



A Vaughan Public Library customer makes use of the new musical instrument library.

Residents discover new forms of creative expression in their public libraries



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Today, we have access to technology that gives everyone the capacity to craft something new out of one's photos, videos, thoughts, and experiences, as well as countless platforms for sharing what one has crafted. So, perhaps, it is a natural consequence of these technologies that so many Canadians are engaging in various forms of creative expression. Whether it's young gymnasts whose quirky videos have found a following on YouTube; the retired dentist who has taught himself to play the piano using his iPad; or friends who have been making music together for years, but are just now recording that music; everyday Canadians of all ages and walks of life are experimenting with ways to express themselves creatively and artistically.

In studies and anecdotal testimonials, engaging in any form of creative expression, especially when done as a pastime, is associated with greater levels of satisfaction with one's life; lower levels of stress and anxiety; experiences of joy and achievement; improved mental health and wellbeing; a healthy social network; a more positive outlook; and higher levels of resilience. It would seem that, whatever art form you choose, investing time in learning and practising for pleasure is good for you – and good for the community! In the words of Gordon Sondland, Chair of the Oregon Governor's Office of Film and Television: "The arts, in whatever form they take, create a vehicle through which society can express its hopes, fears, trends, and the beauty of life." He goes on to say, "without the arts,



ABOVE Vaughan Public Library's Civic Centre Branch boasts a green room and professional recording equipment for budding musicians, performers, and videographers.

a community is just a collection of buildings inhabited by people who have no method by which to express their humanity to their own community and to the world.”¹

Public libraries across Canada, always quick to recognize an opportunity, have developed new programs and services in response to the growing interest in creative expression. While libraries have long supported budding writers with literary, reference, and how-to collections, as well as author readings and writing workshops, new supports to other artists and creative practitioners have been introduced more recently. With offerings that include video/sound editing software, 3D printers, green screens, robotics, professional recording equipment, exhibit and performance space, and musical instruments for loan, today's public libraries act as creative incubators, helping new practitioners discover their art forms. More importantly, public libraries enable experimentation by eliminating the financial barriers to trying something new. Being able to borrow instruments from the library makes it far more appealing to try two or three before deciding which one to pursue. Similarly, it's helpful for a videographer to be able to try different editing software available at the library before deciding which to purchase.

¹ “How do the arts benefit society and/or the individual?” *Oregon Jewish Life*, September 6, 2017, <http://orjewishlife.com/how-do-the-arts-benefit-society-and-or-the-individual/>.

Public libraries often partner with other agencies and organizations in the community. In a particularly poignant example, Midland Public Library in Midland, Ontario partners with the local mental health organization to host a weekly art program for mental health outpatients. It's been running successfully for a year now, with plans to expand the program to involve the local art gallery and art school, clearly establishing the library and the arts as welcoming to vulnerable individuals who are so often marginalized in their communities. In the words of Faith Roebuck Shergold, the Community Engagement Coordinator at Midland Public Library: “we feel that these outlets for artistic practice in a community-based way build self-confidence and self-expression, and demonstrate that the arts community is a welcoming space for everyone.” This partnership is an excellent example of a win-win arrangement. The weekly art program at the library is certainly of value to the mental health outpatient organization in its efforts to help its clientele with mental health challenges. At the same time, the program is clearly aligned with the library's mission to “be the learning and leisure hub of the community providing knowledge, ideas, and technology in a collaborative space that sparks connections between people,” and its vision of “fostering lifelong learning and creativity in Midland and its neighbouring communities.”

Library staff plays an important role in not only developing the services, but also in making artists and creators feel

welcome, reassuring them they've come to the right place, and directing them to available resources and services. Staff is also responsible for developing programs and events, based on interest and demand, which often involves working with partners and sponsors, and sometimes a volunteer workforce. Staff is usually aware of arts and culture opportunities in the community, and can, therefore, knowledgeably direct people to dancing schools; theatre companies; choirs; drumming circles; and ukulele, quilting, and writing groups.

While providing guidance and assistance to artists in the library, staff often find themselves in engaging conversations about the joys and frustrations of expressing something creatively. During the exchange, members of staff often bond with particular creators and become invested in their growth as artists, offering encouragement and inspiration on an ongoing basis. In many cases, staff members themselves are artists, dancers, musicians, and poets, which makes the conversations even richer.

In addition to achieving the purpose of being a catalyst for creative and artistic expression, many of the library's arts-based programs and events are popular in the community and generate considerable social capital. People come by the dozens and the hundreds to how-to-in-10 festivals, exhibits of local artists, talent shows, and poetry slams.

In addition to situations that draw crowds, some library program participants, such as the growing numbers of ukulele players who meet weekly at Prince Edward County, Bayfield, and London Public Libraries (all in Ontario), become friends and co-creators, making

music together, and becoming each other's primary support system. Another, quieter, example is that of writing programs like Brantford Public Library's long-running Lifescapes, a memoir writing program. Through sharing each other's writing, and making suggestions to improve each other's writing, strong bonds often develop, sometimes resulting in the same writers coming back, year after year, continuing to support each other's growth and development as writers.

Programs and events that showcase local talent and creativity have the added benefit of evoking community cohesion and civic pride, shaping, over time, the public's perceptions of community identity. Attendance at events and participation in programs that highlight the variety of talent in the community seem to contribute to a sense of belonging and connectedness, and to a positive view of the community. A good example of this is the annual Day in the Life of Oakville photo exhibit, a community outreach project of Oakville Public Library in Oakville, Ontario, just west of Toronto.

Designed as a public appeal (rather than as a contest) for photos to exhibit online and to be kept as part of Oakville's local history, the Day in the Life of Oakville program is a brilliant example of a library providing a platform and a structure that enables residents to come together to tell the community's story. Ultimately, the photo exhibit each year is a visual celebration of the community, enabling residents to look in the mirror and see the best of themselves. Because of their participation, the photographers and their families – and the public who view the exhibit – all take away feelings of community pride and connectedness

that, undoubtedly, impact overall well-being and outlook. This connection between experiences of local culture and creativity, community cohesion, and personal wellbeing, is precisely why "Culture and Leisure" is one of eight domains of wellness in the *Canadian Index of Wellbeing*.

The Place Settings Project, an initiative of the Writer-in-Residence program at Brant County Public Library in Brant County, Ontario, is another excellent example of a library program having significant community impact, strengthening community identity and cohesion. Krista Foss, Writer-in-Residence at the time, worked with residents and local writers, some of them previously published, many not, to publish an anthology of non-fiction writing about the importance of place to living in Brant County. The anthology, *Place Settings: Collected Works Celebrating the County of Brant*, features 16 pieces, chosen from the 50 that were submitted, written by residents ranging in age from a 16 year old to a gentleman in his 80s. The gala event for the book launch became a Brant County community event, during which the authors read from their entries.

Whether as a solo pursuit or a group experience, engaging in creative expression expands one's relationships throughout the community. A robust web of relationships rooted in shared stories, images, and experiences is what makes a community an appealing place to live. This web of relationships is also what creates a welcoming, open space for creators throughout the community. These open spaces – at the public library and elsewhere – are crucial infrastructure in today's communities. **MW**

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