

INVITING ARTS INTO LOCAL PARKS

CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

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INTRODUCTION

Arts in the Parks (AIP) is an annual summer-long, inclusive arts initiative that takes place in parks across Toronto. Arts in the Parks is a strategic initiative of Toronto Arts Foundation in partnership with Toronto Arts Council, City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation Department, and community partners Park People and RISE Edutainment. The involvement of these key partners led by Toronto Arts Foundation has brought important expertise to the table and helped strengthen the initiative. AIP supports events that are free and family-friendly, including theatre, music concerts, film nights and creative workshops for community members. It promotes community-building and encourages local residents to enjoy parks in a new manner. As of August 2019, 185 events will have taken place in parks throughout the city particularly in areas outside the city centre¹.

AIP would not be possible without a network of supporters and partners: from community organizers who advocate for their local parks, to city builders concerned about public space, and visionaries who see the arts as a way of bringing communities together. Toronto Arts Council animates Toronto parks by providing grants to professional artists through their [Animating Toronto Parks](#) program. In addition, individual donors and corporations support AIP through Toronto Arts Foundation's Mayor's Evening for the Arts. For more information on Arts in the Parks program and community partners see Appendix 1.

Since 2016, Toronto Arts Foundation has evaluated Arts in the Parks by surveying audiences, artists, community organizers and volunteers. The results of these surveys have helped inform the development of the program, and evaluation reports have been shared on the TAF [website](#).

In 2019, we are gathering more in-depth feedback from Community Organizers. Toronto Arts Foundation Evaluation and Research staff interviewed nine community organizers about their experiences with Arts in the Parks. The interviews covered a variety of questions including information about their neighbourhood, the role of their group, and their own motivations to be advocates for their parks and for the arts. In addition, discussions focused on the impact of the arts to the well-being of their community, challenges to bringing arts into parks, and how Arts in the Parks program can be improved.

¹ 185 events occurred in parks from 2016-2019. Events are productions and/or workshops created by arts groups for park settings. Most groups offer their events in multiple parks at different dates and times. Each occurrence of the event is counted as an activity.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

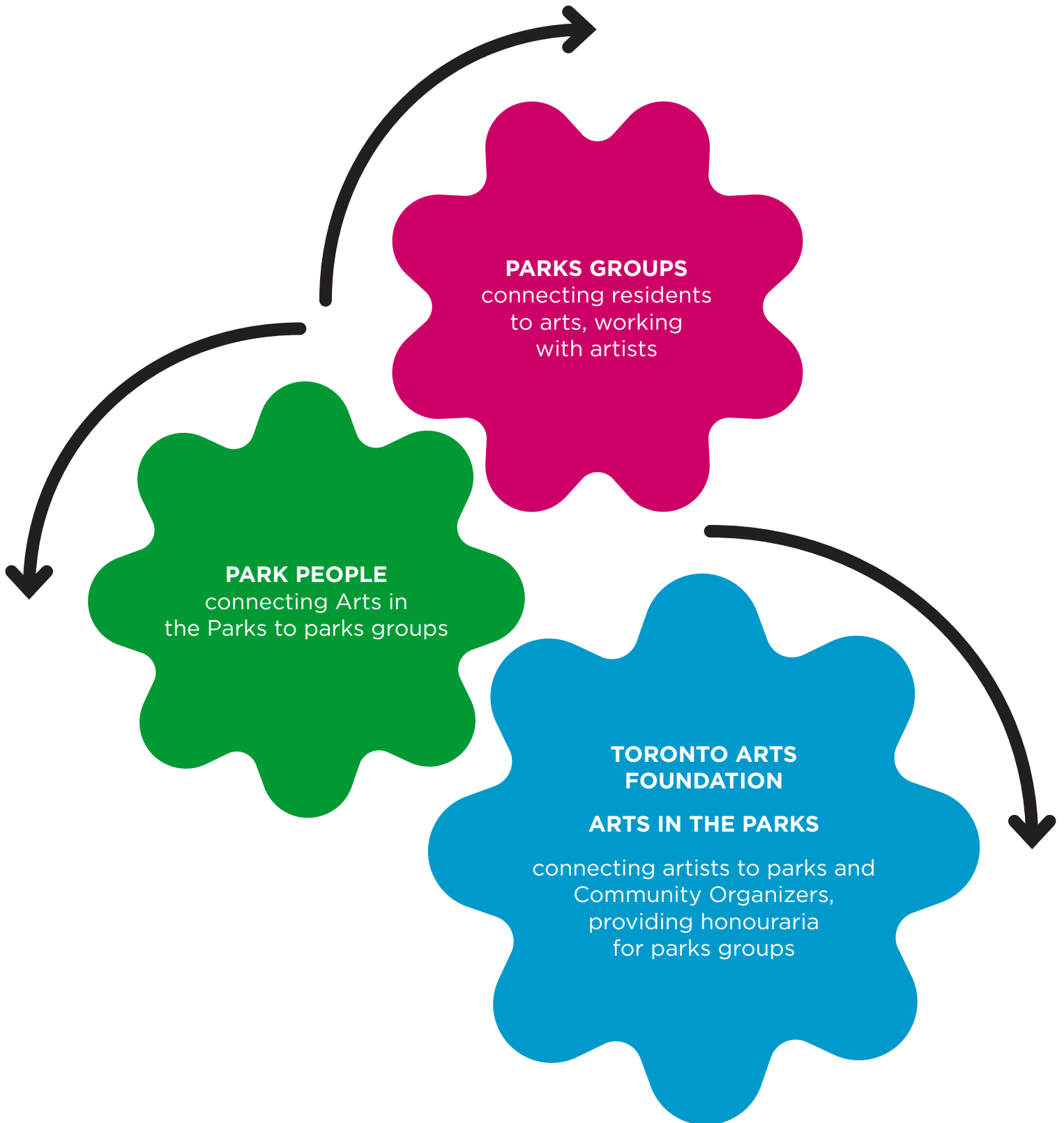
Often referred to as Park Groups, community groups that support local parks include residents' associations, not-for-profit organizations and health care agencies. They are a vital part of what makes Arts in the Parks work at a local level. They coordinate efforts and action by residents to promote the interests of their community and improve it via projects, initiatives and events.

Park People is a national organization that advocates for parks through city-specific initiatives. When Toronto Arts Foundation founded Arts in the Parks in 2016, we turned to Park People for collaboration and support. Acting as an intermediary, Park People connected Arts in the Parks with Community Organizers, many of whom credited Park People as the spark that started or supported their group. Toronto Arts Council, an Arts in the Parks partner, provides support for artists to work in parks through their [Animating Toronto Parks](#) program, and Arts in the Parks provides Park People with funds for honoraria to support community groups.

The coordinating work of Community Organizers, who work within the various Parks or Community Groups, is a central cog needed to keep this community-based program moving forward. They are dedicated to making their neighbourhood and local parks more vibrant and resilient spaces throughout the year, which falls in line with AITP's mandate to make the arts more accessible to residents in neighbourhoods throughout the city. Community Organizers know their neighbourhood parks and how the local community uses them; they know what assets the community has and they understand the barriers residents face. Their role in connecting with residents, artists, and local partners and their knowledge of and dedication to their community are essential facets of a successful Arts in the Parks program.

COLLABORATION PROCESS

A combination of resources and connections helps move this project forward.



CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS





NAWAL ATEEQ

Flemingdon Community Support Services - Flemingdon Park, North York

Why is arts access important to you? Why did Flemingdon Community Support Services get involved in Arts in the Parks?

People were not coming down from their apartments into the park. We saw that people needed an incentive to come out and use the beautiful green spaces in this neighbourhood. Flemingdon Community Support Services wanted to encourage people to use the park and also do skill-building. We see a lot of health issues in the neighbourhood whether that be with young children, adults, senior people. We try to do our best because we really, really feel that Arts in the Parks is something very important for the mental health and well-being of the community.

What's your secret of how you connect with people? Is it social media? Is it posters or hand bills, or all of it?

We're connected to the breakfast programs. We're connected to the after-school programs. We are connected to the local non-profits like The Neighbourhood Organization. We have our databases. We connect with the politicians: our MPs, MPPs, and City Councillor. They send out information to their networks. We have after-school programs like the Go Green Program that have their own databases that they send out to. We partner with all these organizations at different levels at different times during the year for different programs.

