

Presented by Latcham Art Centre

SASS!

Street Art Seniors of Stouffville



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Front image courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.



Street Art Seniors of Stouffville

In September 2022, art facilitators Lara Seixo Rodrigues and Duarte Cavalinhos flew to Toronto from Lisbon, Portugal, to assist Latcham Art Centre in a program called Street Art Seniors of Stouffville (SASS), based on their award-winning international project LATA 65. During their six-day stay, they engaged fifteen local seniors by teaching them all about the history of street art and leading them through the process of stenciling and mark-making with spray paint.

Much more than a simple art workshop, the participating seniors came together to create a public mural and took on the task of creative placemaking – a concept that draws on art and culture to transform and revitalize public spaces – to invigorate their beloved community centre’s exterior wall. Working together, they also developed new connections with one another, surprised themselves by uncovering hidden artistic talents, and shared in the joy of reshaping a piece of their town.

One year after the workshop – the first Canadian iteration of LATA 65 – Latcham Manager Jennifer Onlock spoke with Charlie Hawkins, Lorraine Majcen, Barbara McKenzie, and Geddis Ruttan about their experiences during the workshop. In the following interviews, they describe what surprised them about the process, what they learned, the connections they formed, and the positive effects that remain.

Jennifer Onlock: I appreciate you meeting with me today to share your experience from the project. I'm going to ask everybody a few questions, but I'll start with Charlie, if you're alright with that. Is there one word that would sum up the experience of the SASS project for you? I'm going to put you on the spot there. One word.

Charlie Hawkins: If there was one that comes to mind, it was "fun."

JO: On your submission form, when you applied to be part of the project, the reason you wanted to participate was because you believed it was important for us to recognize and celebrate the work of Abraham Stouffer in the building of our early settlement. We chose that building [6240 Main Street] because it has some history. It was part of Latcham's history as well. Arthur Latcham, I believe, donated the land or proceeds to build the building as a place for the community to gather. So, that's an important part. When you were doing the project, did you have a sense of creating something historical on a historical building?

CH: Well, to be honest, that didn't come to mind, but I appreciate the fact that that was part of the the process. For me, I love the community and the the way people worked together was such an amazing experience. It's all about the experience.

JO: Absolutely. You were asked during the process to create a stencil. Can you tell us what you chose as your stencil, to represent you within the larger project?

CH: I think it was the the word "irregular."

JO: And why irregular?

CH: Because I wanted to be different from everybody else, and this was a good opportunity for me to do that. I want to be different, and I don't particularly fit in anyway, not that I worry about that.

JO: That's amazing. And how did your impression of graffiti art change during the course of this project?

CH: I appreciate it. After looking and being involved, I have a different understanding of it. To be honest, I never quite understood the significance of that community. I thought it was just about defacing public property, and now I have a different appreciation of it. Having done it, I see how difficult and how much thought goes into creating something that looks acceptable. It was quite amazing. It changed my whole opinion of the project, and I appreciate it very much. This makes sense to me now.

JO: Part of this project was to create an opportunity for seniors to place-make. Placemaking is to improve the quality of the public spaces and the lives of the people who use them. Making public spaces better and more enjoyable places to gather for the community. Do you feel that you've helped make your mark on the community?

CH: I guess, when I first got the opportunity, I thought "what are they thinking?" because I'm not an artistic person and they're offering an opportunity for me to make an impression that would be around for a while. It was quite surprising. Actually, it was a very emotional experience for me, and I hope that people



Image of Charlie Hawkins. Courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.

got the same feeling.

JO: You'll see I did in the documentary! *[laughter from all]* What was the most challenging part of the processes for you?

CH: The most challenging part was trying to hold back from teasing people around me. That's my M.O., actually. I tried to reel it in. I realized my table-mate...

JO: Hilary

CH: ...I must have drove her crazy. She put up with me for quite a bit.

JO: I think she loved it. She made a comment weeks later: I bumped into her when we were viewing the mural again. She'd

seen you on the street when she was driving by and said, “hey, I know that man! He’s my friend.” And she said without this experience she may not have met you. And that is what it was all about.

CH: It was all about community and making relationships that last beyond just the initial meeting. It was quite an experience for me.

JO: I guess you’ve already spoken to it, but what was the most rewarding part?

CH: It gave me a sense of joy to actually participate in something meaningful. It’ll be around for a while. It’ll be viewed by people. My relatives came to look, and they seemed to enjoy it. It was really a feeling of joy.

JO: So, Barbara, if you could sum up that experience in one word, what captures that experience for you personally?

