

MORE THAN JUST A WALK IN THE PARK

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For Nancy Holmes, what started as a simple walk in her neighbourhood park has turned into a passion. This past year, Nancy, together with local artist and park caretaker Lori Mairs, launched the Woodhaven Eco-art project, turning Woodhaven Nature Conservancy Regional Park into a natural canvas.

“Woodhaven makes a perfect stage for art and the environment to meet,” says Holmes, Associate Professor of Creative Writing at UBC’s Okanagan campus. “Our idea was to deliver our message of conservation and sustainability set against this amazing backdrop.”

Woodhaven is a little-known oasis, located near the end of Raymer Road in Kelowna. Woodhaven was slated for development in the early 1970s and was spared thanks to the determination of dedicated naturalists, Jim and Joan Burbridge. Today, the woodland park is managed by the Regional District of Central Okanagan (RDCO) and includes four distinct natural ecosystems.

Holmes says artists have long had a connection with nature, creating interpretations on our environment. A key principle of eco-art is to let nature’s offerings foster the artist’s creations, with minimal impact on the environment. The art did not remove or damage anything in the park or leave anything behind.

“Art makes people feel something. Eco-art puts a new lens on public spaces and helps us experience that space in a whole new way,” says Holmes. “It’s art that inspires us to think about sustainability, about what we will leave for future generations.”

This past summer, park visitors were met with a variety of visual delights and performing arts. More than 80 student and community artists created 60 original works of art, including poetry using rocks and fallen logs, sculptures and natural object installations, paintings and photography for display in the park. Audio downloads were created for special guided walks, and visitors were invited to leave notes for Holmes that she later weaved into a poem. Photographs of these works of art can be found on the project website at www.woodhaven.ok.ubc.ca.

“It was fantastic! I’ve told a million people about the project,” says Rose Sexsmith, an enthusiastic park visitor. “I love how they combined different kinds of art with nature. It helped me think about my relationship to the natural environment, and how we are so connected. It also made me realize that we need to do more to protect special places like Woodhaven.”

Live performances were also scheduled throughout the summer, culminating in the inspiring “Chainsaw Ballet.” Directed by Denise Kenney from UBC’s Okanagan campus Performing Arts, students with decommissioned chainsaws paid homage to the foresight of Joan and Jim Burbridge, who worked so tirelessly to ensure the park would be available for future generations.

“What makes this project unique for our students is the ability to engage their audiences,” says Holmes. “Using eco-art as an outreach tool to help people understand and connect with their environment is a new and growing field. The issues they are grappling with here are both local and global, such as deforestation or conservation.”

The project was made possible through a powerful collaboration. Thanks to a grant from UBC’s Hampton Fund, Holmes and Mairs created the partnerships necessary to bring the project to life. With sponsorship from the RDCO, local artists, conservation groups and Holmes’ students worked together to plan, promote and create. Closer to home, they also engaged the community neighbourhood as both patrons and stewards of the park.

“The response was immediate, positive and rewarding,” reflects Holmes. “Our partnership with the RDCO grew over the summer in recognition of the success of the project, and we’re looking forward to developing similar projects in other parks in the future.”

The future for eco-art is bright. The project will be captured in a documentary and thanks to a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a “recyclopaedia” will be created as a resource for those who want to lead the way by changing how we look at simple things in life – like a walk in the park. ●