Our role is really outreach. We try to get the word out to all the different buildings. I think that's one of our core strengths – outreach – because we are able to do it at the grassroots level. Our group is really great at reaching out to people living in these high-rise buildings. We are connected with the library, the community centre. We know our neighbourhood. We always come up with an outreach plan and everybody is assigned different roles and areas. We do it very strategically.

What do you think are the benefits or impacts of having arts in community settings?

The effects are very wide-reaching because when people come and mingle with other people in the community, and when they come and attend these kinds of events every year, it gives them ideas as to doing something on their own. It's so accessible. It's right here in their park.



Flemington Park

150 Grenoble Dr.

Flemington Park is a large park in North York that runs along a hydro corridor and features several multipurpose sports fields, two ball diamonds, ball hockey and basketball courts, a community garden, a children's playground and a splash pad. The portion of the park that is used for events is at the east end where there is a basketball court and a community garden. A small community centre is located beside the park. Flemington Park has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2016.





LAURA-ANA CUCIUREANU

**Friends of Parkway Forest Park -
Parkway Forest Park, North York**

Why is arts access important to you?

One year our park had a movie and an orchestra playing in the park – that was something new. People weren't used to seeing something like that. A lot of people came to me saying, "Oh, you know, we usually go downtown for events like this. It's so nice! I just walk out and bring a blanket, and there it is!" They were very happy.

How do you get people to your events? You've got the space; you've got the artist. What do you do to get the audience?

We have a lot of great partnerships. Working Women Community Centre – they're amazing. For last summer's program, we created other partnerships that cater to different communities. For example, the Hong Fook Centre works in mental health in East Asian communities. Securing these partnerships just involves going to different organizations and, to build an audience, poster and going to community centres is very helpful.

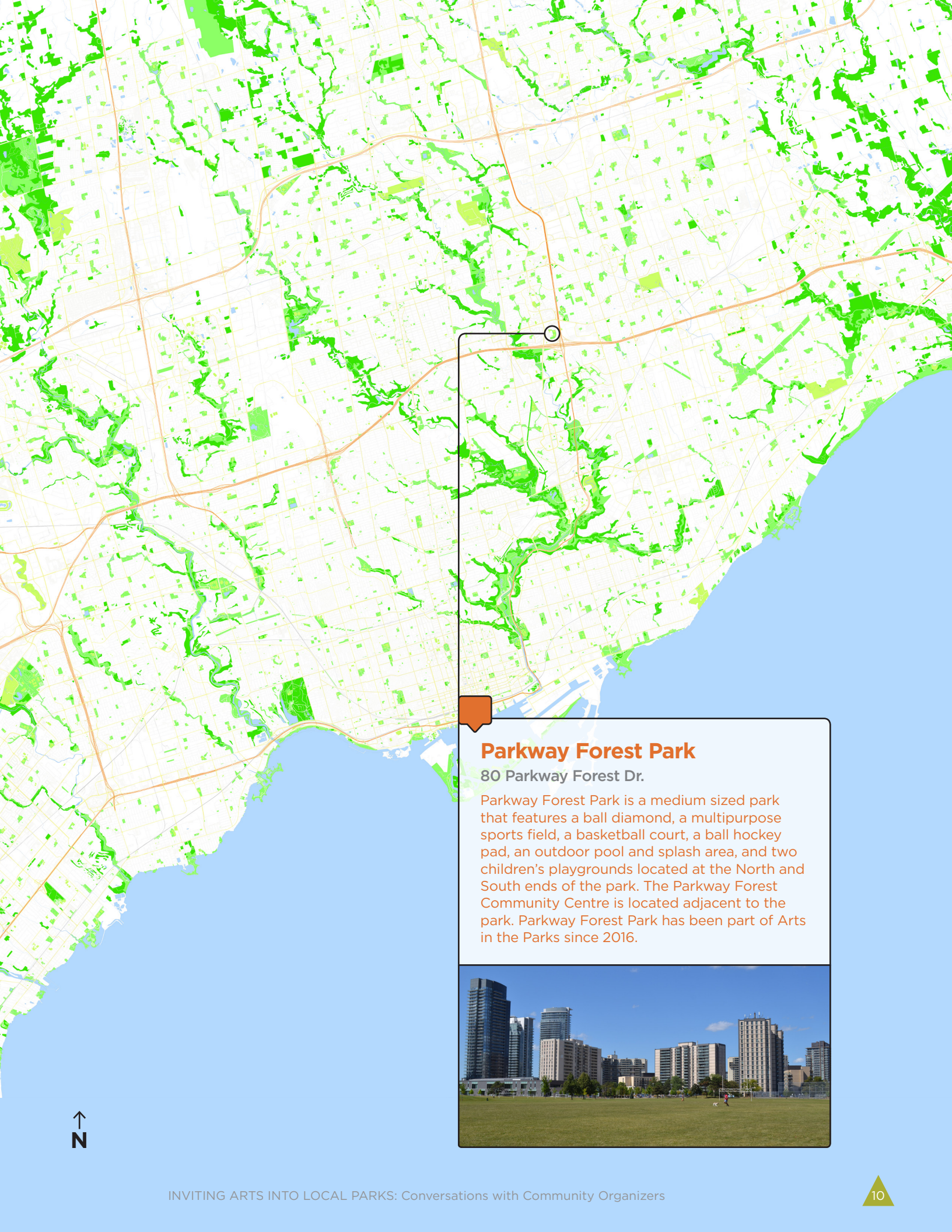
The first year was really tough because I did not know anyone and I didn't have the tools or connections – it was literally just dragging people in off the street. But later you learn that there's WhatsApp and now it's on Telegram. There's a Telegram group where all the newcomer businesses are connected and trying to help each other grow. That's how the Virtual Reality Workshop was full. If it comes from someone they trust, it's very easy to get people to show up.

In addition to the arts, what other activities is your Parks Friends Group involved in?

We try to do a lot of environmental knowledge awareness. Just last year we had a program, which we are very grateful to have been funded for, called The Native Plant Group Project. About fifty individuals, who were newcomers to the area, learned how to identify native plants, how to use them, how to cook them for medicinal benefits.

What kind of challenges do you face?

One of the challenges is how communication may or may not exist. For example, the artists were trying to give away some food and it was "ethnic food." I was able to get a recommended place for that food from the community and someone volunteered, "Oh, I can go pick it up, bring it here, and give it away to everyone. That would be a nice way to connect to the community." But, unfortunately, we couldn't do that because the permit was the wrong one. We had to have a food-handling certified person. It's just the constraints around doing certain things – you can't just hand out stuff. Then what message does that send to the community? It's a little bit tricky because it almost feels like "What's wrong with our food? Are we not welcome? We are trying to help. This is our community. This is our food!" And there's no one to really blame. The rules are in place for a reason. The artists don't want to take the liability and the community wants to help. Everyone wants to do good, but nobody can do good in a situation like that.



Parkway Forest Park

80 Parkway Forest Dr.

Parkway Forest Park is a medium sized park that features a ball diamond, a multipurpose sports field, a basketball court, a ball hockey pad, an outdoor pool and splash area, and two children's playgrounds located at the North and South ends of the park. The Parkway Forest Community Centre is located adjacent to the park. Parkway Forest Park has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2016.





MARCIA DENNIS

Friends of Queens Plate Drive - Flagstaff Park, Etobicoke

Why is arts access important to you?

I think it's a wonderful idea to get people involved, to get the community involved, to get the community engaged. I did research about mental health and found out that going out into parks helps to relieve stress. I think Arts in the Park is a great concept.

How did Friends of Queens Plate Drive get started?

We received some generous support from Park People to start a community garden. We did the Native Bush Garden about three years ago and we had a nature walk. I would also like to have a community produce garden and about a year and half ago I was pushing strongly for a beehive. But these things have so far been unsuccessful.

I am concerned about food security. I hear people in the elevators say, "Oh my gosh! The price of food!" We don't have very many alternatives around here, but the idea of community gardening means some food security and getting the community involved. And to get involved in art, I am for it.

What are the challenges facing this community?

We're pretty isolated. We're on the edge of North Etobicoke, the back of us is Malton. Even when we've had city representatives come out, they're like, "Oh! We didn't know that you were out here! We've never been out here. Oh! This exists? We didn't know."

