

First Nations artists planning West Shore art gallery



By Goldstream News Gazette
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The bannock is still warm when a knife carves off the first slice. Fresh strawberry jam is spread over fluffy slices as the loaf is shared around the table.

First Nations art covers the dining room walls and, indeed, every corner of this Beecher Bay home.

The adults sitting around the table talk about the importance of culture and the work that's gone into finding a location for a project designed to boost the economy of the tiny community of about 240 (of those, about 100 live on reserve).

But for eight-year-old Marrie Peter, the most pressing issue is whether her grandmother has made more bannock. The first loaf is gone – something that makes the baker smile with obvious pride.

Lydia Peter likes to cook for her community and she likes to point out that food is a part of her culture – a culture she hopes to share with a wider group once the Chamas First Nation Arts Society finds a home for its proposed art gallery and coffee shop.

"We are taking our time until we get it just right," said Allis Pakki Chipps-Sawyer, who most people know simply as Pakki.

The Beecher Bay painter has been spearheading the efforts of a small group hoping to develop a business that allows First Nations artists to deal directly with the public through a storefront.

"The only place for going and selling stuff is down by the causeway," she said, about the First Nations Market in the Victoria's Inner Harbour hosted by the Songhees people.

There are also art galleries around the region that sell First Nations art but the artists say they're not always fairly represented.

"I found, when I brought a mask down to the gallery, they would offer me \$250 and then I'd see it for sale for \$2,000," said Narcisse Baptiste, a First Nations carver who creates masks and totem poles. The one he's currently working on was commissioned by someone in Mexico, though details of how the finished pole will be transported there have yet to be worked out.

By controlling their own gallery, the society hopes to keep more of the revenue currently going off reserve, said Evelyn Vandermaas, a Beecher Bay elder who says she was born and raised with a traditional culture.

"Strengthening our future is what we're trying to do," she said about the arts society, which meets every week.

The group is in talks with League Financial Partners, the group behind Capital City Centre at Colwood Corners, about acquiring the former CrossRoads Pub building. It currently sits vacant while several groups, including Royal Roads University, negotiate over relocating the building.

Even if that specific building isn't available, Chipps-Sawyer said the group is anxious to get moving on a location for their coffee house and welcomes any suggestions from the public.

The idea is to have a place that will offer music, food (including First Nations specialties) and aboriginal art from across North America at fair trade prices. But more than that, a storefront provides a chance for local First Nations to interact with the community at large and allows more people to learn about the culture of the people who first called this region home. Originally, the arts society wanted the store to be on reserve land, but decided it was too remote of a location. It's also too costly to even consider moving the old pub building to reserve land. Instead, the society is eyeing Colwood as its preferred location for a storefront.

Colwood Mayor Carol Hamilton said she supports the group's efforts, though she admits there is a process that needs to be followed.

"Right now it's an expanding ripple, if you will," she said about spreading the idea for a storefront, possibly in the yet to be developed Royal Bay area.

The conversation has begun but a big step will be trying to secure grants for such a project, which first would have to be dealt with at the municipal committee level.

"It's all costs, to be honest," Hamilton said.

Federal heritage minister Jim Moore is apparently aware of the society's plans.

The arts society has prepared a business plan though the puzzle is still missing critical pieces such as start-up costs and location.

And while it's still early in the process, the society members are confident that they're taking the next step to restore awareness and pride in a culture that was assailed in previous generations.

Peters, a jewelry maker, says her craft has allowed her to regain a sense of self that had been stripped from her when she was taken away as a child and forced to attend a residential school.

"I had a (traditional) blanket that was ripped off of me and thrown in the garbage," she said, recalling the childhood incident as if it was still fresh in her memory. "And I was not much older than my granddaughter. Imagine how that would feel?"

It's a long way from this day, as she happily gets another loaf of bannock for her granddaughter, who flits around the room, sometimes bored and sometimes curious by the adult conversation.

Yet, almost everything about that conversation relates to the girl and her generation. The coffee shop and the art are all part of an effort to restore pride in a people who had been taught to feel ashamed of their heritage.

There's no sense of that in eight-year-old Marrie, who is happy to dress up in traditional clothes and bask in the pride of elders such as Vandermaas.

Asked how we'll be able to tell when First Nations have healed from old wounds, Vandermaas says: "I think when you see kids walking with their heads up and not staring down."

Visit the art society website, Chamasart.com for more information on the group.

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