Barbara McKenzie: Just getting together with everyone, I enjoyed that. It was different, but it was also a lot of fun.

Geddis Ruttan: That wasn’t one word. You already broke the rules and you just started! *[laughter from all]*

JO: Did you have any preconceived notions about what you were going to do, and was it what you thought it was going to be?

BM: It was different. I thought it was just scratch marks on the wall, right? You know, scratch what you want kind of thing. But it wasn’t that at all. It seemed to me that it was very thought-out

and professional. It made a lot of sense.

JO: I have to say that one of the best things I learned, that I will carry for the rest of my life, was not to underestimate people. When you're programming for art, you try to anticipate people's wants and needs. I thought it was possible that by the second day of stencil-making – with the first day being pretty intensive - that maybe people would be thinking “been there, done that.” I was worried that people were going to lose their interest and want to move on to something new. But everyone arrived with more ideas! And they were more determined to create. I was beyond thrilled. So, what was the most challenging part for you, Barb?

BM: I had a problem with the idea. What should I do? What could



Image of Barbara McKenzie. Courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.

I do? *[laughs]*

JO: One advantage of being in a group of people is that you can be inspired by what's going on around you. So, then, what was the most rewarding part?

BM: Being with the group, being together. Because I'm more or less a loner. I'm a solitary artist, so to speak. But that's what I enjoyed: being with the people.

JO: When you look at the larger piece that you help create, how does it make you feel?

BM: Proud, actually. I saw so many other people doing artwork that I thought, "gee, I'd like to be able to do that," but I didn't even have a clue. But in the end I enjoyed it, yeah.

JO: OK. So, Geddis, the one-word question again: is there one word that would sum up your experience?

GR: Yeah, exciting. I thought of that immediately, as soon as you asked that. It was really exciting.

JO: And on your submission form, you said the reason you want to participate was because you admired the Latcham family and have attended the Gallery for years. Do you feel the experience captured what your hopes and dreams were?

GR: Yes. I enjoy art, but I'm a watcher. I see, but I can't do, so I was terrified that I was going to have to do. When I started, I thought of a birdhouse for my stencil. Lara said, "well, I think you should have two of them, do them in pairs." So, mine are little pairs. I sort



Image of Geddis Ruttan. Courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.

of think that my interaction with Lara - with someone that knows this field and is an artist and so forth - that was my little private pride. It was also really neat the way it all came together, and I could spot the different works of my pals. I didn't know Charlie that well prior to this because he hasn't been [in our community] as long as I have, and so I thought "oh look what he can do, isn't this great?" That was exciting to me. That was a discovery about somebody. Another thing I enjoyed was we weren't being talked down to, you know?

CH: It wasn't, "Let's do some finger painting."

GR: There was an acceptance of everything everybody was doing, so nobody was the big star of the show. And nobody was dragging behind, that was the thing that scared me. I just

thought, "I can't draw. How am I going to do anything?" So it was wonderful that that all happened and that's a compliment to the whole program, and to the people that were there. Lara was so great with positive suggestions, but she wasn't hanging over you all the time. It was a team.

JO: Yeah, it's like we were all at the top of a cliff. None of us knew how it was going to go or what was going to happen. And then we all just jumped together! Nobody looked back, nobody hesitated.

GR: That's right.

JO: And it felt like that through the whole process. There was engagement the entire time and everyone contributed their part. It was just kind of magical actually. We started on Monday doing two full days inside at 6240 Main Street, talking about the history of street art, getting visual ideas, and working on our stencils. It's not easy! You have to get your head around it a little bit, right? The idea of making those little paper bridges to keep your stencils from falling apart. There's a lot to think about when you're designing. But I really felt like in your second full day, the creativity just started, and the stencils got more complex, and people started adding second stencils, and different colours.

GR: Yeah. That's when we made our birth years into stencils. I'd forgotten all about that.

JO: That's right. That adds an element, because when you look at the piece it gives you a reference to who made these marks. It gives people an idea that these are seniors that made this piece of art.



Image of Lorraine Majcen. Courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.

GR: And then when we got outside, it was just so exciting to be doing it! Remember how there was a big white square at the top? Lara, she did something there...

JO: Yeah, the LATA 65 logo. And I love that Lorraine did the Canadian flag as one of her stencils because this was the very first project that LATA 65 had ever done in Canada. Like, we are it.

GR: That was neat too! But there was harmony with everybody working on it. And, you know, I remember the Mayor and others that came to see it, and they seemed to get excited too when they saw it.