You feel kind of forgotten?

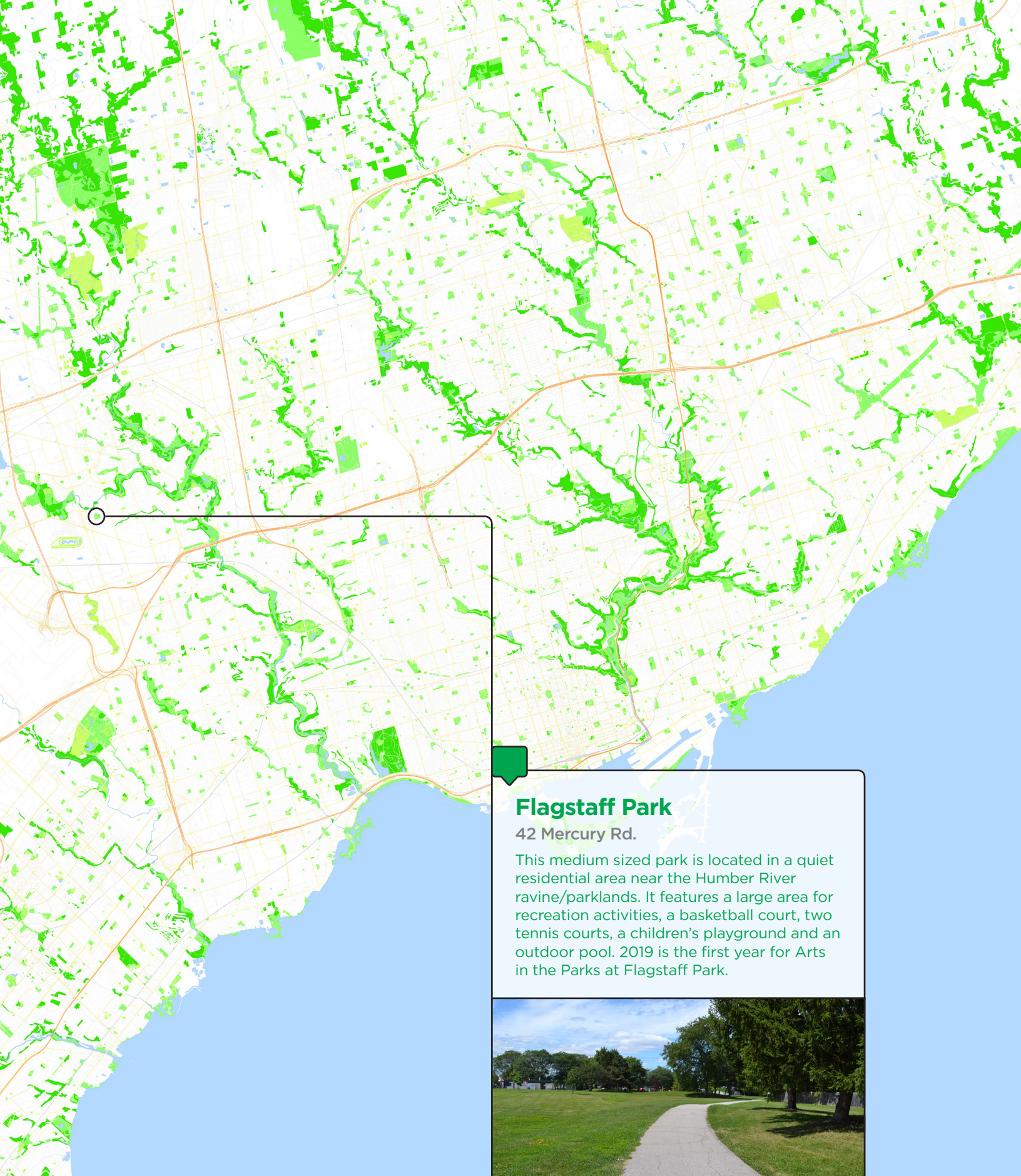
For sure.

This is the first year for Arts in the Parks in this area, how will you attract people to attend? What do you think will be the challenge of getting people to the park?

It's not a big park and it's enclosed in a residential area. It's on the other side of the highway.

I am concerned about the little ones. I love the idea of having a bus that will pick up the kids and take them back and forth from their homes to the park.

I am also a bit concerned about the people living near the park – homeowners who look down on people living in social housing. I've been involved in the community for about seven or eight years. I've gone to Town Hall meetings here in North Etobicoke and I've heard people say that our TCHC building should be burnt down or that "People in social housing on social assistance are lazy, they don't want to work, they have all these children, they keep coming into our country."



Flagstaff Park

42 Mercury Rd.

This medium sized park is located in a quiet residential area near the Humber River ravine/parklands. It features a large area for recreation activities, a basketball court, two tennis courts, a children's playground and an outdoor pool. 2019 is the first year for Arts in the Parks at Flagstaff Park.





JULIA GRAHAM

Stonegate Community Health Centre -
Bell Manor Park, Etobicoke

Why is arts access important to you? How did you get involved in Arts in the Parks?

Myself, I have a huge love of the arts. I reached out to Arts Etobicoke and connected with them about how we get more arts-based activities in our park. I saw that it was really thriving in other parks. Mabelle Arts is an amazing example and I worked with them on projects in the Mabelle community. They inspired me in terms of art and its ability to transform community and I saw that we were really missing that in a community health centre setting. We offer so many programs but we were really missing a vibrancy and a life that arts can create.

You work for Stonegate Community Health Centre. Why does the Centre support arts access?

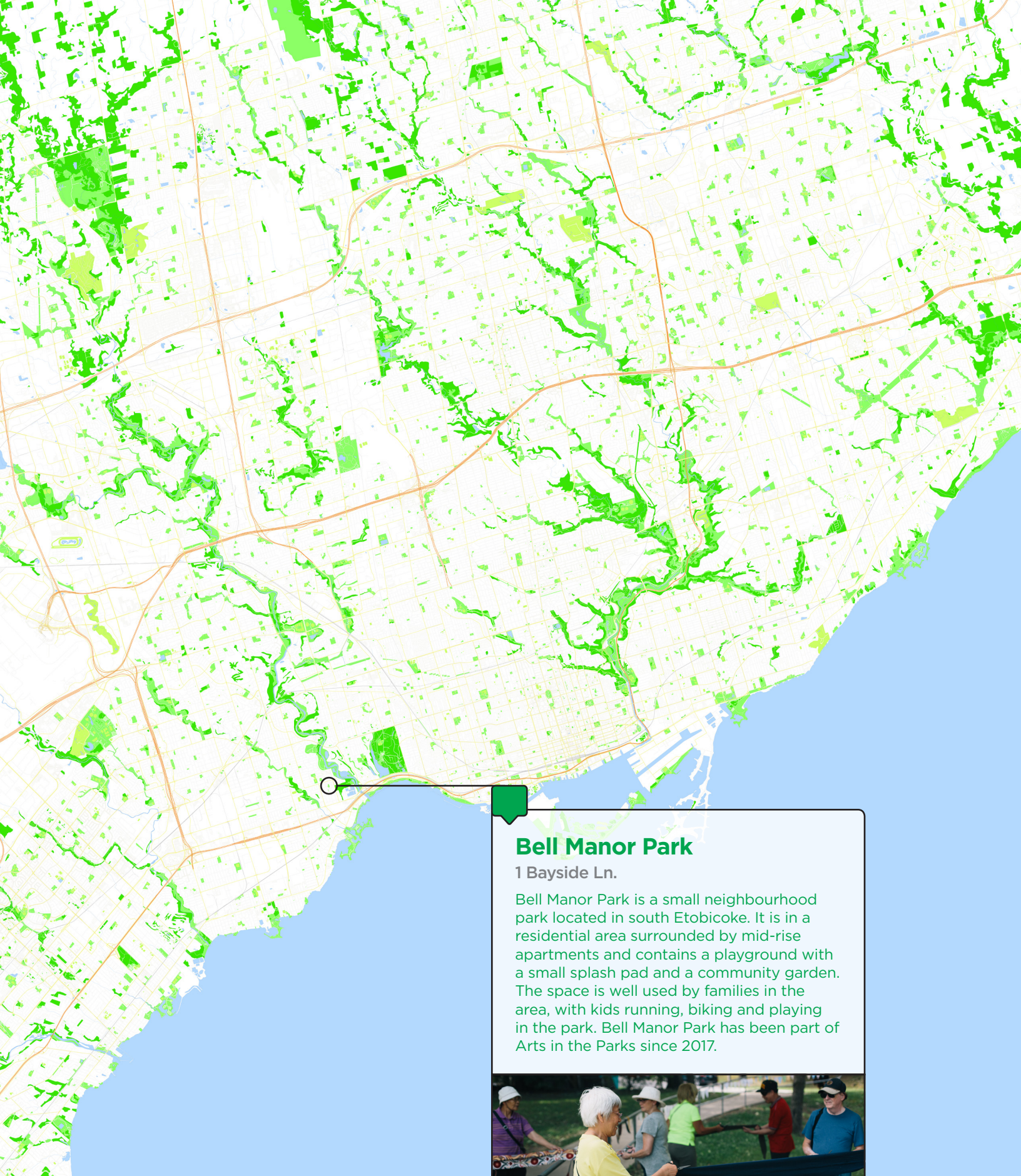
The management sees the value in the partnership with Arts Etobicoke, Arts in the Parks and Park People. The reward for arts engagement is the happiness and health of our clients.

