

COLUMN: Celebration of art and culture a success

Culture Days inspires growth



Ross McIntyre

“Art inspires growth. It uses different parts of the brain and is good for personal growth,” said Jacqueline Soczka, manager of culture for the City of Orillia and the driving force behind this past weekend’s Culture Days celebration in Orillia.

It turns out Soczka is absolutely right about the impact of art and culture on individuals and a community.

A 2011 study out of University College London in England, as reported in *The Telegraph*, reported on the impact of art on the viewer. It turns out even just viewing art increases blood flow to the part of the brain associated with desire and pleasure.

Additional research reported by the *Huffington Post* in 2012 drew attention to how engaging

with culture and the arts is just as important for mental health and acuity as anything else we do. The findings were summarized in a two-part television series called *Arts & the Mind*.

These are two examples of many that confirm Soczka’s acute observation about this past weekend’s Culture Days events around Orillia.

Culture Days is a provincewide undertaking and, based on Orillia’s deep cultural heritage that has evolved into our current culture-rich city, Soczka felt it was an important initiative to get involved with in a big way.

“We had close to 40 events that included the cultural hubs of Orillia (Orillia Museum of Art and History [OMAH], Orillia Opera House, Orillia Public Library) as well as many businesses and organizations,” said Soczka.

Once again, the weekend gave us an opportunity to see many branches of Orillia come together to create something memorable and beautiful.

Events included writing workshops, a poetry slam, mixed-media projects, live music and many more. While each event caters to a specific cultural interest and age group, several unique ones helped broaden the scope of Culture Days this year. A flash mob with a Shakespearean twist organized by Bridget Gole was identified as one of the fun surprises of Culture Days and even involved Mayor Angelo Orsi.

Soczka also spoke highly of the art-music fusion project at Apple Annie’s, which combined the visual-art talents of Elizabeth Schamehorn and the musical talents of Michael Jones.

“He played and she painted. It really captured the essence of Culture Days since it was about being within and part of the creative process,” Soczka said, though she insisted everyone played a perfect role in the weekend.

Of all contributors, Soczka said, “it takes all the time, energy and materials that cultural providers put in for Culture Days to work and we couldn’t have

done it without them. They are the event.”

Soczka is closing in on a year in her new role as manager of culture in Orillia, which led to the question of how Orillia is unique compared to other places her career has taken her.

“Orillia is blessed to have place like the Orillia Opera House, OMAH and a historic downtown. We are blessed to have these cultural spaces with rich diversity and we need to celebrate it.”

If celebrating our art and culture was the goal, congratulations to all involved for accomplishing that during Culture Days 2013.

Ross McIntyre is a director at Camp Couchiching and the Couchiching Community Initiative. He is passionate about outdoor education and community building. This column profiles community organizations dedicated to Orillia and opportunities for local youth engagement. If you have a story idea, email rossmcintyre@gmail.com.

