

## Introduction

At County Arts, two key tenets of our community programming are accessibility, and harnessing the power of art to address our community's challenges. As part of our efforts to break down accessibility barriers, and connect as many residents as possible to the proven health and social benefits of art-making, we offer sliding scale pricing, youth bursaries and free supply kits upon request for our community arts classes.

**But to truly bring to life our vision of arts accessibility for all, we needed to go further.**  
Enter, the Art Together pilot project!

In the Fall of 2022, we were awarded a Resilient Communities Fund grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation/Government of Ontario to pilot **Art Together - a free, weekly drop-in art-making studio program open to all community members 16+.** Over the next 8 months, nearly 100 residents of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities came together for 27 3-hour Art Together sessions, taking a rare moment to pause and find that “flow” state in our busy world, connect with new friends and old, and explore their creative side in a welcoming, accessible environment.



# Addressing Community Needs

The Art Together pilot project falls under our Art for Well-Being programming stream, through which we facilitate free opportunities for residents to access the proven joy and health benefits of participatory art-making experiences. This work is inspired by research demonstrating that participatory arts activities can help to prevent ill health (including by enhancing well-being and reducing the impact of trauma or the risk of cognitive decline) and support the management and treatment of existing mental health challenges by reducing stress, activating reward pathways in the brain, and helping participants learn new skills. Group art-making experiences have also been shown to increase social engagement, reduce isolation, and help maintain community ties.

In recent years, Prince Edward County residents have experienced declining and relatively low (compared to Ontario averages) self-reports of mental health and sense of belonging, along with increasing affordability challenges. We saw Art Together as a potentially powerful tool to help address these community challenges, and focused our outreach and promotional efforts on community partners working with residents at higher risk of experiencing all of the above challenges.

To learn about the program's impact on the well-being and social connectedness of participants, we continually engaged in program evaluation activities throughout the pilot project, including multiple participant surveys and interviews, and a Post-Project Facilitator Survey. In the following pages, we share the inspiring results.





## Participant Testimonials – How has Art Together impacted you? What makes this program unique in PEC?

"I am so grateful you offered this program and made it so accessible. It has had such a positive impact on my quality of life. It has been such a huge part of my healing journey and connecting with my new community. I am so grateful!"

"A wonderful community space to learn and share with your neighbours. And top notch artist facilitators too!"



"PLEASE continue with your programming! It really is about connecting everyone to what is generative and playful in themselves, and we need creativity as a core ability to navigate our toughest challenges, as a way to come together and to make something new. This is especially important for adults, who generally feel they aren't very creative, but who have simply lost the connection to their innate imagination and creativity."

"Please continue this much needed work. The difference I see when people first come to explore art and the confidence and excitement I see at the end of classes is amazing. You definitely provide an opportunity for people to bond and also while being themselves."



**"We need art in our lives to be well. Just like nature."**



"I was very socially isolated before attending Art Together sessions. This creative and low pressure social situation has helped me get more comfortable being social again."

"It brings people together and encourages everyone's uniqueness and gives you a sense of unity and achievement. I love that everyone can be included no matter what financial situation or past art experience, as well as being accessible to everyone."

"PEC attracts a lot of artists, but not everyone sees themselves as creative in this way. To be able to participate in the joy of making art for its own sake adds a deeper dimension of care and connection and a richer experience than just coming to see what 'real' artists create."

"I feel Art Together is such a unique and valuable offering in our community! The no-cost and low pressure creative fun made this program truly accessible to me."

"It feels very safe and empowering to have a space that you can go and be with other people in your community and create together. This is good for the soul. Its magic!"

"I love the spirit of Art Together, its something that builds connection and community. I always have fun and am proud of whatever I create, I can't recommend it enough."



**"It's a wonderful opportunity to gather, make, learn & explore new skills while also being social. Not many places have such rich, accessible arts programming -- Art Together is a gem in PEC."**



**"Seeing colours, line drawings, paint, collage come to light as a result of what I created felt so satisfying and hopeful - adding a lift to my spirits when life could be hard."**

"Creating in community offers a sense of belonging and the facilitators are caring and fun. Definitely a mood booster!"

"Art Together has had such a positive impact on my healing and well-being. I am new to the community and struggle with my physical and mental health, every day. Art Together offered me a very safe and inviting space to learn, grow and connect with other creative folks!"

"It's been a long while since I lived in a small town. Returning to my roots, I immediately felt that feeling again, of community, of adventure, of learning in community in Art Together. PEC is becoming a hub for the arts (in all mediums) and having an arts program like this, in Picton, connects us to that energy, to that life in this small county."



"Art Together gave my son and I a relaxing way to wind down from a busy day and spend quality time together learning something new. It was our first post-pandemic activity, and the Instructors created a calming, meditative environment and were very kind and supportive. It helped us explore many different mediums, and then take the plunge to sign up for a Drawing class!"