You've been doing work around food security as an essential piece in terms of what people need. Is there in your mind a connection between that and the work you're doing in the arts?

I think there is a well-being link. Both create a sense of happiness and empowerment – when you are able to cook for yourself, shop for yourself, when you are able to create something yourself. One of our food security initiatives is our farmers' market and there's creativity there. Anytime you're picking something for your meals, or you're learning a new dish or recipe, it's creation, it's expression. When we have arts-based activities at our market, it seems like a natural fit that goes hand in hand with our community gardens. There's a lot of arts-based animation in the community garden, thanks to Arts Etobicoke. There's a mural on the shed, artwork along the garden fence, and dreams of future projects. You have flowers and vegetable plants growing, which is nature's beauty, but then you have this expression of human-made beauty as well.

How does arts participation have an impact on community members?

Last year one of the activities was creating a fence mosaic – just beautiful colours. It's vibrant. It's alive. People loved coming out together to design what it would look like and to take part. It gives the community that sense of building something together, that sense of self-expression and also transformation.



Bell Manor Park

1 Bayside Ln.

Bell Manor Park is a small neighbourhood park located in south Etobicoke. It is in a residential area surrounded by mid-rise apartments and contains a playground with a small splash pad and a community garden. The space is well used by families in the area, with kids running, biking and playing in the park. Bell Manor Park has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2017.





LAURA HAMMOND AND OVITA LYNCH

Birchmount Community Action Council -
Maidavale Park, Scarborough

How did you get involved in community organizing?

It started organically. I moved into this building and I wanted to get to know the community and to meet my neighbours. I noticed kids hanging out in the hallways and laundry room and there wasn't much for them to do. There was a rise in violence in the community that happened when community assets like swimming pools were taken away. – Laura

I am a resident here. I was part of the events that used to happen and then there was a time when nothing was happening. Our basketball court got taken away. I actually physically watched the violence rise when the community activities got taken. – Ovita

I got turned off working in the criminal justice system and got involved in community development. I started a committee in my building - Birchmount Community Action Committee. I had a big passion to work with youth and I organized small events like neighbourhood cleanups. – Laura

What are some of the challenges in being a community organizer?

Resident groups don't always get respect. There seems to be a notion that being a TCHC resident means that you lack capacity or knowledge of how to do things. – Laura

I am going to say the barriers are more societal, things we are not entirely in control of. We need to centre around more solution-based responses, having that sense of community and letting everyone know that anybody is allowed. – Ovita

How do you decide what will work in your park and how do you get people to come out to events?

Maintaining relationships and trust is really important. You are putting your word on whatever you do. We get feedback from the community so I'm very critical about what comes into the park. Who is the organizer? What is the purpose of the event? What's in it for community members? What are the expectations of community members? – Laura

What do you think are the benefits of having Arts in the Parks in your area, in your community, for residents in this apartment building?

I thought Arts in the Parks was a good idea – I met Arts in the Parks team members and I asked a lot of questions to the artists particularly about how the community can be directly involved in the arts activity. I think a positive event gets people outside and talking, parents meeting other parents and making friends. Just drawing on those social connections is a nice, positive platform. – Laura

How do you get an audience out? What's your outreach plan?

We need to focus on the sense of community and letting everyone know that anybody is allowed. As long as you are human, as long as you have a voice, as long as you have dancing shoes, as long as you're counting, as long as you want to be here willingly, as long as you want to know your neighbour next door, you are welcome. – Ovita

I'm involved in a lot of groups in the area and I've volunteered on boards and committees. These contacts give me access to email lists. This helps us get Arts in the Parks information out to a wide group of people. There's also flyering and word of mouth. – Laura

How did the community respond to the arts in their local park?

There were so many people in the park to see Shadowland, but it wasn't just those that came for the event. It also enriched the experience of other park users – volleyball players, dog walkers, and people hanging with their friends. They stayed on the edges but they noticed, they watched between matches and came a little close. They didn't come for the art but they we're still enjoying the vibe. People stayed in the park for a long time – we all got bit my mosquitoes. – Laura



Maidavale Park

1031 Birchmount Rd.

Maidavale Park is a small park within close proximity to Massey Creek and is easy to walk through. The park is primarily an open field, but features include a ball diamond, a children's playground and a few benches. Maidavale Park has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2017.





HANBO JIA

Friends of Beverly Glen Park - Beverly Glen Park, Scarborough

Why is arts access important to you? Why did you get involved in your Parks Friend's Group and Arts in the Parks?

We have cultural barriers, language barriers, and even access barriers. I think that arts, such as dance and music, are a universal language so we don't have to worry about barriers. Arts are very, very approachable.

What is your secret to getting people out?

When I talk to people, when I just reach out to people, they said they would like to have a big event so people can have a chance to get together. I know they are very interested in arts, in a variety of arts programs, and that's why I just reach out to them. I am comfortable to put all the groups together because I think there's a need in our community.

Did you mainly communicate with people online, through social media, face-to-face, or with posters and hand bills? There are so many different ways. Which works best in your community?

Face-to-face communication works very well. I also use email and WeChat groups. When you talk to people face-to-face it is very, very persuasive and also it's very efficient for you to pass on your ideas. Sometimes talking to each other is better than sending out flyers and emails because there will be a great connection.

We provided translation services for the audience. People were scared to partake in events because they couldn't understand English, they couldn't understand what's happening. That's why we have lots of volunteers, including me, just doing translation services. People feel close to you if you can communicate. They will think you are very, very down-to-earth because they know you do care about them.

Arts in the Parks is just one way parks can be animated. Does your group support other activities in the parks or are you focused primarily on animating parks through arts?

We have cleanup events and pumpkin parades and tai chi events and we even had nature walks before. So, actually, the arts program is just one of our programs.

What kind of advice would you give to the Arts in the Parks team in terms of moving forward?

Sometimes I feel it takes time to make professional artists understand the community. To be honest, it was a great challenge for me to work with some artists. They do not know the community. They just do things in their own way. It doesn't work for the community at all. What I would suggest is to educate the artists because I know they're very professional, but when you work with the community you have to use different approaches.



Beverly Glen Park

75 Beverly Glen Blvd.

Beverly Glen Park is a small to medium park with a large open area featuring a ball diamond, two sports fields and a children's playground. Located in a suburban residential area, it is surrounded by houses and is adjacent to a school. Beverly Glen Park has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2018.





JOHN MASON

Friends of Guild Park and Gardens - Guild Park and Gardens, Scarborough

Why is arts access important to you? Why did you get involved in your Parks Friends Group and Arts in the Parks?

Friends of Guild Park started seven years ago, to bring whole-park thinking to the park. The park has been here since 1932. It was started as an arts space by Rosa and Spencer Clark, but when they died in the 1980s their dream of having this as a sanctuary for artists and a place for visitors to come, that almost died as well. Over the next two or three decades, there was no vision, there was no dream, there was no overall thinking for how this place was managed. As a result, in 2011 the Guild Inn that you see here was completely boarded up. When that happened, a couple of friends and I said we did not want to live in a community where the heart was decaying and dying. We created a Parks Friends Group to bring all the interests together and we collaborated with community groups.

