

# Cultural Distancing

Artistic endeavours return as the pandemic persists

On a rainy night in September, the Charlotte Street Arts Centre in downtown Fredericton opened its doors and welcomed a crowd, a tentative step forward into a post-pandemic world. The rain sounded like bullets against the concrete as it pounded against it. Nobody would have blamed the attendees for staying home that day; but they made it to the Charlotte Street Art Centre regardless of the rain.

The Charlotte Street Art Centre was host to Fredericton's first annual horror festival: Morbid Curiosities from September 22 to 26; the 25<sup>th</sup> was host to the festival's Jekyll & Hyde Market. It was a market for local collectors, artists and small businesses to share the odd art, fashion, collectibles and alternative work. It was fairly busy with customers browsing items or just socializing with the vendors.

The vendors ranged from selling spooky photography, tarot card readings, custom-made pins and buttons, another vendor named Necrochet which made and sold hand-made and often spooky crochet creations, and an antique store which set up a table of goods. Walking around and browsing each table left many attendees chatting openly with the vendors; it was like an informal gathering of hobbyists and friends all under one roof. The thing they had in common, aside from their love of horror and the alternative scene was in spite of everything going against this event whether it is the weather or the risks posed with the COVID-19 pandemic, they persevered and the event carried on.

Morbid Curiosities, like other art ventures during the pandemic, found itself faced with the realities of the COVID restrictions and having to hold an in-person event amidst an uncertain climate. [An August study by Statistics Canada](#) found that for profit performance art companies saw a drop of -63.9% of operating revenue in 2020 alone; non

profit companies dropped by -60.8%. [While the provincial government of New Brunswick invested a bit into arts and culture to sustain it in spite of the pandemic](#), it's a meagre amount compared to the lost profits and revenue many are facing.

Yet for Kayleigh Saad, fashion designer and part of the group Left-Hand Girls who created Morbid Curiosities, running the festival proved to be a welcome experience, “We planned it all summer long and tried to come up with a bunch of fun easy free things for people to do and it all came together really good.” When Saad came up with the concept New Brunswick was still in the yellow phase; there was some uncertainty when the province changed phases other whether it would still take place but it went on anyway. “The restrictions really only affected informal events; we already work with a number of immune-compromised people so our number one priority was keeping everyone safe regardless of the green phase or not.” Masks and distancing were already in place for the event with the vaccine mandate being the only thing to require some adjustment on their end.

Saad acknowledges that the vaccine requirement lowered their turnout; in one case, a group of three in line were checked for their proof of vaccination and had to get turned away because they couldn't show their proof of vaccination. Yet in spite of this and the event catering to a niche alternative crowd, it saw a healthy turnout with it exceeding Saad's expectations. Any proceeds that didn't cover the cost of hosting the festival went to the Indian Residential School Survivors Society.

While the Jekyll & Hyde Market made up the majority of the afternoon, come nightfall the auditorium was prepped for an all-ages metal show that ran in the evening. Admission cost 15 dollars and the same restrictions that were in place for the market

applied to the show. The music was loud, people were rocking out, and the auditorium was electric. It was hard to hear one even think over the sheer volume of the music blasting.

Amidst the darkness of the auditorium, one group attempted to form a mosh pit in spite of the restrictions. Almost immediately, Saad stepped in to ensure they would maintain a safe distance from each other, “We are not even letting half-capacity in here and most of these people are already in a safe bubble with each other. I’ve been going up to them myself and been going ‘Hey, maybe watch your elbows a bit more because not everyone is comfortable with that.’ It’s only been a couple of people who I’ve had to go up to.”

By the first intermission, they had to stop letting people into the auditorium because of the lowered capacity; the show was easily hitting the capacity limits in spite of the pandemic and the crowd spoke for themselves. Saad and other organizers are already discussing the prospect of holding the festival in 2022.

A notable name amidst the event-goers was Picaroons, a local brewing company and roundhouse located on Fredericton’s Northside. Not only did they provide drinks and catering for the metal concert but they had dabbled in other ventures with artists and creators around Fredericton. One of these events was Paint & a Pint, a bi weekly “paint and sip event” held at the Picaroons Roundhouse.

October 19<sup>th</sup> was the complete opposite of the rainy evening that had surrounded the Charlotte Street Art Centre. The gloomy downpour had been replaced with a pleasant sunset as the autumn season had come into full swing. A pleasant chill was in the air on

Fredericton's Northside. It only amplified the warmth of the interior of the Picaroons Roundhouse.

Picaroons proved to be lively as customers dined, drank and enjoyed their evening on the loud bar-side; yet just over to the right on the restaurant side of the bar was the quiet and laidback Paint & a Pint. There were only five people present for the event giving it a quiet and peaceful vibe. Paint & a Pint is essentially an art class; a subject is announced and those interested book a seat in advance to join in. Attendees paid \$50 per person to be take part and are provided with all the necessary supplies as well as their drink of choice.

Jim Middleton is the artist behind Paint & a Pint. Those that attend follow him along as he guides them through the acrylic painting for that session; at the end of the night they can choose to keep their work or Middleton will take it off their hands. The acrylic paint used in the event lets the paintings dry fast for attendees to be able to display almost immediately after finishing. Middleton's approach allows for people of all skill-levels to have fun painting and enjoying a drink in good company.

