

Re-Membering Our Place

community art

by Jan MacLean

What motivates an artist to leave the relative safety of her studio to enter the less certain realm of community art?

For me, the reasons are both personal and political. As an artist and a parent of a child with a disability, I have been committed to using art as a tool for integration for many years. Through this work, I questioned what integration truly means. How can individuals with disabilities not only be included but also perceived as full contributors to the community they live in?

With these thoughts in mind, I began to envision a community art project that would give teens with disabilities an opportunity to be the teachers. In its own small way, the project would attempt to re-examine the stereotype of what it means to be a person with a disability.

And so began my adventure as a community artist.

My first step was to contact community organizations to see if they were interested in becoming partners in this project. The response from these organizations was overwhelmingly positive and supportive. Full of enthusiasm and energy, we found ourselves facing our first and most daunting challenge: funding.

I quickly found out that the community artist wears many hats. I was

simultaneously artist, manager, publicist, facilitator, and fundraiser. But I was far from alone; North Shore Neighborhood House's Special Needs Teen Club became the main sponsoring body, with North Vancouver Arts Council and North Vancouver Recreation Commission additional partners. As well, many individuals wrote letters of support. After a year of applying for funds, we were fortunate to receive grants from both the City of North Vancouver and the Herman Bischoff Foundation.

The first phase of the project was to work with the teens from Teen Club to train them in leading the banner-making workshops in the community. We used the training sessions to strengthen and build a number of skills, including event planning, organization, and art making. We taught these skills through drama, mask making, clay work, and painting. The training stage was a lot of fun and the teens, staff, and I enjoyed this segment of the project enormously.

Our next step was to move into the community. Ridgeway and Lynn Valley Kid's Clubs were very receptive to us holding banner-making workshops at their centres (the workshops and banner-making materials were free of charge). The teens visited the centres in small groups,

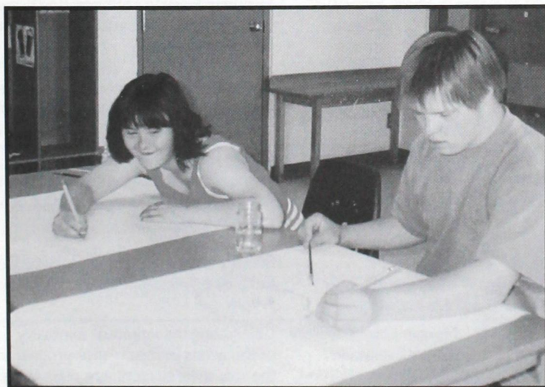
and with the support of the staff and me, facilitated the making of the banners.

There were a few challenges surrounding these workshops: Because we hadn't known that we had received funding until just a few weeks before the summer programs began, we had to do some very creative scheduling. We also had limited space, but because of the supportive staff, we were able to overcome both these problems. Even though the workshops were at times somewhat chaotic, everyone enjoyed the process and the participants were very pleased with their finished products. The teens were particularly proud of their role as facilitators.

Flexibility and good communication are key factors in making a community art project work. Without the humour, flexibility, and collaborative spirit of all the participants involved, the project could not have been the positive experience it was. And these are the very same dynamics that make true integration not only possible but probable.

Re-Membering Our Place is a community art project funded by the City of North Vancouver and the Herman Bischoff Foundation. The purpose of the project is to promote the integration of teens with a developmental disability through the process of art making in the community. Teens from North Shore Neighborhood's Special Needs Teen Club held banner-making workshops in the community for children from Ridgeway Kid's Club and Lynn Valley Kid's Club. Each banner is a self-portrait celebrating the unique and important place each of us holds in our community. Banners are on display in the lobby of the Centennial Theatre through to August.

Jan MacLean is a performance/visual artist and arts educator. She is also artist/project manager of Re-Membering Our Place.



Teens in "training"