We advocate for the park, we communicate about the park and we celebrate the park. The City of Toronto is working hard to keep the legacy going. It's an ongoing process.

How would you describe your local community? How do you get people out to your events? What barriers do you face?

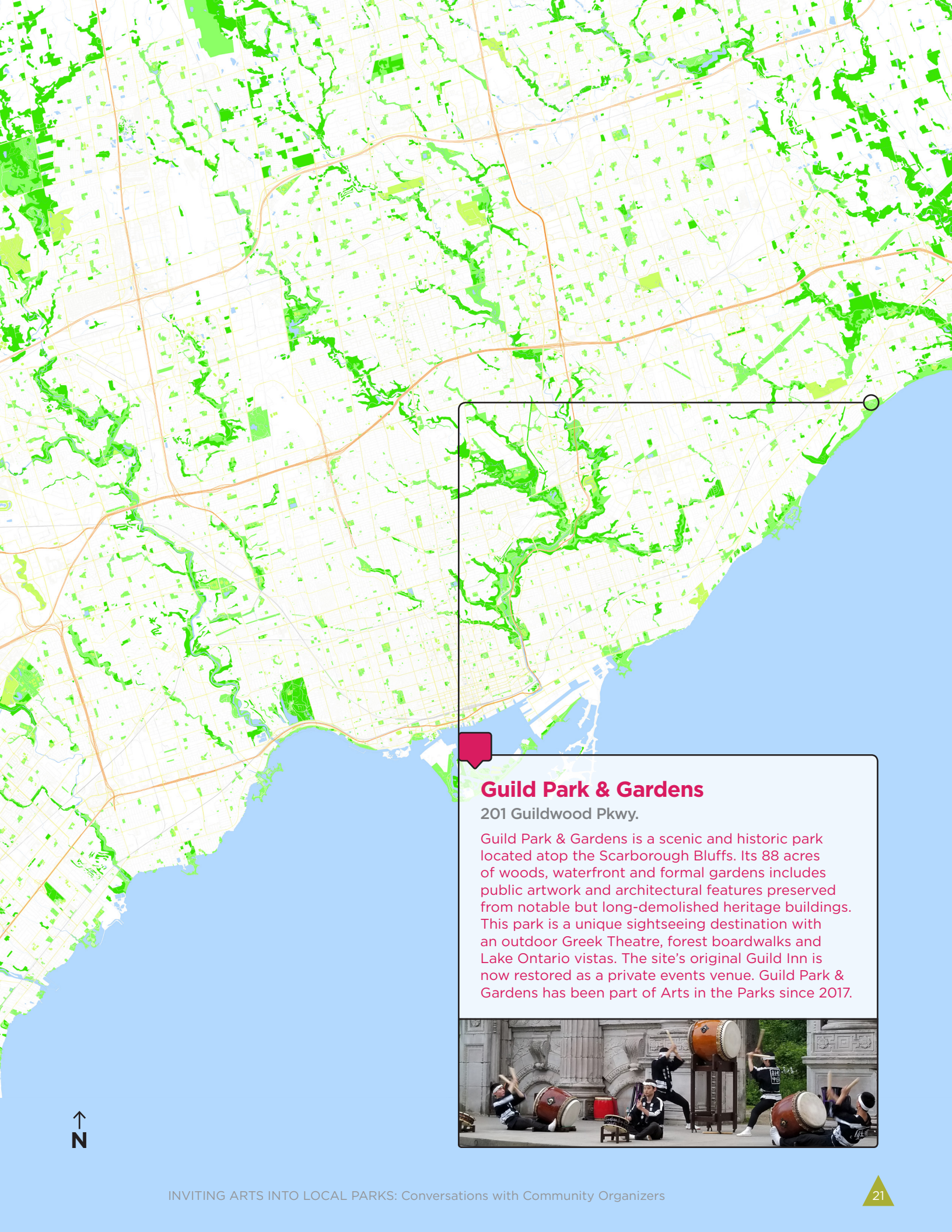
There is a huge diversity around Guildwood Village and one of the mandates we have is to go to groups that do not feel welcome and make sure they know that this is their space as well. When we have events, we cross-promote. We just want everybody to know what's coming to the park and what's happening. One of our biggest problems is public transit. Public transit throughout Scarborough is just horrendous.

Who do you partner with in the community?

We're in touch with Scarborough Arts all the time. They are really plugged into local artists. One of the things we're doing with them this summer is hosting the Scarborough Sign at Guild Park.

What do arts bring to outdoor spaces?

They animate it. The cultural impact is huge. Guild Park is a little bit different because there is such a legacy of arts in this space. There has been a long tradition here, but Arts in the Parks Program actually revitalized that tradition of having the arts here. The results are fantastic! It makes free entertainment available. Having Arts in the Parks here lets people see this as a canvas with wonderful artistic endeavours on it whether it is Japanese drumming or Shakespeare.



Guild Park & Gardens

201 Guildwood Pkwy.

Guild Park & Gardens is a scenic and historic park located atop the Scarborough Bluffs. Its 88 acres of woods, waterfront and formal gardens includes public artwork and architectural features preserved from notable but long-demolished heritage buildings. This park is a unique sightseeing destination with an outdoor Greek Theatre, forest boardwalks and Lake Ontario vistas. The site's original Guild Inn is now restored as a private events venue. Guild Park & Gardens has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2017.





ALURA MOORES

Rosewood Taxpayers' Association - Alexmuir Park, Scarborough

Why did you get involved in your Parks Friend's Group and Arts in the Parks?

I didn't know my neighbours. I didn't know my community. I was young. I just moved into the neighbourhood. Just got married. I had no real way of connecting with people. This was a way of meeting people, making friends. It really started to help me engage in my neighbourhood. I wanted to feel a part of a community, whereas I didn't have that feeling initially. Now I work with people because of it.

What other arts activities does your Park Group host?

We've had local artists playing traditional Chinese music and, in 2017, we started doing a Lunar New Year celebration. We've started a partnership with the international language program of the TDSB. The students perform in Chinese wearing their cultural costumes and we've brought in professional lion dancers. It's a nice collaboration of professionals and the community.

What challenges does your community and organization face?

We need better signage. We have a very strange location in that it's in the middle of our neighbourhood surrounded by houses and if you don't have signage everywhere, people don't know what's happening. In Scarborough we have a big challenge with services, with transit, with everything. We're really up in this little corner of Toronto and it's just really hard to get anything. We're very much ignored and not considered, and we get left out of the picture a lot.

Getting art in our community is really challenging. To access a lot of the cultural centres or to access anything that's going on, you are either looking at travelling quite a way through Scarborough, which is challenging for some people, or it is centred downtown. A lot of people avoid going downtown because it's expensive and it's not great for us.

What is the impact of having Arts in the Parks in your park?

Arts in the Parks has been the biggest thing we have brought into our park. It's been very valuable in bringing different segments of the community together and redefining how people see and use the park. The park is used very differently by different people, but this has been a nice way to bring all these different people together. It reinvents how everyone sees the park. Having Arts in the Parks come right into your community is amazing.

Also, now that it's starting to be in a lot of parks around us, it's really wonderful. Kids in the neighbourhood ask me "When is it happening this year? What's going on?" They look forward to it. They are really excited about it. Jacky Chan, a student volunteer who has participated in Arts in the Parks in our neighbourhood, has had some really great exposure and just a really unique experience that he would never have had otherwise. Overall Arts in the Parks has been wonderful for the community. I appreciate it a lot.



Alexmuir Park

205 Alexmuir Blvd.

Alexmuir Park is a small to medium sized tree-lined neighbourhood park with a large open area, playground and sports field. Located in a suburban residential area, it is surrounded by houses and connected to two schools. There are small clusters of trees throughout the park and the park itself can be accessed by paths running off surrounding residential streets as well as through the school yard. Alexmuir Park has been part of Arts in the Parks since 2016.



ARTS IN NEIGHBOURHOODS

Building a strategy for healthy communities Keeping organizations and organizers motivated Nurturing arts at a local level Supporting local artists

Arts in the Parks is assisted by community organizations made up of local residents who are committed to the well-being of their neighbourhood. These organizations promote community-based initiatives in their park and the larger community.

