

(The following is a transcript of a verbal presentation that took place two days following the Breathing Northwinds Forum. Ron Berti was one of thirty speakers invited to Sudbury to speak to a variety of community and government stakeholders from all sectors, examining the feasibility of building a large cultural/performing arts centre in Sudbury. In telephone consultations with delegates represented at the Forum, it was clear to all of us that this was an opportunity to express a realistic strategy and some concrete figures in support of community based arts practice in Northern Ontario, while large scale bricks and mortar plans were being made.)

Good Evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak.

At a recent provincial gathering of community based arts practitioners, with a strong representation from Sudbury Region and Northern Ontario, some important discoveries were made. We discovered that the five cities of North Bay, Sudbury, Timmons, Thunder Bay and Kenora are logical places of convergence for activity throughout the north, and that working together like five fingers of a hand, would provide the strongest structural framework with which to share resources of relative scale, and to support the overall ecology of the arts sector.

With the current plans being discussed to build a new performing arts facility in Sudbury, we discussed the role of these urban north public art spaces, and how one can operate a cultural arts facility to do well on the books, draw large crowds and present big acts. And you can import big artists names from outside the region/country to accomplish this. In this respect, it becomes a servant to the tourist rather than the community. However, if you want the facility to be the hub of a thriving arts community, if you want it to contribute to the quality of life of all those who do and who do not buy the tickets, if you want it to be authentic, then it has to be relevant to the local, regional, and provincial arts community, in all its diverse forms and mediums.

And by relevant, we mean

- making the presenting of the art of Northern Ontario artists an unequivocal priority.
- providing space and tools and services and audiences for all forms of artistic expression and engagement,
- paying attention to the current trends away from the pure disciplines, and towards more multi-disciplinary, and innovative forms

And if you want the arts activity in a community to reach its full potential of benefits,

- from increasing civic engagement, awareness, and social vitality
- to urban beautification
- to pride of place
- to integrated programming with the education, health, social service sectors, the justice sector and the eco tourism sector –

then make sure the community based artists who currently animate artistic activity and social expression outside of the mainstream facilities, are given a permanent home, a strong voice, and a meaningful role.

Our largest facilities in our largest centres need to be fed, stimulated, creatively challenged, nourished and supported by the artists, the artistic product, the organizations and the artistic services of the entire Northern Ontario arts sector. Maximum integration with community on as many levels as possible would ensure that all parts of the sector grow together. This is the foundation upon which the larger facilities success will be built.

How? By **Feeder Organizations** that are made integral to the programming of the larger facilities – being provided where required with space, tools and resources, while maintaining creative independence.

Community based feeder organizations (eg. Myths and Mirrors, The Best Medicine Troupe, Atikokan Centre for the Arts, etc.) do the best job at outreach, at making sure that all segments of our communities have access to participation in the arts according to their own aspirations and inspirations, despite their location, their income, their education, or their age.

Feeder Organizations are delivery mechanisms for artists in the classroom, artists in the workplace, and artists in the community. When you have artists in the classroom and in the workplace and in the community, then you have a society that grows ever richer, ever more tolerant, ever more resourceful, innovative, and invigorating. This is the way to develop audiences – by maximizing participation in the arts on all levels, so that it is wholistic, integrated, and becomes a part of the life style of the people. This is how you bring artists and audiences together – you blur the lines between them, rather than reinforcing the lines.

Artistic elitism will not serve us well in Northern Ontario – fundamentally, we have different values as a result of the nature of our places – a series of loosely interconnected communities spread out over great distances that share common experience and subservience to weather and the environment, at the same time with very specific local histories. Survivalists.

So we know that **Feeder Organizations** of Northern Ontario are crucial mechanisms. What do they require to be healthy? They require 5 – 6 full-time employees dedicated to the artistic programming. This allows the organization to reach the critical point of having enough secured (paid) human resources to respond, develop, innovate, partner, and deliver, in a flexible and meaningful way. It is only in reaching this critical mass of human potential – 5 or 6 – that the organization actually has the means to contribute meaningfully to its own self sustainability, and therefore, to its future growth and potential. Insufficient staff remains tied to the office, there is little opportunity for innovating earned revenue initiatives and alternative revenue generating services and partnerships.

An annual investment of \$900,000. would provide the 30 full time staff positions required across Northern Ontario to keep the feeder organizations productive and growing.

In addition to the Larger Facilities in the five cities of convergence, and the Feeder Organizations, we recognize the important role of **Feeder Communities** across the north. They differ in size and in location while they provide important links between the individual artist, the individual audience member, the individual student, and the Feeder Organizations. **Feeder Communities** complete the linkage between individuals and the main facilities and resources in the cities of convergence.

Feeder Communities bring artists and communities together for shorter periods of time, provide direct services to artists, and can penetrate deep into the landscape to reach even our most isolated and remote colleagues. They host festivals and special events and gatherings for a wide variety of reasons throughout the year.

An annual investment of \$375,000 would provide 15 Feeder Communities with the resources and leverage of additional resources, to address small local infrastructure and/or programming needs, so that the Feeder Communities can increase their service, capacity, and reach.

And finally, recognition of **Individual Artists and Practitioners** across Northern Ontario. Of particular note, has been the realization that in the north, you are more likely to see entire families who are engaged in artistic practice. Perhaps this is an influence of social conventions like the native clan system whereby tasks and responsibilities were determined along family lines, since it was in the company of the family that the skill or trade or task was learned. This would also reflect the rural, resource-based lifestyle of many northerners that for generations has seen skills and trades passed down through the family. In any case, we

see many, many examples of entire families engaged in artistic practice, and in realizing and recognizing this, we should be able to serve and support our artists better.

Our **Individual Artists and Practitioners** have professional development needs. They need access to materials and supplies, to new equipment, to specialized training, and a variety of others. They also need the ability and freedom to move about. This is how they become useful and accessible to the Feeder Communities and the Feeder Organizations.

An annual investment of \$225,000 would give 25 Northern Ontario Artists/Families each year what they need to advance their careers/practice and their art, and contribute to the artistic animation of Northern Ontario

The five main centres of convergence in Northern Ontario may have varying capital infrastructure requirements. A review of this has not been within our purview, nor have the needs of mainstream regional arts organizations, except to the extent that some of these run important outreach and education programs and services for the direct benefit of the community.

As Northerners in contact with the land and aware of our environment, we know that all things are connected. The health and vitality of one will affect the health and vitality of the other. Whatever is spent on bricks and mortar, *The Community of Artists of Northern Ontario* strongly recommend that an annual investment of **\$1.5 million dollars** be committed to invigorate the **Feeder Organizations**, the **Feeder Communities**, and the **Individual Artists**. This investment would ensure that the Arts Sector of Northern Ontario develops according to the values and ethics of the people of Northern Ontario, with two feet firmly rooted in the community.

Thank you.