

The Art of Advocacy

A student-led mural project in Williams Lake, BC

By Ruth Lloyd

Williams Lake students rose to the challenge of imagining a colourful, beautiful and hopeful future, as they painted a collaborative mural thanks to Tamarack Institute. The mural design was a combination of a diverse range of inspirational and hopeful images created by students and put together into a unified design by Williams Lake artist Sarah Sigurdson of Cariboo Art Beat.



The road to get to the finish for the project was a long and winding one, with many different contributions along the way, but the project grew naturally as it went, with youth contributing to every creative step along the way.

The idea for the project was sparked when Astrid Arumae of Tamarack Institute asked Sue Hemphill, executive director of the Scout Island Nature Centre,

about possible opportunities to engage with youth in the area for a project. Hemphill connected to myself, Ruth Lloyd, with Streets for All Williams Lake, to see if I had any ideas, which I did.

Streets for All Williams Lake works with Scout Island Nature Centre for Go By Bike Week and is an advocacy organization promoting active transportation and calling for better safety and infrastructure for those outside of vehicles for public health and sustainability. We had screened the film *The Engine Inside* during Fall Go By Bike Weeks in 2023.

The film documents six people who are making change in their communities, using the bicycle as a tool to do so. It is an inspiring film featuring diverse examples of changemakers

who are having significant impacts in their communities, all over the world.

The idea was to host art-based workshops to support engagement, with the film as a jumping -off point for discussions. This was meant to help provide ways for students to envision a positive future and empower them to take steps to help create it.

The workshop plans began through discussions with the Youth Climate Changemakers Challenge participants through online meetings with Astid, myself, and Denise Deschene, also of Streets for All Williams Lake.

The initial discussions, were inspiring and hopeful in themselves, as these were highly ambitious and engaged youth who brought forward some helpful suggestions to make our workshop plans more relatable for the Williams Lake youth.

Denise brought in Siobhan McCambridge, the art teacher at Lake City Senior Secondary School and she was open to our idea for bringing the workshops to her classroom and helped us further refine the plan, breaking the lesson plan into three sections. Each of the three initial sessions involved discussion, screening part of the film, and then some follow up discussion.

In talking about the project with Siobhan, it was decided to work with her painting and drawing class, which includes students from Grades 10 through 12. The plan included questions we might be able to use to get the youth thinking and to engage them with the idea of climate anxiety, and advocacy, both highly advanced concepts for these young people, and not something on their radar at all in terms of being able to articulate the concern and fears they may have around things like deforestation, catastrophic wildfires and heat domes.

In the summer of 2017, when these students were in elementary school, the entire city was evacuated due to catastrophic wildfires threatening the town. Even after returning, citizens lived for months under oppressive clouds of wildfire smoke, with air quality advisories keeping many inside and limiting outdoor activities. Many homes were lost in the area and flooding later devastated parts of the community, exacerbated by the loss of forest in the surrounding watershed.

Since 2017, there have been other wildfire seasons in B.C. which have caused lengthy air quality issues and impacted many other communities. In 2021, an intense heat dome in the province limited people's ability to be outside and is estimated to have been responsible for the premature deaths of over 600 people in the province.

Despite these climate realities and the area being very dependent on logging and the associated forest industry for a large part of the economy, not all students understand the role of climate change in these problems or any associated mental health impacts. However, during our initial discussions with the students as part of the workshops, many

did say they experienced anxiety and fear when there is wildfire smoke in the air during the summer.

The plan was to screen the film, present some ideas and engage in discussions around art and advocacy, then have the students each draw and paint different pieces individually over following classes. The discussions included art as a tool for change and providing hope, advocacy and what this means, how the two work together, climate change and what students maybe want to see in the future. When talking about the future, we tried to ask questions around what the students enjoy and love in their lives, how they hope to be able to still enjoy those things in the future. Their individual drawings and paintings were then presented to professional artist Sarah Sigurdson.

She compiled the images into a combined design for a mural, which the students then helped paint over the course of a few weeks. The leadership class, taught by Caitlin Sabatino, also engaged in the initial class discussion, which involved Denise and myself presenting the workshop concept, screening the first 20 minutes of the film, and then asking questions and engaging in a class discussion with the students. The leadership class screened the rest of the film on their own and came back into the project at the end to help plan and lead the celebratory mural unveiling event for the entire school community.

When Denise and I first began to have discussions with Siobhan, she expressed some concern the concept and discussion would be too advanced a topic for the students. She made sure to carefully prepare us for the challenges some of the students faced, including difficulties related to ADHD, FASD and other learning and behavioural issues which might make them reluctant to engage in discussion.

When we spoke to the class, some students were extremely reserved and one student sat looking down and doodling for much of the time. This was some of what made the final outcome of the workshops so inspiring. After having visited for the first few sessions then leaving the drawing and painting to Siobhan and the students, the students presented their ideas and drawings to Sarah, the artist. We then followed up when Sarah had combined the concepts and images. It was incredible to see what the students came up with and how they engaged with the topic. Each of the 25 drawing and painting students created were unique.

Sarah's sketch, integrating something from each students' work, was a creative manifestation of their vision into something the students really seemed to get excited about. Over a three-week period, Sarah then helped those students paint a large three-panel mural onto plywood, with each student participating to some degree, and some really taking ownership of the project. The large final mural was unveiled to the rest of the school on June 13, with Caitlin Sabatino's leadership class hosting a celebratory event.

The students organized a chalk art contest, hot dog barbecue and water, lawn games and bicycle races for the event.

A brief speech from myself and artist Sarah Sigurdson then kicked off the celebration, and a Citizens on Patrol volunteer even brought a radar gun for students in the bicycle races to challenge themselves and each other to see how fast they could go.



The most exciting part was to see how much some of the students were inspired by the project. The student who spent most of the three initial classes looking down and doodling opened up about her piece and was one of the presenters at the mural unveiling.

Our hope is the workshops planted a seed in each of the participants which helps them feel empowered and see how individual actions can lead to collective inspiration, creation and change.

The mural will be mounted on the outside of the school over the summer. The project and unveiling event were covered by two articles in the Williams Lake Tribune, and also on Streets for All Williams Lake social media (Instagram and Facebook).