

Culture and dev

Case Study: Art We Awesome - Woodcarving Mural

“With over 300 participants contributing to a 24 foot woodcarving, the Art We Awesome - Woodcarving Mural is a great example of how art can be used to bring together a diverse community and foster community pride.”

Background

When the new Queensborough Middle School located in New Westminster, British Columbia opened in 2003, it was envisioned as a community meeting place as well as a middle school.

The Art We Awesome - Woodcarving Mural project was launched as a way for youth to take ownership of a project, learn about their neighbourhood's history, gain new skills of expression, and contribute something lasting to the community. As the project progressed, it also brought community involvement and a sense of history into the new school and fostered a renewed sense of community identity and pride.

This community art initiative was a collaboration between the City of New Westminster's Parks and Recreation Department, the Queensborough Middle School and a local residents' committee called the Queensborough Special Programs Committee, which has worked with the City of New Westminster to organize events, festivals, and community initiatives over the past 27 years. This on-going partnership was recognized by the British Columbia Principal's and Vice Principal's Association in 2005.

Process

Over 300 children, parents, teachers, and community members contributed to the 24-foot woodcarving for the school, which depicts the history and flavour of living in Queensborough, a culturally diverse neighbourhood of about 3,500 people in New Westminster, British Columbia.

Both the design of the mural itself and the process of creating it reflected values important to Queensborough residents, such as diversity, inclusion, and community pride. The process began with a community brainstorming session that included various members of the community including adults, business owners, and youth.

From a list of words and concepts, Sukhdeep Rai, a teacher at the Queensborough Middle School, designed the mural.

“Members of our community were asked to share their thoughts on what Queensborough means to them. Then the challenge was to blend together various themes such as cultural diversity, physical environment, and economical heritage. The most important theme was to capture the heart of the community - the people. They are what

truly make Queensborough special.”

Woodcarver Doug Morrison worked with everyone individually to create the mural, involving them at every stage of the project, from preparing the wood, to tracing the design, to carving the mural. He taught them to use the special carving tools safely and effectively.

Participants learned new skills and had the chance to experience something new and different. New tools were bought and the new techniques were integrated into the middle school's industrial education curriculum. Youth who never had carved before discovered a new hobby and many asked for woodworking tools for Christmas.

Although youth were the driving force in this project, flexible working hours made the project accessible to all neighbourhood residents. A diverse range of community members participated, including every middle school student and teacher, school staff, family members, and other Queensborough residents totaling over 300 participants in the end.

The mural took eight weeks of intensive work to complete, and was unveiled at the Queensborough Middle School in January 2004. Benefits are apparent to both individuals who participated in the process, as well as to the community at large.

Impact

Participants felt a sense of ownership of the project, and pride that they had contributed something to the community. It gave them a forum for meeting new people, a venue for individual expression, and a chance for youth in the community to take on a leadership role. Justin, a middle school student, said:

"The program meant a lot to me because it gives me a chance to give back to the community something valuable. I have done things in this community I am not proud of. I am not an angel, but this is something I am proud of. "

The mural also brought a sense of history to a new building, and brought the broader community into the middle school. It enabled a culturally diverse community to come together with pride and celebrate what makes living in Queensborough so special. In 2004, the project was recognized and received two awards: the Program Excellence Award from the British Columbia Parks and Recreation Association and the Award of Excellence for Innovation from the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association.

As a spin-off of the success of this project, the community consequently applied for, and received, funding for three additional woodcarved welcome signs. Families had the opportunity to design and create, and contribute to a heightened sense of physical identity for the Ryall Park area in Queensborough. These welcome signs are displayed prominently in the entrances of each of the two schools and the Queensborough Community Centre in Queensborough.

Lessons

- Although this was a community-driven project with several groups involved in financial and administrative support of the project, the City of New Westminster played a key role in providing in-kind contributions, including staff support, project facilitation, advertising, and clerical support.
- Most importantly, as Renee Chadwick, the manager of the Queensborough Community Centre, emphasized, is that *“the New Westminster Parks and Recreation encourages a community development service delivery approach. By putting all your resources together you will realize a greater good for your community. In this case the Art We Awesome – Woodcarving mural community initiative demonstrated that the arts are a valuable vehicle for facilitating community belonging, fellowship, and pride.*

For more information
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