Middleton is a full-time artist, and Paint & a Pint is one of the many channels which he earns revenue through during the pandemic, "I was in a sales job and I got laid off in July of 2020." Middleton said. "That was when I decided I need to make the full push with my artwork because it's something I can control on my end."

In addition to Paint & a Pint, Middleton does commissions as well as live paintings, art classes, NFTs, and solo shows; taking on so many projects is how he sustains himself following COVID." "If I just did paintings and put them up for \$2000, \$3000 dollars and had to wait for them to sell it would be really hard." Middleton

explained. “The trick is having multiple channels of revenue and doing many different things. The more things you do, the easier it becomes.”

While there was some instability at first in finding a permanent location for Paint & a Pint, Middleton has settled in at Picaroons as well as with the ever-changing COVID protocols. Paint & a Pint usually see upwards of 67% capacity with a few exceptions; it depends on the subject of the painting on a given week. “I was gonna do a witch for last week and I didn’t have anyone sign up for it.” Middleton said. “I decided to do a harvest one tonight and it got people to come out.”

The attendees at Paint & a Pint were brought together through their common interest in painting in spite of the pandemic, and all of the external circumstances. It was easy to relax and follow along with Middleton’s lesson even if you weren’t an experienced painter. It helped them forget the pandemic and even the world outside the event for just a few moments.

From markets, to metal concerts to painting, Fredericton’s art scene is not only adapting to the pandemic, its thriving. Case in point was the first annual Freddy Fright Fest held in Downtown Fredericton; running from October 22<sup>nd</sup> all the way to Halloween Night, the Freddy Fright Fest was a haunted tour held by the Charlotte Street Art Centre and the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of New Brunswick (APEGNB) with the proceeds for the Freddy Fright Fest go towards Chimo, a crisis helpline located in Fredericton and available 24/7 for all New Brunswick residents.

. For those 10 days, downtown Fredericton was host to spooky decorations, Halloween music blasting, and a smoke machine all announcing the presence of the

haunted tour. Even without all those decorations and music, it was hard to miss the Freddy Fright Fest as the line to get inside almost went to the street.

Bookings for the Freddy Fright Fest were done online with attendees picking an allotted slot, paying for their ticket and then showing up at the designated period in order to get into the haunted tour. The tour on 29<sup>th</sup> was not only sold out, but the spaces for both the 30<sup>th</sup> and the 31<sup>st</sup> were extremely limited. One of the few remaining slots was at around 6 in the evening on the 30<sup>th</sup>; even then, the line to go through the tour stretched around the interior of the tent that served as an entrance and out to the curb.

It took at least half an hour from a booked time to get into the tour; attendees were warned to mind their step, their heads, to avoid touching any of the characters and that the characters would not touch them and were fully masked, and that they were encourage to scream. Making one's way through the 12-minute tour revealed a dark and foreboding interior filled with frightening characters, areas inspired by both classic and modern horror and a whole host of scares. The tour could make even the hard to scare jump a few times; although, some groups didn't take to the experience that well based off their screams.

The Freddy Fright Fest was the culmination of a haunted tour previously done by the Charlotte Street Art Centre itself as well as the annual Nightmare on Smythe Street event; with the pandemic already being a challenge, the parties behind both events merged them into one and created the Freddy Fright Fest. Courtney Steves, executive director of the Charlotte Street Art Centre, explained how while the first few days had a smaller turn out given the circumstances, it quickly ramped up, "Once the word got out our ticket sales just went nuts because its such an awesome haunted house." Courtney

said. “People are just really happy to be a part of something that’s safe and fun and interesting so to put on an event that people feel really comfortable in and has built-in distancing has made things really smooth.”

While it has been difficult for the Charlotte Street Art Centre to host events amidst the pandemic, having to cut down their audience capacity to only a third of the maximum, Courtney is grateful they even can host events in the first place. “We’re still providing the arts to the community and that’s our goal.” Courtney said. “We’re happy just to be able to do it.”

It’s similar to what Jim Middleton said about having multiple flows of revenue; the Charlotte Street Art Centre had helped organize the Freddy Fright Fest and had hosted Morbid Curiosities a month apart from each other. Picaroons hosted Middleton’s Paint & a Pint while also providing drinks and such during the Morbid Curiosities metal concert. These events were interconnected because they shared two things in common: the arts and that allowed people to forget about the outside world and the pandemic if only for a brief time.

Whether it was the curiosities of the Jekyll & Hyde market, the thumping music and crowd of the metal concert, the quiet and chilled-out atmosphere of Paint & a Pint, or the scares and spooks of the Freddy Fright Fest, they each persevered and went on in spite of the pandemic, reduced capacities, and trying to find an audience during a time where less people are going out. In spite of everything going against them, these events managed to succeed in a period where arts and culture are seeing major drops in revenue because of COVID. “We’re just gonna roll with it.” Kayleigh Saad said through the loud music playing in the auditorium. “It’s the only thing we can really do.”

