

FEATURE STORY:



Theatre in the Neighbourhood, Sum Theatre Heather Morrison, Artistic Producer

Sum Theatre's core values were at the forefront of this project: excellence, community, sharing, citizenship, accessibility, innovation, inclusion, and fun. A strong community is a connected community; and art unites us in a way that nothing else can. Innovation has always been one of our core values and we tapped into that creativity to create this year's summer program which comprised of two phases.

- **Phase One consisted of the Sum Creation Studio.** Each week, we posted a theme on our social media and asked kids to create art based on this theme. The themes, such as bravery and friendship, were specifically chosen to be antidotes to what children are feeling right now (e.g. scared and isolated). Submissions were shared on our social media to connect kids to one another, and they were also used by our creative team to create Phase Two of our project.
- **Phase Two was Theatre in the Neighbourhood,** a travelling theatre experience. From the Creation Studio, we created original music and puppets for this parade-like event. We then worked closely with the City to figure out how to safely travel through 27 different neighbourhoods this summer with a traveling show. Bringing community-building art right to the front lawns of families across the city.

By participating in our Creation Studio, kids had the opportunity to reflect on positive themes that are antidotes to what they are feeling right now. By showcasing the art of our community's children, Theatre in the Neighbourhood helped individuals feel connected to one another. Our show itself was made up of 10 wonderful "scenes" looping in succession; telling a story of healing and helping, of friendship and love. We pre-recorded the music to omit live singing and our ensemble wore masks. This spectacle of theatre travelled at a slow pace through residential neighbourhoods and invited individuals to participate from their own lawns, balconies, and driveways.

We performed in 25 communities in Saskatoon and 2 communities in Martensville, travelling over 50 kilometres in just two weeks. Some audience members chose to sit and catch a glimpse as we passed by, others donned masks and followed at a safe distance to catch the whole show. They learned songs through our social media pages so they could sing along and were invited to decorate their sidewalks with chalk to celebrate our arrival. These feeling of connection lasted long after our parade passed by.

It's important for children to have fun, community-building memories during this scary time. They need experiences that bring them joy and make them feel safe and normal. They need to feel connected to community. And not just children. Adults are feeling disconnected and restless as well. Like children, we need experiences that make us feel safe and normal. Experiences that remind us that the human spirit is alive, joyful, and resilient. Theatre in the Neighbourhood fulfilled this need.

We are always grateful for the support of the Community Initiatives Fund, and we were especially thankful for their support this summer. We could not have made Theatre in the Neighbourhood happen without them.

How has your program been modified since the onset of COVID-19? Were there any obstacles you had to overcome? Any tips or lessons learned?

We typically host 7000 individuals in their local parks. We're famous for our crowds of hundreds packed shoulder to shoulder... so a lot had to change.

The biggest obstacle was all the unknowns. We didn't know what the health guidelines would be in August. We didn't know when restrictions would be lifted. We didn't know how we would be able to safely work. Essentially we came up with a variety of scenarios and when the timing seemed right, we executed what seemed like the best plan. We managed to keep everyone safe and provided a community-building experience, but it was certainly a challenge.

My top tip would be – communication. Even if you don't know the answers! As a team, we met frequently through zoom to talk through options. I spent a lot of time talking with the city. I called each team member right at the beginning to say, "we want to do something but we don't know what that will be. Please hold tight." And then had to call everyone a month later to give them the same message. But keeping in touch like that is so important.

I'm proud of our team and what we overcame. It was a tricky road, but we worked together really well. And, we had fun.

