We can't watch the news without seeing the forces that are deliberately sowing the seeds of fear and distrust between people. We can help overcome those fears by getting out of our self-imposed bubbles and seeing the world through other people's eyes. That's what the arts, at their best, do – they encourage us to gain a broader perspective.

AX will be a gathering place where we can interact and learn from each other, celebrating our local culture while accessing a broader range of cultural expression and activities.