The Community Organizers we interviewed work with these community organizations. All had their own reasons for and approaches to their work, but they also shared many commonalities, including:

- ▶ **Holistic thinking:** Some Community Organizers have been working to improve their community for a long time and are interested in an overall strategy for healthy communities, of which they feel arts can be a key part. They organize and promote a number of community-based activities, such as sewing groups, park cleanup events, pumpkin parades, seasonal festivals, movies in the park, nature walks, tai chi and other exercise activities. Some we spoke with are particularly interested in activities related to food security, such as food drives, farmers' markets, food co-ops, and planting community gardens. All these organizers are holistic thinkers who work hard to raise funds and know how to stretch their resources. Sources of support include donations from local businesses, grants and honoraria.
- ▶ **Committed to the Community:** Community Organizers know their neighbourhood parks and other facilities and how the local community uses them. Some were motivated to start a community group because they saw how spaces and facilities were under-used. Many want to create welcoming spaces and are enthusiastic about arts activities that directly engage community members, actively reach out to newcomers and are designed to make everyone feel accepted.
- ▶ **Deep connections:** Some Community Organizers have lived in their community for many years and also volunteer for other organizations in the area. They care about the people who live there, they know the community's interests and how to attract residents to attend arts events. This makes them excellent promoters.
- ▶ **Supporting local artists:** In 2018 and 2019, AITP added a local artist component in which local artists perform as part of the overall program in some parks. Finding and contracting these artists is currently done by RISE Edutainment, a youth-led community movement, composed of artists and activists. Their mandate to create safe and welcoming platforms for self-expression and healing through the performing arts works well with the inclusive and welcoming vision of many Community Organizers. As a plus, local artists help attract local audiences. Opportunities for local emerging artists have been provided in parks such as Forest Parkway Park, Alexmuir Park, Guild Park and Beverly Glen Park. Local arts groups or artists can be incorporated into a main performance, perform before a main performance, or be the main performance themselves. Community Organizers are proud of local talent. For bios of local artists in Arts in the Parks 2019, see Appendix 3.

- ▶ **Understanding impact and motivated to make change:** Community Organizers point out the benefits to the community from involvement in the arts and how the arts bring people together to create dynamic spaces. Knowing their efforts are making a difference helps keep them motivated and many are encouraged to keep going by the energy they feel at community events or by the enthusiastic response to arts activities. Others say their motivation lies in the desire to make deeper changes: they want their community to be viewed in a more positive light and gain more access to services, especially where residents have experienced the stigmatization that comes with living in a challenged neighbourhood.

92% of Community Organizers host other park events during the year in addition to AITP. **One-third** of them host 5 or more park events per year.

- Arts in the Parks Evaluation Report 2018



PARTNERING AND RAISING SUPPORT

Making local connections

Developing strategies to work together with other organizations

Raising resources and getting support

Community Organizers shared their concerns around access to resources and working to improve the overall well-being of their area of the city. Their interests extend beyond the arts and into concerns about the environment and the overall needs of residents. Community organizations often develop connections with other local groups to boost the impact of their work, including with health agencies, social service agencies, community centres, tenants' organizations and Local Arts Service Organizations (LASOs).

The Community Organizers we interviewed acknowledge the importance of on-going support to help with fundraising, sourcing donations, recruiting volunteers and to maintain and build on the work they are doing:

- ▶ **Reaching Out to Arts Organizations:** Local Arts Service Organizations (LASOs) facilitate the development and distribution of arts in their area of the city and strongly support the City of Toronto's work in underserved communities. Through services, designated spaces and programming customized to local needs, LASOs provide inclusive opportunities for a broad demographic. For community organizations working in parks, LASOs have assisted in creating better contact with artists. For example, after working with Etobicoke Arts Council, Stonegate Community Health Centre is reaching out directly to artists to do additional arts programming outside of Arts in the Parks. See Appendix 4 for more information on Toronto's six LASOs.
- ▶ **Connecting to City-Building Organizations:** Park People is a national organization that, through city-specific programs, works to realize the potential of parks to build strong communities, healthy environments and resilient cities. Park People has been an essential ally for Arts in the Parks throughout Toronto. Community Organizers were introduced to Arts in the Parks through Park People staff who continue to provide support year-round.
- ▶ **Capacity and Resources:** Some community organizations are incorporated and have experience raising funds and applying for grants to fund the work they do. Groups such as Birchmount Community Action Council and Flemingdon Community Support Services have successfully raised funds from a variety of sources including government grants and support from sponsors. One Community Organizer noted that in order to take on significant fundraising they had to incorporate, but setting up a not-for-profit corporation and finding residents willing to sit on a Board of Directors involves a lot of steps. Systemic barriers include lack of literacy in English and the perception that people living in social housing lack capacity, putting community organizations in low-income neighbourhoods at a disadvantage.
- ▶ **Receiving Support:** Some Arts in the Parks Community Organizers work at community centres or agencies that embrace arts access as an element of the group's mandate. Other AITP groups are run solely by volunteers and this can sometimes be limiting. Arts in the Parks provides community organizations with honoraria based on the number of artists and activities scheduled in their park. Some organizers said they sometimes end up doing more work than expected which makes the AITP honorarium feel inadequate and others noted it did not adequately cover their costs.



75% of Community Organizers
agreed that the type of art or
activity in their park was a good fit.

- Arts in the Parks Evaluation Report 2018

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Best ways to communicate with community members Building trust

Community Organizers play a key role in audience turnout. They are the local experts who know their community well, understand how to get the message out and which strategies will help attract audiences.

Community Organizers highlighted four key points about communication:

- ▶ **Finding the Right Outreach Approach:** Community organizers use more than one outreach and marketing technique, with face-to-face communication expressed as the most effective. Some other tools include distributing posters and flyers, emailing, and using social media and social messaging tools such as WhatsApp, Telegram and WeChat.
- ▶ **Working with Others:** Cross-promoting with other community groups and community members is an effective communication strategy.
- ▶ **Language Translation:** Translating information into other languages makes it easier to reach more community members. Building trust with newcomers is an important communication strategy and translation is an important way to foster trust. Translated surveys have helped the Arts in the Parks team gather feedback from more people. At the moment, audience surveys are offered in English, Tamil, Farsi and Simplified Chinese.
- ▶ **Effective Signage:** Finding one's way in a park can be difficult, especially in larger parks. Community organizers appreciate the signage put up by Arts in the Parks on the day of the event but note that signage that could be used year round would remind residents that the parks are arts spaces.



Top methods of outreach for community organizers are:
Face-to-face and word of mouth (**100%**)

Posters and flyers (**100%**)

Social media (**83%**)

83% of community organizers believe their outreach efforts have an impact on attendance.

- *Arts in the Parks Evaluation Report 2018*

IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES

Addressing what's happening in local community Getting involved in problem solving Identifying systemic problems

Arts in the Parks has been embraced by Community Organizers and while it is generally working well, there remain some challenges. For example, some feel their communities are neglected and want better facilities and services from the City, including, in addition to AITP, more access to arts experiences.

Challenges that have proven to be most difficult include:

- ▶ **Feeling Disconnected:** Not all Community Organizers find it easy to identify support or establish partnerships. Community organizers who described their neighbourhood as a “stigmatized community” identified systemic barriers that have a negative impact on the perception of the area and on being able access support from government departments or not-for-profit organizations.
- ▶ **Safety Concerns:** The overall layout or design of the park, plus park accessibility problems, can make hosting an arts event challenging. Inadequate facilities and infrastructure have resulted in safety concerns such as lack of lighting and absence of accessible public washrooms or, in some cases, any washroom at all.
- ▶ **Public Transportation:** Some parks are in areas that are not well-served by public transportation which makes it challenging to build an audience.
- ▶ **Difficulty with Permits:** A variety of permits are needed for an Arts in the Parks event but some permits create challenges. For example, it's difficult to get a permit to serve food but community members like events that include food vendors or picnics.
- ▶ **Not a Good Fit:** Some Community Organizers felt the artists chosen for their park were not the right fit because their work did not resonate with residents or did not fit the environment. For example, a small park close to homes was programmed with artists using drums and the sound upset those living near the park. Some Organizers felt they had encountered artists who were not good communicators which made it difficult to plan and provide what was needed for successful programming.

