

EAT, DRINK AND SHARE A STORY

There was a time when people used to sit around the dinner table with friends and family telling stories and sharing their lives, but with the onslaught of distractions such as TV, computers and other devices, that communal sharing has been all but lost in recent years.

Gabriel Newman is resurrecting the art form of storytelling through his social potluck project – a project that contributes to the social and cultural sustainability of our communities.

The Master of Fine Arts degree student at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus used the Glenmore area of Kelowna for the project that brought people together to tell stories ranging from the heartache of putting a child up for adoption to how a deformed finger came to be.

"It was whatever story they wanted to tell," says Newman.

The project was funded through the Sustainable Community Development Grant Pilot Program which is a partnership project between the University of British Columbia Okanagan campus and the City of Kelowna.

"Social potluck is a template for creating community story telling performance projects," says Newman. "I can go in different communities and create a unique performance that is all about them and their stories."

Newman hosted a potluck dinner where he would provide the food and those in attendance would provide the stories. He then created a performance based on those stories and the participants would again gather, this time each bringing food for the potluck.

Newman says a lot of input people have today comes from an outside source, such as TV or the Internet, but the social

potluck allows people to "create their own culture by telling stories around the dinner table."

The potlucks also create a sense of community and social sustainability among neighbours.

"The project brings people back to live performances without the influence of outside media, says Neil Cadger, associate professor in the performance program and head of the Department of Creative Studies within the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies.

"It is visual. It includes the whole body," says Cadger. "It is not just about the words. It is the food being exchanged. The food itself is part of the communication. You can't communicate that sense of taste, smells and sound any other way. It's really an important thing to do: to bring back the storytelling."

Newman says the nice thing about story telling is "it is something we all have the capacity for. It is entertaining to just sit and listen to people share their stories."

The stories not only generate a feeling of community, but they help people see their neighbours in a different light, a more familiar light.

"It's really easy not to meet your neighbours," says Cadger, adding people do not even have to attend social gatherings like a movie theatre anymore because they can watch movies in their basement via a number of avenues.

"Social sustainability has to do with sharing. Those systems of sharing can be substantial," says Cadger. "If not there will be consequences in other areas."

Adds Newman, "It's in the small acts that you will have big results." ●