JO: Lorraine, if you had to sum up your experience with SASS project in one word, what word comes to mind?

Lorraine Majcen: Gutsy.

JO: Gutsy. Great word! And why is that?

LM: Because it's something that I never anticipated I could be involved in. It was so out-of-the-box. I thought, "OK, it's for young pranksters..." and I'm sorry to create that label, but we're people that you don't see doing this type of street art. But I'm one that doesn't like to back down from a challenge and so I suppose this was meant to be. It was an invitation that I couldn't turn down.

JO: You were challenged to make a "tag" during the process. What did you choose and why?

LM: It was very spontaneous. My name is Lorraine, and the word "Lola" came to mind. I didn't know how I'd associated it with my name. And then, as I thought about it more, my grandchildren's other grandmother is Filipino. In the Filipino culture, grandmother is Lola, and I thought well I'm a Lola too. And so, I chose Lola and the number two. So, it was a play on words. But I'm shocked at my creativity! It's so beautiful that as a senior member, I was able to expand my creativity.

JO: How did your impression of graffiti art change during the course of the project?

LM: Tremendously, because when [Lara and Duarte] first started to explain it, and they did a video on it, I got an understanding that these are messages being provided by legitimate people

wanting to share. And so, it totally switched my understanding of graffiti and street art.

JO: Part of this project was to create an opportunity for seniors to improve the quality of public spaces and the lives of the people who use them. So, creative placemaking. Do you feel that you've helped make your mark on our community in some way with this experience?

LM: Yes. Yeah, definitely. I'm bubbling up and overjoyed to think that as a senior I could create, not an impression, but create something to contribute to my community.

JO: And I think it certainly has. We've had a lot of responses! People have happened upon it by accident and it's just a joyful surprise to come across. I think it's created a space within our community...

LM: And questions I would hope, from younger people who might be thinking "What is this? Like, seniors made this? Wow!"

JO: What was the most challenging part of the process for you?

LM: The whole process was so well done. They encouraged us to break it down into parts. Let me think about what the challenge was, because I saw it, overall, as a very doable project. I recall choosing to make a Canadian flag as a stencil. I was given this challenge to draw free-hand, and I didn't have the confidence to do it. I started and I thought, "oh, can I erase something and start again?" Duarte was so kind. He said "no, you're gonna be OK. Don't erase anything. You're gonna be OK." He gave me such confidence, and it did turn out very acceptable. It really boosted



Image courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.

my confidence, but it was a challenge for me to just let it happen and accept that I could do it.

JO: We chatted about that a little yesterday, how fantastic it is to have that flag because it's the first iteration of LATA 65 in Canada. So, especially with the photos, it represents that uniqueness to our project here in this place. What was the most rewarding thing for you, on the other side of this process?

LM: Just the confidence I gained. The love of being with other people of similar ages and similar, maybe, angst? And the friendship, joy, and the love that I felt from the artists and from the people here at Latcham that helped us.

JO: Yeah. I think that's a bit of a consensus from everyone, that it

was just a magical, beautiful experience.

LM: Yeah, I agree.

JO: Last question: when you look at the work you created with your peers, how does it make you feel?

LM: Joyful. Joyful, and so uplifting. And it makes me feel that, yes, we are making a mark in our community in a small way, but it is a special mark in the community. A stamp.

JO: It's kind of a seed, and hopefully that'll continue to grow. We're hoping to do more of these projects, and those all take time, but the idea is to continue this and try to get as many people involved.

GR: Can we ever come back to do more?

JO: Yes, of course! *[laughter]*

BM: As the experienced artists?

JO: Well, that's the hope: that through people hearing about this, and reading the articles, that they'll be inspired by your experience, and say, "OK, they took the creative leap, maybe I will too!" So many of us have these thoughts and feelings about what we can and can't do, or shouldn't do. And you know, just hearing about your experiences is so valuable. When people hear that it might inspire them to do something that they weren't sure about.

BM: I've already got another lady lined up!

GR: You know, now that I think about doing our birth dates, if it was 1935 or something, I remember not feeling embarrassed about it. Like we'd left the fact behind.

JO: No - I think they would be even more proud! You see in the documentary, one of the youth volunteers said, "I would think it would be so cool if my grandparents did street art." They were super impressed. Well, thank you so much. I appreciate you sharing, because it's valuable to the community.



Image of Lara Seixo Rodrigues with a SASS participant. Courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.



Image of Duarte Cavalinhos with a SASS participant. Courtesy of Dennis Hristovski.

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To learn more about LATA 65 visit mistakemaker.org/lata-65

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