

Pandemic puts future of Art Gallery of Bancroft in jeopardy



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By Nate Smelle

For nearly four decades the Art Gallery of Bancroft has been a major hub of the arts community in North Hastings. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the AGB's president Hugh Monteith said the gallery's future is now in jeopardy.

According to Monteith, the severity of the threat to public health and safety posed by COVID-19 first became apparent in mid-March when the AGB's board of directors decided to close the gallery and defer the upcoming exhibitions until 2021. Although the directors voted to re-open the gallery on June 18, he said since then visitor traffic has been very light.

Fortunately for the gallery, Monteith said Allan O'Marra, the AGB's featured artist for the month of July, assisted with the re-opening by agreeing to open his exhibition early in mid-June. When the artists scheduled to exhibit in August requested for her show to be deferred until 2021, he said O'Marra stepped up again allowing his work to remain on display until the end of August.

"Revenues are well down without visitors, but our operating expenses continue, so we continue to lose money on a monthly basis," said Monteith. "Physical distancing means we must limit the number of members and visitors that can enter at one time. We have had no opening receptions, social events which are a big part of the generating energy for the gallery, and are also one of our major fundraising efforts of the gallery."

Recognizing the importance of bringing people together to enjoy and create art, Monteith said they attempted to host a portrait painting workshop with O'Marra, however they did not have anyone register, so they decided not to try other workshops for the remainder of the year.

Taking into consideration that the gallery's reserve fund has been significantly depleted because of the pandemic, Monteith said they are very concerned about the future sustainability of the AGB. Recognizing how vital the AGB is to the art scene, and the entire community, he said the ongoing effects of COVID-19 are definitely weighing on the minds of the directors. At this time, Monteith said they have decided to close the gallery in the new year from January through March, with plans of re-opening the space in the spring for an exhibition scheduled in April. What the gallery's future looks like beyond that is still up in the air, he said.

"The remaining months of 2021 will likely determine the fate of the gallery," explained Monteith. "If the number of visitors and revenues do not return to our pre-pandemic levels, it is very possible the gallery may be forced to shutter its doors for good. After 38 years of continuous operation by volunteers, permanent closure would be a tragedy for the arts culture in North Hastings."

Yet another major challenge for the AGB arising from the pandemic has been the reluctance of the volunteer base to return to staffing the gallery. Because of this shortage of volunteers, Monteith said they have been forced to reduce the number of days the gallery shop is open. Currently, the AGB is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. To remedy this shortage and return the gallery to its regular hours, he encourages anyone in the community interested in volunteering and getting involved in the local art scene to contact the gallery by phone at: 613-332-1542; or by email at: artgalleryofbancroft@gmail.com.

Although the future of the AGB is unknown, Monteith said there are still many opportunities for people to help the gallery weather the storm churned up by the pandemic. Acknowledging that artists need patrons to make a living, he suggested that any art enthusiasts with the financial means to support the arts by purchasing art. With many artists spending more time at home, Monteith said the only positive impact COVID-19 has had on the arts scene is that it has provided many artists with more time to create. With respect to the helping the AGB endure these uncertain times, he said they need artists to bring in new works on a regular basis to keep the gallery shop looking fresh.

"Visitors don't want to see the same art each time they come to the gallery, they want a new and interesting look," said Monteith.

On the second week of every month, Monteith said artists are welcome to bring in new works. He encourages any artists reading this article to consider submitting their art to the gallery. Ultimately, Monteith said they are hopeful that by replenishing the art for sale at the gallery on a regular basis, more people will visit, and shop at the gallery.

"Come in and look at the exceptional arts and crafts created mostly by local artisans," urged Monteith. "Please consider the gallery shop as a prime location of gifts for all occasions, including the coming Christmas and holiday season. There are so many unique and beautiful objects. Spread the word about how wonderful our little art gallery is. So many visitors remark that it the type of Gallery one would expect to find in larger urban areas like the GTA or Ottawa."

With levels of membership ranging from as little as \$20 per year up to \$500 for our premier category, Monteith said another way for people to help support the gallery is by becoming a member. People can also do their part to get the word out about what the gallery has to offer by liking and sharing the Art Gallery of Bancroft on Facebook and other social media; or by writing about the gallery on TripAdvisor.

Providing art lovers with incentive to drop by the AGB, Monteith said there is a new exhibit now on display at the gallery by Apsley artist David Smith, titled "The Lost and Found Project." Noting that Smith's show is mostly composed of landscape scenes, he said one of the things people will find most interesting about his work is that each painting is accompanied by a poem written by the artist.

Monteith said they have also scheduled exhibitions in October and November, featuring photographer Francis Livingston, and artist John Climenhage; as well as the annual juried exhibition in December.

To further engage the community with the arts and the AGB, Monteith said they are calling on the community to create individual works of art to place on the fencing on the site of the former Victorian Lady, beside the two murals created for last year's Culture Days weekend. Highlighting the success of the Culture Days initiative, and the AGB director's enthusiasm for this community-based art project, he said "They were a really successful community art project, and we hope to capture that same excitement to help to beautify the main street of Bancroft."