

THE ARTIST AS RURAL ENTREPRENEUR

BY CHARLOTTE JONES

The seventeenth in a series of articles developed from regular public forums sponsored by the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development. Memorial Presents features speakers from Memorial University who address issues of public concern in the province.

Artists have played an important role in creating economic activity in rural areas of Newfoundland and Labrador, especially since the downturn of the cod fishery in the early 1990s. In the first place, they created jobs – for themselves and others – in rural communities. And, secondly, they have often taken on leadership roles within these communities. Charlotte Jones, Acting Director of the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery, looks at how three visual artists in Western Newfoundland are earning a living and are helping to sustain their communities.



Two themes predominate in the very informative overview of arts and culture in rural communities around the world, Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Culture. The first is that cooperative arts activities – like festivals – are economic generators for rural communities, often to replace the loss of more traditional local industries. The concept of cultural tourism recognizes that the contemporary tourist wants more than just a scenic landscape, and that the arts and heritage can both attract and retain visitors in a region.

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Above left: Audrey Feltham, *Walking Softly*.

Bottom left: Reed Weir's studio.

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The second theme looks at the benefits to the region in having a vibrant arts community, to having artists living and being able to support themselves in the area. This will be the focus of this article. While artists of all disciplines (writing, theatre, music, film, etc.) contribute to sustaining rural communities, this article will moreover focus on the visual arts.

Beyond the obvious direct economic benefit—that is, having persons living and spending money in a community or generating business for the region—artists bring indirect economic and social benefits. This is very important to note, because by emphasizing only the cultural tourism “product” or the industrial side of culture and the direct economic benefits, we run the risk of not supporting or of ignoring activities which do not have obvious economic outcomes but which, nevertheless, have major benefits to the community.

Some of these benefits are:

Many artists are actively and pro-actively engaged in their communities in volunteer capacities; they are self-starters.

Because artists must create something from nothing, because they must be able to see what isn't there, these individuals are often driving forces and visionaries behind creative solutions.

Artists often have a large network and a wide variety of job experiences. They can and must wear many hats and as such are a great resource.

Many programs, like *ArtsSmarts* and *Learning through the Arts in Western Newfoundland*, take advantage of artists' skills to engage youth.

And finally, arts and artists flag a region as being a desirable place to live, and can and do attract others to the region to live and work.

Let me illustrate these benefits by highlighting three artists who were featured in this past summer's exhibition at the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery, *Time and Place*, the third annual juried exhibition of members of LAWN (League of Artists of Western Newfoundland), an organization which seeks to promote and support visual arts and artists in the region. While the

competition was province-wide, most of the 34 selected artists live on the west coast of the island. Works in the exhibition ranged from representational landscape watercolors to video installations; the exhibition itself was testament to the energy and diversity of visual arts practice in a remote and rural region.

I asked three artists in the exhibition—Reed Weir, Audrey Feltham and Barb Daniell—how they came to be in the community that they are in, how they survive, and what works in terms of support and what doesn't. Although their artwork doesn't necessarily lend itself to the cultural tourism mold, the three of them all contribute substantially to their respective communities and to the province; they take their art practice very seriously; and they have shown their work both within and without Newfoundland and Labrador.

Originally from Ontario, Barb Daniell has lived in Woody Point for several years now. In 1999, she saw and answered an ad in the Visual Artists Ontario newsletter placed by Christine Koch, who was looking for someone to share a studio space in downtown St. John's. From there she was one of the first artists to participate in the Artist in Residence Program at Gros Morne National Park. She was greatly affected by the beauty of this part of Newfoundland and hasn't left. The region has been an inspiration and is integral to her art.

She has contributed actively and significantly in paid and unpaid capacities both to the community at Woody Point and to projects that have benefitted craftspeople across the Province. For example, she produced the concept and text for the Design Basics Kit for the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador; she was involved at the ground level with Writers at Woody Point; has offered advice to local craftspeople on setting up businesses and exhibitions; coordinated *Gardens Round the Bay for Writers*; and continues to be involved with Parks Canada's *Art in the Park* programs. Significantly, Barb spearheaded the group that lobbied successfully for broadband internet in her region.

Reed Weir is another Ontario native. She met Brian Banfield, a displaced Newfoundlander, in Northern Ontario and about 20 years ago they moved to Gander. At that point, they made the decision that before they tried any other way of making a living, they would first try to make a living making art. They moved to Robinsons in the

Codroy Valley, population approximately 300, because in their words, “It is a good place for artists to be.” They were able to purchase a relatively inexpensive place; they could set-up and work immediately; Robinsons is fairly close to an airport, the TransCanada Highway and the ferry; and it is near Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, the Art Gallery and the College of the North Atlantic. It is also on a tourist route.

For the first three or four years, Reed produced no artwork. She and Brian focused on the production of souvenirs and giftware. Brian toured the country extensively and built up a good network for their products. Most of their outlets were out-of-province but they also sold work at their own shop. They eventually disbanded their storefront in Robinsons because it took too much time away from their production work. They took advantage of the support offered by the Craft Division of the Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development, and in a relatively short period of time had sales so great they could not keep up with the demand.

