

# Collaborative arts community creates city of inclusivity

BY ABHIJIT RAO

I CAME to Canada in August of 2019 — a new immigrant in Thunder Bay, looking for a place to call home. I had moved from the United States after living there for almost two decades. As I drove past the border at Pigeon River and saw the stunning amethyst-coloured mountains, I knew Thunder Bay would be my first home in Canada.

Back in the U.S., I had worked in the post secondary education sector and was a practicing ceramic and metal artist. I was hoping to become part of the ceramic community in the Thunder Bay area and meet with the local artists to hopefully collaborate with them. However, life had different plans; soon the world was to come under the shadow of a global pandemic.

Being in Thunder Bay felt very safe, and I could not have asked for a better place — especially when news poured in relating the challenges other countries were facing at curbing the spread of the pandemic. However, being a new immigrant in a global lockdown was also an isolating experience.

At such a time, when the future looked ambivalent, I was introduced to Clara Sacchetti-Dufresne, co-executive director of the Community Arts and Heritage Education Project (CAHEP), during the early days of the pandemic. Betsy Birmingham, a friend and well-wisher, had come across an opportunity for delivering art education programming. Given my background in education and art, she thought it might fit my skill set. It did not take more than five minutes of meeting with Sacchetti-Dufresne to discover a friend, supporter, and a kindred spirit.

I joined the CAHEP team as a contract artist to deliver art programming for the various initiatives run through the organization. Through my experiences I was introduced to CAHEP's art programming initiatives for children, youth and adults throughout the city. Through CAHEP, I received opportunities to run art projects such as teaching ancient pottery techniques to elementary students to dyeing silk scarves for the 55-Plus community group.

The programs were delivered online during the lockdown with individual kits delivered to the homes of the partici-



ONE CITY,  
MANY VOICES

**The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.**

pants and later to hybrid and in-person delivery as the lockdown requirements were lifted. It was a fulfilling experience watching the look of discovery in the eyes of elementary students when they made their first ceramic bowl, or seeing the sense of wonder in a mature attendee as they unfolded their first dyed silk scarf. Through the programming, I finally felt I was meeting my potential both as an educator and an artist.

During the workshops, I was able to interact with other artists in meaningful ways and learn from them not only their craft, but also sustainable ways for deploying art education in the Thunder Bay community. CAHEP's collaborative work environment ensured artists were also becoming familiar with the different grant opportunities, the grant writing process, and the funding agencies.

This was an invaluable education for me in learning how to develop a network and find ways to create sustainable support for one's artistic journey. I realized CAHEP was not just providing art programming to the community, but also building a strong community of self-reliant artists and art educators that could support themselves and each other within a collaborative framework.

In 2021, I joined the CAHEP staff as a project co-ordinator. Through this role, I received multiple opportunities to co-ordinate year-long art programming initiatives supported through the various funding agencies. A couple projects that still stand fresh in my memory are the international students' cookbook and the gender-based art programming.

Through a collaboration between CAHEP and United Way, a group of international students from Lakehead Universi-

ty developed a cookbook of recipes from their home countries. The international students set up a planning team and a group of cooks that eventually created a printable cookbook and video recordings of these recipes. The students took up roles such as web developers, graphic designers, video editors, and content writers and worked with the cooks to develop a culturally rich cookbook. Visit [dishesfromhome.uwaytbay.ca](https://dishesfromhome.uwaytbay.ca) to see their website.

Multiple students from the project were able to showcase their professional skills and successfully receive job offers. Consequently, the project not only brought Thunder Bay's cultural diversity to the local community but proved how food can bring communities together under one voice.

The Johansen Larsen Foundation, for multiple years, has supported CAHEP in art education initiatives. For the past two years, CAHEP has been able to work with artists from the 2SLGBTIAQ+ community to bring gender conversations to youth through the medium of art. Through the programming, the artists were able to both showcase their art as well as develop project management skills, and the youth found a space to discuss concepts such as identity and gender in a safe and creative way.

These experiences are a slice of the substantial repertoire of CAHEP's art programming which includes school programming, Boys and Girls Club, Winter Fun Days, Speak Up, amongst other initiatives.

When I came to Thunder Bay in 2019, I was hoping for a place to practice my art and find an art community. My CAHEP experiences far exceeded these expectations. Here, I met a dedicated group of artists and art educators that even the pandemic could not slow down. They kept going just so the community could do art, heal, and recover during those extraordinary times.

CAHEP helped me grow not only as an artist and educator, but also as a person. Within the CAHEP family, I finally found my true artistic home.

*Abhijit Rao is an academic support zone co-ordinator in the Student Success Centre at Lakehead University. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.*