IMPACT OF ARTS ACTIVITIES

Seeing benefits of arts engagement

Increasing arts access by using parks as arts venues

Finding a good fit between arts activity and park

Community Organizers recognize that more arts access is a benefit to their community and that arts engagement can foster a sense of pride, happiness and well-being as well as provide opportunities for skill-building and stress relief.

Community Organizers touched on three common ways Arts in the Parks activities influence their communities:

- ▶ **Recognizing the Value of the Arts and Arts Spaces:** There are few arts-designated sites in neighbourhoods outside the downtown core. By considering any spot as a potential arts space, Arts in the Parks helps increase access to the arts across the city as well as the possibilities for Torontonians to access the arts in their own backyard.
- ▶ **Engagement with Community:** Community Organizers value public space because it is a place where residents can meet each other, particularly those who are isolated such as seniors, newcomers and people living in high-rise communities. Many community organizers feel that art is a “universal language” that brings people together and fosters social connections despite cultural and language barriers. Community Organizers expressed preference for arts programming that directly engages attendees; for example, some artists offer workshops that encourage community members to be creative, including the opportunity to be part of a performance. Some programs have been very successful in engaging specific groups such as young people and newcomers. One interviewee mentioned that neighbourhood children ask her when Arts in the Parks will be back and her own children are not only very excited about the return of AITP, they still have the hats and flags they created last year.
- ▶ **Looking for Local Connections:** Some Community Organizers noted that involving artists from the local neighbourhood creates a good connection between the artists and community, and residents tend to respond favourably. In 2018 and 2019, AITP invited local emerging artists to be part of the programming in parks such as Forest Parkway Park, Alexmuir Park, Guild Park and Gardens, and Beverly Glen Park. RISE Edutainment’s connections with emerging artists has helped AITP identify local artists and provided performance experiences for artists. Additionally, in 2019, Toronto Arts Council’s Strategic Initiatives Program Manager Erika Hennebury and Toronto Arts Foundation’s Community Outreach Coordinator Eliot Feenstra organized community information sessions to deepen connections with local artists, community groups and community members.
- ▶ **Feeling Connected to Green Spaces:** Art in a park setting encourages people to embrace the arts but also recognize the value of green spaces. Some Community Organizers point out that Arts in the Parks has helped attendees to find a deeper connection to the natural environment of the park. Shadowland Theatre’s 2019 work, occurring in a number of parks, will bring people together around a fire pit, an idea embraced by Birchmount Community Action Council for offering a unique experience in an urban setting that could help residents feel more connected to each other and the outdoors.



75% of Community Organizers agreed that animating their park with the arts has inspired them to do more with their park.

67% thought that this experience provided them the skills and knowledge to continue animating their park with the arts.

83% said their overall experience with Arts in the Parks was excellent.

- Arts in the Parks Evaluation Report 2018

COMMUNITY ORGANIZER RECOMMENDATIONS



Our conversations with Community Organizers elicited a number of recommendations to other organizers, arts groups, Arts in the Parks program, Parks People, and City of Toronto to help the program run smoothly and successfully.

Communicating and Planning

- ▶ Do not assume that what works successfully in one park for one community will also work successfully at another park for another community. Artists and others not from the area should get to know Community Organizers and community members, as well as the park features and surrounding area before planning any programming.
- ▶ Keep in mind each park is unique and planning for each park needs to be customized. Each park functions differently and is accessed differently by local people. Even the time of day a park is frequented differs from park to park depending on the community surrounding it. Make sure that the arts programming is a good fit for the park and will engage community members.
- ▶ Find ways for artists to get a better sense of the community they will be working in before they apply for the grant. Once the artists and parks are paired, encourage artists and arts group to be in touch with Community Organizers. Artists can learn a lot from Community Organizers about the park and the local community. This will improve the delivery of the arts project and their overall experience in the park.

Supporting Parks Groups and Parks

- ▶ Review the honoraria amounts offered to Parks Groups and consider providing additional financial support for community organizations, especially those run by volunteers. Volunteering is sometimes a challenge for people of low income. Find out how best to support or encourage their involvement.
- ▶ Work on overall concepts to develop parks. Find ways that different organizations and City of Toronto departments can work together to support and coordinate building the park's infrastructure (trail maintenance, lighting, washrooms, signage, etc.), improve permitting processes, and communicate about programming arts and culture activities in all regions of the city.

Finding Allies and Fostering Connections

- ▶ Parks Groups need to seek out allies who share similar values, such as arts access. This is a good way to join forces and make a difference in the community. For example, working with Local Arts Service Organizations can successfully bridge the disconnect between community groups and the arts community.
- ▶ Community Organizers can help bridge the divide between arts funders and local artists who might not be aware of resources. Find ways to connect local-based artists with more information about Arts in the Parks and information about applying for arts grants.
- ▶ Arts in the Parks program, via TAC/TAF and Park People, could provide information and support to Community Organizers wanting to develop more arts programming in parks and public spaces in their community outside of Arts in the Parks events.

CONCLUSION

After meeting with Community Organizers, a clearer picture emerges of the importance of local activism. The organizers are deeply committed to the places they live, work and play. They see their local park as a site of diverse activity, a place of inspiration, and an invaluable meeting space.

Organizers are looking for holistic solutions to help their park thrive. They invite in artists because they see the arts as more than entertainment or distraction. While the joy arts bring is never to be underestimated, the arts are also a way to bring people together and deepen an overall sense of well-being.

During our conversations, organizers explained how the arts programming in their park complements other activities such as nature walks, park clean-up campaigns, community gardening and even bee-keeping. They identified the importance of welcoming newcomers, addressing food security, and finding ways to engage the community in shared public spaces. Organizers also framed their opinions against the larger backdrop of systemic barriers faced by community members and of their own personal experiences.

Arts in the Parks connects parks outside Toronto's downtown core with professional artists and arts groups who are experienced working in outdoor locations. More recently, to the delight of residents, artists from local neighbourhoods have been invited to participate in Arts in the Parks. Arts activities and performances provide audiences with a cornucopia of sound, movement and design: from aerialists in trees, to a parade of drummers and stilt walkers, to an adaptation of a Shakespearean play, to an installation of balloons in a wading pool, to people watching films under the stars, there's no end to the creative ways to use a park setting. During the interviews, Community Organizers shared memories of arts activities that brought their park alive, what residents had to say about the arts programming, and why people are eager to have the program back in their park.

Community Organizers, and the mutual trust they hold with their community, are key to the success of the programming. They know how their community works and without their outreach work there would be fewer people in the parks. The formula is unique to each park: a mix of word of mouth, postering, translation, signage, partnering with local groups and using social media.

In 2016, Toronto Arts Foundation put into place an evaluation plan for Arts in the Parks. By surveying artists, audiences, community organizers and volunteers, the Foundation has been able to get a clearer picture of the program and see where program adjustments may be needed. By interviewing the Community Organizers, we have deepened our understanding of how the program plays out in local communities.

APPENDICES: ARTS IN THE PARKS 2019

APPENDIX 1: ARTS IN THE PARKS PARTNERS

TORONTO ARTS FOUNDATION (TAF)

The Foundation raises funds from the private sector to support Toronto's arts and cultural sector. The Foundation is a charitable organization that sparks creative connections, spotlights artistic excellence, and supports vibrant cultural growth throughout our diverse city through private sector investment. Funds for AITP are primarily raised through the Mayor's Evening for the Arts. Since its inception, donations and sponsorships from hundreds of corporations and individuals have made this initiative possible.

TORONTO ARTS COUNCIL (TAC)

TAC is the City of Toronto's arm's-length arts funding body. For many years, a handful of TAC-funded organizations have been offering excellent arts programs in downtown parks. In 2016, as part of the Arts in the Parks initiative, TAC developed [Animating Toronto Parks](#), a new funding program that enables artists to produce their own projects in parks outside the central part of Toronto. Grants of up to \$25,000 are available to artists, collectives and non-profit organizations to produce arts programming in selected Toronto parks in Etobicoke, North York and Scarborough. Recipients are chosen through a peer jury process.

CITY OF TORONTO

The City of Toronto is a critical partner, and leadership from Mayor John Tory has been instrumental to the success of this city-building initiative. The City's Parks, Forest & Recreation Department (PFR) is responsible for the care of city parks and is a primary collaborator in the park approval process that matches artists and parks and issues park permits to arts groups. Permits cover aspects such as noise concerns, when to be out of the park, and use of fire pits.