**"Art Together has been a godsend for me. It gives me somewhere to go to get out of my head for awhile, keep my hands busy, and give myself permission to play without putting any expectations of myself or anybody else."**

Here is a glimpse into results from the four quantitative Survey questions:

- **93%** felt Art Together helped them gain a new skill and/or learned something new about themselves
- **90%** felt Art Together had a positive impact on their mental well-being
- **83%** felt Art Together made them feel more socially connected
- **93%** felt attending an Art Together session gave them the inspiration or confidence to do or try something new

## Accessibility

Accessibility is a top priority for County Arts and in particular for the Art Together program. It is free, and offered at two different times (afternoons and evenings) to accommodate as many schedules as possible. The program takes place at the County Arts Lab, an accessible and walkable location in the County's most populous town; we were pleased to learn that **35% of participants walked or biked** to Art Together – a high proportion for a rural area. Picton is also home to a relatively high proportion of residents experiencing situational vulnerability, residential instability, and economic dependency, making the program more accessible to residents facing socio-economic challenges who, according to the research, have difficulty accessing participatory arts experiences yet stand to benefit even more from them.



"People with disabilities often have tight budgets. The fact that Art Together is free and welcomes everyone makes it a wonderfully unique experience. Participating in Art Together gives the people I support a sense of accomplishment and the opportunity to feel included, meet new people in their community, learn new artistic techniques, and express themselves creatively. They look forward to coming, and they proudly display their artistic creations at our Day Program. I hope this amazing program can continue!"

~ Paula Rosborough, Recreational Program Facilitator at Pathways to Independence, who brings Pathways participants with acquired brain injuries / developmental disabilities to Art Together sessions



## Artist Facilitator Testimonials

An important objective of the Art Together pilot project was to create new year-round employment opportunities with industry-standard pay for our rural artist community. As shown in these testimonials, our 4-artist Facilitator team also learned new skills, made connections in their community, and observed firsthand the impact this programming had on participants.

"This program was more than just a job for me, it was an amazing opportunity to meet other creative minded people in my community. As someone who is fairly new to Prince Edward County and who was not able to meet many people during my first few years here because of the pandemic, this program allowed me to make friends and feel more integrated in the community."



"I enjoyed getting to know the 'regulars' who came most every week, and it was also interesting to meet new people and hear their stories about why they came to the sessions. During the final session one regular participant said she tried to incorporate everything she had learned in previous sessions into her final piece of art. Another chose 'Connection' as the theme for her final piece of art. She said that is why she came to the Art Together sessions; she wanted connection with other people, especially during the dark cold winter months."



"The Art Together environment allowed a wide variety of people to participate. For some, it provided the initial step of getting back into the community following the pandemic isolation. People that regularly engaged in art making, but on their own, and others that had never made art, participated. Some family members wanted to share time together and needed a low cost activity that they both could join. The fact that the sessions were free enabled many people to try out the workshops without committing anything more than their time. Intergenerational connections were made, and one night some people newly displaced from their homes and living in a shelter joined us. Others drove from a fair distance to attend, and during a collage workshop, several people that were caregivers for their aging parent or their recently deceased spouse attended and used the workshop to acknowledge their loved ones. Art Together provided a very relaxing, safe environment for many people."



"Since participants had varying levels of artistic knowledge, and the group was constantly changing, I learned how to develop short lessons that are accessible to a broad audience and adapt lessons for different groups of learners. I also learned a lot of new skills observing and working with fellow Facilitators."

"It helped me feel connected to the community and feel a thread of connection with other artists."

**"The high-level of care and support that is built into this program is what makes it special.**

The value that people are getting from this program is huge: the quality of the workshops, the knowledge of the artist facilitators, and their generous attention and attentive-ness and the general ethos of all facilitators (i.e. that we are all artists, we are allowed to and in fact should make bad art, and that experimentation and open play is essential to art-making). This is much more than just a person who unlocks a supply cupboard, and provides free space for people to create in for an hour or two. **This is a deeply rich interaction with a group of deeply-caring artist facilitators who know the value (explicit and implicit) of creating art, talking about art, engaging in creation processes, and looking at art.** I can confidently say that this program deeply touched and transformed its participants in profound ways."



## Impact - County Arts, Partners & Community

Finally, by allowing us to create a new, accessible, welcoming space for play, exploration, and connection in our community, the Art Together pilot project allowed County Arts to:

- Forge new, and deepen existing, partnerships with fellow community organizations through outreach and recruitment efforts
- Facilitate - and evaluate and share the impact of - creative, arts-based solutions to challenges faced by Prince Edward County residents, providing community partners with a new way to meet the needs of all residents, including those at higher risk of social isolation, and socio-economic and/or mental health challenges.



Image on right - Group artwork co-created by Art Together participants during the last two sessions of the pilot project. They were invited to create art using any medium, in black & white, inspired by words starting with "co", e.g. community, cooperation, collaboration, connection. The work was publicly exhibited in June 2023 as part of the inaugural County Arts Lab Exhibition.

We conducted outreach and recruitment campaigns with many local organizations including Community Care for Seniors, the Prince Edward Learning Centre, Addictions and Mental Health Hastings Prince-Edward, the Enrichment Centre for Mental Health, Alternatives for Women, and Hospice Prince Edward. We also carried out a special "Flyer" campaign, creating and distributing nearly 400 flyers to promote Art Together with clients of local food security organizations including the Storehouse Foodbank, Picton United Church Food Bank, and PEC Fresh.

**We shared results from our ongoing program evaluation activities with community partners, and received positive feedback about the presence of this Art for Well-Being programming in our community, as well as hopes for more similar initiatives in the future!**