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## Making the most of it: Turning to arts and crafts through the pandemic

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The Vancouver Island community of Saanich has a lot of heart – literally. Since summer 2020, Saanich residents have decorated more than 900 wooden and clay hearts that now adorn structures all over community parks and spaces.

Brenda Weatherston is a community arts specialist with the municipality, and one of the people behind the [HeArts Together Community Art Project](#). When the pandemic locked the community down last year, Weatherston reached out to her non-profit and charity partners to ask how they were faring. She found many overwhelmed and struggling to reach their community members.

“We knew if they couldn’t reach people, we certainly couldn’t either. But what we could do is collaborate to give people something they could do in their homes,” Weatherston says. “The hearts may be a bit cliché, but we wanted to take the symbol and give it a new shape, form, and meaning and make them really beautiful, cared-for objects.”

Weatherston enlisted the help of volunteer woodworkers to create the hearts, which then made their way to mental health associations, residential care facilities, women’s and homeless shelters, the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, and newcomer and youth groups, reaching 16 organizations and more than a thousand community members – all on little more than in-kind donations and a \$3,500 grant from Community Foundations of Canada’s Community Response Fund.

Weatherston’s insight – that the simple act of decorating a heart can have exponential benefits – is a powerful one. The HeArts Together project has had deep meaning for different people: a mother and daughter who survived abuse collaborated on a heart that helped them engage with

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that trauma together; Métis community members decorated hearts in a celebration of their culture; newcomers used their hearts to thank their new Canadian neighbours for their support and care; a young artist with Down's syndrome who recently moved to the community was able to share his art and find connection.

"Displaying the hearts in public spaces makes people feel like they belong and they matter," Weatherston says. "You may not be able to go out to the park to see your heart with all of the others, but you know it's there. It's about being asked, feeling like your opinion matters and that the community cares."

Many seeking comfort, control, continuity, and connection in the pandemic have turned to craft and art. Solidarity rainbows have popped up in windows, conveying shared wishes for the future. Mask-making teams have stitched up a sense of purpose at machines across the country. In Kahnawake, a Mohawk community near Montreal, [a community beadwork project](#) has kept hands and heads busy during the second lockdown, connecting people to each other, and to culture. And it's not just happening in people's homes. Community art projects have been brightening laneway garage doors, telephone poles, empty storefronts, and countless other public spaces.

Crafting and art have gone beyond creative expression to become a way to check in, share something positive, stay focused, make meaning, and create a connection to the outside world – and to something bigger than our isolated selves. And while the depth of those benefits have been a surprise to some, they're well known to individuals and organizations working in community-engaged arts and art therapy.

Rachel Chainey is a Montreal-based art therapist and the coordinator of [Art Hives HQ](#), the home base of an international open-source network of more than 200 community art spaces that use art as a strengths-based community development practice.

Art Hives HQ is located on the Concordia University campus in downtown Montreal. In normal times, it buzzes with people of all ages and backgrounds who drop in for independent and directed making sessions – it's a place where people can find belonging and support while, and by, exploring their creativity. Shifting programming online has limited accessibility and changed what connecting through craft looks like at HQ and other Art Hives, but it has also allowed new folks to join and has inspired new projects, like arts educator and therapist Megan Kanerahten:wi Whyte's new virtual Art Hive in Kahnawà:ke, which she launched to help people connect during lockdown.

"We believe in craft not just as a creative pursuit, but as a lifeline. What's powerful is that it's a social experience around something that's generative," Chainey says. "We're all going through some level of difficulty and grief, big or small. Art can hold so much of that. And when you create art with others, the impact multiplies: you're uplifted by what you created, and by others' creations, and you have this sense of belonging."

The cognitive and mental health benefits of art have been widely studied and applied in a variety of contexts. Studies have found that practising art increases people's overall and mental health by helping them better cope with stress. Art and craft gives people a way to process difficult emotions and experiences. There are also links between making and involvement in the arts and a higher sense of community belonging.

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They're big benefits. And they're often achieved with small investments. Toronto's [Art Starts](#) works with youth in several communities across the city, offering arts and life-skills activities in community spaces where youth are. The 30-year-old organization shifted to digital programming during the pandemic, offering after-school art sessions for youth, leadership programs for teens, and classes that give moms and babies a focused way to connect through art. They also started new programs to fill needs that have arisen during the pandemic, among them an intergenerational digital storytelling program for seniors and youth.

"One of the effects of the pandemic is that our thinking has opened up. We know that seniors are experiencing isolation, and so are children. So we asked ourselves, 'How can we bring together communities that are underserved?'" says executive director Bruce Pitkin. "We've thought about intergenerational programs before, but it's only now that it's really happened."

He adds: "It's great that the power of art and craft to heal and give hope is being acknowledged. We've known it for a long time, so it's great that there's a spotlight shining on it now. But we wish [the increased attention] would translate into more funding. We need more funding."

[Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming](#) (SCYAP) also uses art to break down barriers young people face and create pathways for success. They reach a large population of Indigenous and female youth. "It's been heartbreaking to see our community space not colourful and full of youth," says Clay Shaw, manager of operations. He worries about the youth who would regularly come to the space, but whom he hasn't seen in months.

SCYAP has been delivering art kits to community members and offering online art, mentorship, and leadership classes. Their long-running Urban Canvas program brought youth and the community together last fall in a rare moment of in-person connection to create a large mural on the exterior wall of the Salvation Army, the latest installment in a project that has seen more than 60 murals created around the city.

Shaw says that the Urban Canvas public art projects don't just showcase creativity and beautify the cityscape – they teach skills and create agency and connection. "Participants can look at the mural, or go back years later and say, 'I did that,'" he says. "It's not just the story on the wall but the story of their commitment to the project. It's awesome to see people's confidence grow throughout the project. And it's awesome when people come back to do a second one."

At the Textile Museum of Canada, craft is creating a different sense of accomplishment – that of making the most of what's at hand. Throughout the past year, they've been offering online sustainable teach-ins focused on reusing and upcycling through mending, natural dyeing, green gift-wrapping, and basket-making using T-shirts.

"Making during the pandemic has been an opportunity to get more creative about the materials we use," says program coordinator Leah Sanchez. "It's made us more mindful of what we have around us that we can use and inspired us to transform known materials into a whole new thing."

Back in Saanich, Weatherston plans to continue the HeArts Together project for as long as there's interest from non-profit partners and the community.

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Like Pitkin, she also wonders whether the increased attention and understanding of the value and benefits of making and art will lead to an increase in funding. “Those of us in the arts know that we’re so often hit first when there’s a downturn or crisis. I hope the arts can continue to be supported as part of recovery and healing.”