PARK PEOPLE

Park People is a non-profit organization that supports the improvement of city parks country-wide by developing programs and connecting people and groups who share an interest in parks. TAF partnered with Park People from the beginning to better understand the parks that were being animated and to establish connections with community organizers familiar with local parks.

REACHING INTELLIGENT SOULS EVERYWHERE (RISE)

RISE is a youth-led movement to provide opportunities and spaces for youth to develop artistically, professionally, personally, socially and spiritually. RISE creates safe and inclusive spaces and programs that provide youth with opportunities to express their creative voice, develop artistic and innovative leadership skills, and build capacity for professional artistic practice, while encouraging them to work from a place of love, social consciousness and political engagement.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. ABOUT THE GROUP

- ▶ How did your organization get started?
- ▶ What has been the impact of your organization's work? What does your organization bring to the neighbourhood? What kinds of activities does your organization support: e.g. community barbeques, nature hikes?

2. ABOUT THE GROUP MEMBER/INTERVIEWEE

- ▶ How many years have you been part of this organization?
- ▶ What attracted you to start this group or join it?

3. ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY/RESIDENTS

- ▶ How would you describe your neighbourhood?
- ▶ What groups/sectors do you reach out to? Are you aiming for greater inclusivity and diversity?
- ▶ Are you aware of other groups you'd like to reach out to but don't have the capacity to do so?

4. CONNECTING TO ARTS/ARTISTS

- ▶ How did your organization become involved with Arts in the Parks? What do you think arts brings to parks? And parks to the arts?
- ▶ How does Arts in the Parks align with your organization's work?
- ▶ Of the arts groups that have worked in your park, which one really stands out?
- ▶ How can local/community organizations better support local artists?
- ▶ What is the biggest barrier to bringing arts into public spaces like parks?

5. SUPPORT FOR YOUR GROUP

- ▶ Did your organization receive any funding/honoraria to bring arts to your park? If so, was it adequate?
- ▶ If you had more funding, what would you use it for?
- ▶ Have you considered working with professional artists to apply for a Toronto Arts Council's [Animating Toronto Parks](#) grant?
- ▶ Do organizations in your neighbourhood support your group's work?

6. BENEFITS OF ARTS IN THE PARKS

- ▶ What are the benefits of Arts in the Parks to your community?
- ▶ What has been the reaction of residents to the arts programs in the parks?
- ▶ What kinds of artists would you like to see in your park?
- ▶ What advice would you like to give the Arts in the Parks team?

7. CONNECTIONS

- ▶ Before Arts in the Parks, had you ever heard of Toronto Arts Foundation or Toronto Arts Council?

APPENDIX 3: LOCAL ARTIST BIOS

Thunderclaw Robinson: Thunderclaw Robinson is a singer and poet with a strong focus on lyricism and vocal proficiency. In 2018 he was the Co-Captain of the Bam! Youth Poetry Slam Team that went on to win the Louder Than a Bomb Toronto Championships. He has traveled to various cities across North America to share his music and poetry on stages and radio stations.

Lexxicon: Hip-Hop artist Lexxicon fluctuates between dancehall patois, R&B harmonies, and melodic rapping. Born in Jamaica, he moved to Birmingham, England, and then New York City before later settling in Toronto. Toronto is where Lexxicon found the drive, passion and tools to become a recording artist. He honed his talent in some of the city's talent incubators such as Urban Arts and R.I.S.E Edutainment. Lexxicon has brought his dynamic energy to live performances at Afro Fest, Kothu Fest, T-Dot Fest and the Culture Shock Block Party. The Toronto-based artist's electric sound comes from many influences, from Sean Paul and Lady Saw to Tory Lanez and Rihanna. He strives to push the boundaries of reggae music.

Jäjé: Jäjé is a multidisciplinary artist who aims to bring a fresh perspective to the Toronto arts scene through her versatility. As a professionally trained dancer, Jäjé's artistry also extends to singing, acting and her love of poetry. Her work over the years has ranged from film and television to staged productions and live musical performances. Her unique ethno-cultural perspective coupled with her artistic abilities allow for an intriguing intersection of art forms.

Yungstar Millz: Yungstar Millz is a poet and a rapper who resides in Scarborough. He's been writing poetry since a child and is influenced by Toronto artists who are not afraid to express themselves. He shares his life stories through his rapping skills.

ZeneSoul: ZeneSoul is an R&B and Neo-Soul artist from Brampton who uses music as her voice to tell stories and to empower those listening. Inspired by artists such as Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu and India Arie, ZeneSoul developed a love for Neo-Soul and R&B. She focuses heavily on lyrics and the message behind music, creating her sound around that. In March 2019, she released her first EP, WORTH. ZeneSoul uses music as a platform to tell the many stories of her life.

Ānaneę: Born in Toronto, Ānaneę is a multidisciplinary artist whose focus is to create an atmosphere of love, understanding, honesty and acceptance by transforming his human experience into music that connects and guides people through the nature of the universe.

Tracey Kayy: Tracey Kayy is a multidisciplinary musician based in Toronto. She is a singer, songwriter, rapper and spoken-word artist whose works touch on the difficulties and traumas within our society. Realities often ignored are brought to light by her musical compositions and she raises awareness by being a voice for multiple communities across the globe. Tracey Kayy is driven to connect with people from all walks of life through her writings and her music.

Eyeami: Lewis Manyenya, aka EYEAMI, is a multifaceted artist hailing from Harare, Zimbabwe, currently based in Toronto. By fusing the familiarity of African instruments and melodies with the influence of his new home, EYEAMI gives audiences a taste of a refreshing genre he hopes to pioneer called Afrobounce. Inspired by artists like Mr. Eazi, Mafikizolo and Childish Gambino, EYEAMI has impressed audiences with lively performances at events including Supafrik's annual show, the Way Home festival and ROM's Friday nights Live in Toronto. EYEAMI works to inspire others like him in their artistic aspirations and becoming immersed in the world of arts – especially youth from his home in Zimbabwe.

Alia: Alia is a queer Canadian R&B artist who is Jamaican raised. Alia is influenced by numerous artists including Adele, Lauryn Hill, Etta James and more. Her music fuses the genres of Jazz, Blues, Pop and Soul into a moody, modern R&B sound. Propelled by her passion for music and life experiences, Alia wrote Unhealthy Muse which earned her the Dave Rocks Demo Award, presented by the Musicians Knowledge Network. In 2019, her debut performance was a headlining engagement at Canadian Music Week.

APPENDIX 4: DESCRIPTIONS OF LOCAL ARTS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS (LASOS)

Scarborough Arts

Scarborough Arts serves the Scarborough community by developing, delivering and promoting innovative arts programming and cultural initiatives in collaboration and partnership with the community. Scarborough Arts brings artists to the community and community to the arts.

East End Arts

East End Arts serves the east end of Toronto, loosely defined as Sunrise Ave in the north, Victoria Park Ave to the east, Lake Ontario to the south and the Don Valley Parkway to the west. They provide inclusive arts programming and events to local communities including youth, newcomers, seniors and priority groups, and professional development opportunities to both emerging and established artists and arts organizations.

North York Arts

North York Arts is a non-profit registered charity created specifically to address the needs and interests of artists, arts organizations and residents based in North York, and whose purpose is to deliver on the City's social, economic and cultural goals outside of the downtown core.

Urban Arts

Urban Arts delivers programs, services and resources within the former City of York boundaries, with a focus on York South-Weston. Urban Arts is committed to building inclusive, engaged communities by enriching peoples' lives through the arts, culture and heritage.

Arts Etobicoke

Formed in 1973, Arts Etobicoke is one of the most established community arts councils in Canada. It supports established and aspiring artists of all ages and backgrounds with a broad variety of activities and services, including arts education, advocacy, community space and much more.

Lakeshore Arts

Lakeshore Arts was established in 1993 and serves south Etobicoke. The organization is dedicated to engaging all people using multidisciplinary art forms as a way of enriching lives and building inclusive, healthy communities in Toronto.

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P. 13 Julia Graham, by Leonora Buskin
P. 14 Arts Etobicoke, by Sean Howard
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Community Organizer portraits - Leonora Buskin

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