Reed has supported herself over the years through hers and Brian’s production work, grants from the Canada Council and the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council, and recently, through the upfront, sight-unseen purchase of her sculpture by the Jonathan Bancroft-Snell Gallery in London, Ontario.

For Reed, living in the tiny Robinsons community has allowed her to develop a unique voice. She was very interested in the notion of community and the question of why people stay in rural and remote communities. Her vital work (with Angela Antle) for the *Flood at Furnace Cove* exhibition could not have happened had she not lived in Robinsons.

The reverse side of the coin is: what do Reed and Brian bring to Robinsons? An obvious item is employment. They hired someone — who actually went on to the College of the North Atlantic’s visual arts program. But more subtly, they have been touched by the sense of pride the community has had in their success, which helps validate the community. For example, when Reed was shortlisted for an Arts Council Award, she was amazed by the community awareness of the nomination and support for her.

Although originally from Lethbridge, Alberta,

Audrey Feltham obtained a B.Ed. and B.A. in English from Memorial University, where she met her husband, Jim. They eventually settled in Deer Lake as teachers and raised their family there. Audrey was part of the first graduating class of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College’s School of Fine Arts.

Audrey supports herself and her artwork through contract printing (that is printing for other artists), sales of artwork, artist fees, and her work with artist-in-the-schools programs like *ArtsSmarts*, *Learning through the Arts in Western Newfoundland* and most recently, the *School Touring Program*.

Despite fairly challenging imagery, she has found that she has been able to sell her artwork to American and European visitors through her studio, which is set up as a business. In addition to her artwork she produces functional prints on textile which she views as craft with integrity. Similar to Reed, Audrey credits living in a rural community with the opportunity to focus on her work without pressure to conform to “art world imperatives”.

She has been a dynamo in contributing to the cultural fabric of this province. She and Tina Dolter established LAWN. She is the past president of the Association of Cultural Industries, was the regional representative of Canadian Artists Representation and has organized countless opportunities for artists on the west coast of Newfoundland. Additionally, she has encouraged and inspired students through her work in the schools.

Entrepreneurship implies a certain element of risk-taking in a commercial enterprise. To locate in a rural and remote location further compounds the risk-taking. For example, we can’t compare ourselves with rural southwestern Ontario or rural upstate New York, with their relatively easy access to larger and more cosmopolitan populations. Given this additional constraint, what do these three artists identify as being supportive, if not critical to their survival?

All three point to the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador. Reed points out that the Council is flexible and membership-driven. She adds that she would not have been able to survive without the Craft Council support. The Craft Industry Development Program contributed to her recent catalogue, *Flood at Furnace Cove*. That support comes in more than

financial form; for example, the organization helps organize contacts for the artists, both within and outside the province.

Audrey cites the support of the Cultural Economic Development Program of the Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, which allowed her to put together catalogues of her work with a good curatorial essay and good reproductions. She has used these as a successful tool for attracting residencies, clients and exhibitions.

All three artists have received the financial support of the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council to produce new work — as have many of the artists in the LAWN exhibition — and appreciate the increased level of funding by the Provincial Government to the Council. New NLAC programs such as *School Touring* and ongoing programs under *Cultural Connections* have also provided opportunities for artists to work with students. These programs are very successful in linking artists to the community as well as in paying artists for their skills.

What do these artists see the major drawbacks to living in rural and remote regions when trying to pursue their profession?

Obstacles obviously relate to the nature of our remote location. In the first place, there are the shipping costs of bringing art materials in, including the additional fuel surcharge.

In the second place, there is access to markets, not only the sheer cost of getting art objects to the market but also finding those markets and all that it entails: the networking, the face-to-face contact

that is crucial to meeting gallery owners and art buyers, and in maintaining a relationship with them. This is especially important for artists whose product might not be accessible to a regional tourist market.

There is also the problem of affordable and/or limited studio space. For example, in Corner Brook, although there is a lot of vacant space, rent remains high. In smaller communities, suitable space may not exist or may require substantial renovation. While there is support for craftspeople for studio start-up costs, there is not a similar program in place for visual artists. One program in the United States gives a three-year graduated grant to an artist to set up a studio, the first year providing 100% funding and the third year providing matching funding.

We also need to ensure that our current institutions work, for example, that the public or *de facto* public galleries not function as gatekeepers, but instead promote the full spectrum of the professional visual arts activity in the province. And further, that these institutions promote our artists not just within the province but in other parts of Canada and elsewhere. There needs to be the institutional will to do so and the funding to support this. 

¹ Nancy Duxbury and Heather Campbell, *Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities through Arts and Creativity*, prepared for the Creative Cities Network, March 2009, <http://creativecommons.ca/images/stories/PDFs/CCNCRResearch/rural-communities-arts-2009.pdf>.



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