



Warming Hearts and Brightening Walls

The Art Galleries of 1515 Blanshard

A little over ten years ago

the Ministry of Health renovated a fifth-floor wing of its main building at 1515 Blanshard Street in downtown Victoria. After completion, staff found that the new, but bare walls needed something to brighten up them up.

Previously, an art group on the fourth floor of the ministry had established a gallery space to showcase art created by staff and their families. This model was proposed for the newly renovated fifth floor. This led to the creation of Gallery Five (named after the fifth floor), and the Gallery Five Art Group began curating and displaying two shows per year that run for five to six months each – Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter.

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Eleanor Kallio, senior policy analyst with the Ministry of Health

After organizing several shows, the Gallery Five Art Group found that they needed to expand the scope of artist participants in order to sustain the program. They began reaching out, initially to non-profit organizations in the neighbourhood, including Pacifica Housing, Our Place Society, the Cool Aid Society, the Garth Homer Association, and the MS Society. As it turned out, all the organizations contacted ran art programs for their clients, and they were keen to participate. As well, for many clients of the art programs, it was their first opportunity to display their work publicly.

This community outreach marked the second phase of development for Gallery Five, and shows now feature work by non-profit organizations, art collectives, individual artists, and art by ministry staff, their family and friends.



Local artist Jean Oliver stands next to her latest work on display in Gallery Five as part of the November 2019 Fall / Winter show.



Jordan Straker, "Medicine bag"



Evolving the gallery to include official openings



The next step in the gallery's evolution was to begin holding an official "opening" for each of the shows, inviting artists and staff to come and meet each other, talk about the art, and share refreshments.

For the group, this growing connection with the community is heartening – over the years, the gallery has developed a strong relationship with the art community, and it benefits both staff and artists. Staff enjoy and appreciate their enhanced workplace, and artists value the opportunity to hang their work, gain exposure, and connect with staff. Sales are not the focus of the displays, but several works have been sold, as staff fall in love with particular pieces.

The last show display that Gallery Five held was in November 2020 – 'Number Twenty,' which was a celebration of its 20th show, and featured 20 artists and 86 works, and was immensely popular with the staff who were still in the office at the ministry.

While COVID-19 has certainly changed the workplace environment, it seems to only make the gallery displays that much more necessary. "Having art in the workplace is really important, especially during COVID-19, as it really lifts the staff's spirit to have colour on the walls," highlights Eleanor Kallio, senior policy analyst with the ministry, and coordinator of the Gallery Five Art Group.

The group met the challenge of COVID-19 with true creativity to open its 2020 Spring/Summer show. A gala opening had been planned to celebrate its 10th anniversary, but plans were put on hold that March, when it became clear that gatherings would not part of the public health plan. All 24 artists who had signed up were still eager to go ahead, so once the art was

dropped off individually, a small group of community and staff volunteers hung the 95 works. A first-ever video tour was made of the show, in place of an opening. It featured interviews with several of the artists, art group members, and a short 'cameo' appearance from Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry. The 'Power of Art' show was shared with all ministry staff via the intranet in June 2020.

Gallery Five recently put up their Fall/Winter display, aptly titled 'The Healing Power of Art,' with several new artists showcased, including an extensive display of 30 quilts. As Kallio notes, "the theme was chosen by the group to reflect the challenges we've all been facing with COVID-19, and the ability of art to restore and heal." The popularity of Gallery Five has led to other areas of the ministry wanting art on their floors, and there are gallery spaces on the second and sixth floors, as well as in the main lobby.



Valerie Rogers, "2020 KCS Mice"

Dr. Henry's contributions to the latest displays

Dr. Henry has a personal love of art and is a supporter of local artists. She has received several original pieces of artwork made by citizens from all over the province, expressing their appreciation and gratitude for all the work she and her staff have been doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The collection includes paintings, portraits, quilts, tile work, and a beaded medicine bag. Two of the artists are just 10 years old: one created a painting of a health-care worker to inspire them to fight harder against COVID-19, while the other sent a pair of hand-decorated sneakers for "Dr. Bonnie." Many of the works were accompanied by photos, cards, and letters of personal thanks.

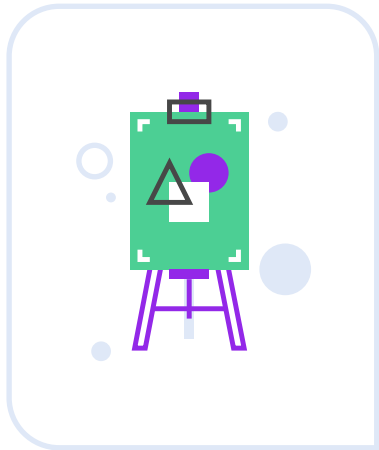
Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Henry's staff, the Gallery Five Art Group, and community volunteers, an exhibit of two dozen of these works has been hung in the hallway that leads to the Provincial Health Office. The most recent addition features a giant "gratitude collage" of dozens of the thank you cards that Dr. Henry has received. The display, 'Be Kind. Be Calm. Be. Safe: An Art Show Tribute to Dr. Bonnie Henry has been incredibly

well-received by staff who are working at the building. The show has recently been extended to April 2021, because in the words of one of Dr. Henry's staff: "it brings happiness."

As Dr. Henry emphasized, while taking her own 'art walk' through Gallery Five, "It is so special to have art in the workplace, as it has been a challenging few months...so being able to bring some beauty back into the office, as people come back, is a really important thing."



Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry takes a stroll through Gallery Five's quilt showcase, as part of the Fall/Winter display 'The Healing Power of Art.'



Artwork by: Elfrida Schragen

