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abilities

CANADA'S LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



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MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

DISABILITY AND
BODY ART

YOUR GUIDE
TO SPRING &
SUMMER
SPORTS

PLUS:
CREATING
SACRED SPACES

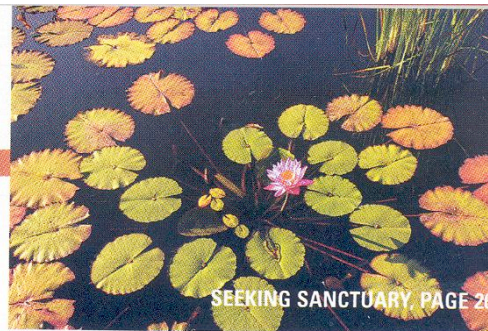
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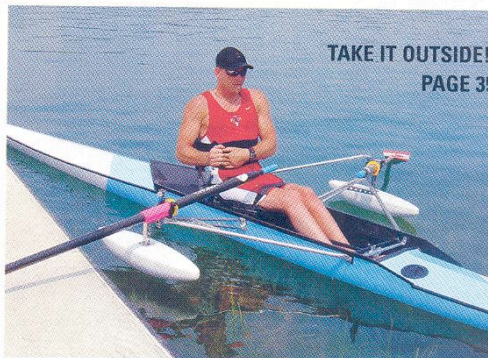
Paralympian Jeff Adams

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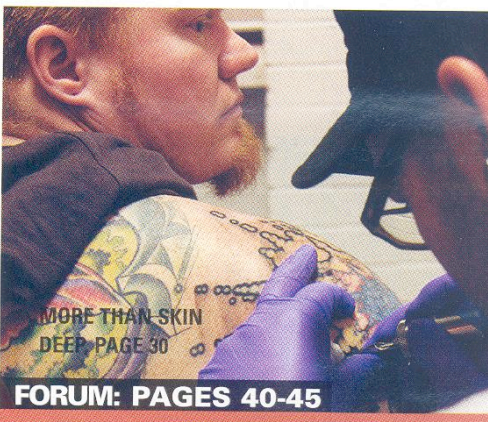
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COVER: Photo of Jeff Adams by Liz Rubincam (www.lizrubincam.com).

STRETCHING CREATIVITY

Inspiring Students to Create Accessible Art

THE RICH DIVERSITY OF Canadian culture is reflected through its vast variety of cultural collections. Several organizations have been working toward the exhibition and exchange of cultural content online. However, not all such initiatives are accessible to people with disabilities in a meaningful and seamless manner. Stretch and CulturAll are two multi-partner initiatives led by the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre at the University of Toronto to create opportunities for making online cultural content and exchange more inclusive of people with disabilities. The Winter 2005 issue of ABILITIES Magazine included details about these projects in the article "Making the Arts Accessible." Below are some details on how these projects have unfolded.

INCLUSION AND CREATIVITY

One of the many objectives of Stretch has been to collect and present, in a compelling and interactive way, a collection of Canadian cultural works on the theme "Perspectives on Inclusion." An artists' workshop was held on the theme "Inclusion as a Catalyst for Creativity" with a view to sensitizing artists to the possibilities of stretching their art. Captioning and audio description were explored as tools for creativity to provide a multi-sensory experience to the audience, quite as envisioned by the musical group ABBA in their song "I Let the Music Speak": "I'm hearing images, I'm seeing songs, No poet has ever painted..."

STRETCH IN SCHOOLS

Another approach taken by Stretch has been to catch the artists young – while they are still in school – and give them the message of inclusive design. This has been possible through collaboration with seven enthusiastic teachers of visual and media arts classes in three schools that are partnering in the project. A number



The Meeting

of events were conducted as part of Stretch with artists, educators and students to discuss issues related to inclusion and the arts. Artists with lived experiences of disability spoke with students about their perspectives on inclusion and how they integrated art into their lives.

Questions were posed to students of visual and media arts to get them thinking, including: For whom do artists create art? How do they perceive their audiences? Would they want to reach out to people in ways they had not considered? They were motivated to think creatively about inclusion as part of their creation process rather than as an afterthought. They were exposed to ideas such as the "curb-cut" metaphor to illustrate how some design changes benefit people other than those for whom they were originally intended. The "curb-cut" metaphor signifies that accessibility provisions such as curb-cuts (ramps on sidewalks) that were designed to help people on wheelchairs are also being used by skateboarders, cyclists and people with baby carriages.

The teachers took great pleasure in stretching their curriculum and motivat-

ing their students to produce exquisite pieces of art that express inclusion. Stretch team members trained the students in an open source software program called CapScribe for captioning and audio describing movie files. The students created digital versions of sculptures and paintings and made them accessible by adding captioning and audio description. They explored novel ideas and themes to make films and videos accessible. Over 100 student art works are ready for exhibition. These will also be hosted in their digital form on the Stretch website.

MULTIPLYING THE LEARNING

Educational resources are being created as part of Stretch. An interactive game is being created using the themes of artists with disabilities and First Nations culture. One of the partnering schools is producing "how-to" DVDs for teachers to share experiences with other schools. These DVDs will talk about initiating students of art into thinking about inclusion and provide the tools and training for putting such ideas into practice.

Stretch is about expanding the world of art, artists and audience such that each gives more to the others. By conveying their art across a variety of media and modalities, artists make better connections with their audience. The Stretch project will technically be completed by the end of March, but its spirit and momentum will continue to fuel the movement of embracing inclusion as a catalyst for creativity.

THE DE-BA-JEH-MU-JIG JOURNEY

Artists with disabilities and First Nations artists spent a week together on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, to examine the challenges, experiences and strategies they share, and to represent their experience as a performance piece. Leesa Levinson, one of the participat-



STRETCH

CulturAll 

ing artists, recounts her experience:

"Anni (means hi in Ojibway)! I am an actor who uses a wheelchair. I am a participant in Stretch, which is evolving fantastically. A group of artists in wheelchairs have taken a long journey up to cold and picturesque Manitoulin Island and are paired up with Aboriginal artists from the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group. The objective of this particular event is inclusion.

We were asked to create a three-to five-minute original piece about each of our communities. This is also about making art accessible. We learned about many barriers and language issues that each community faces, as well as oral history. We have exchanged knowledge of our differences and similarities. We are learning about each others' experiences of prejudice, stereotypes, barriers and challenges to overcome.

The city folk were graciously hosted by the Rainbow Lodge, tasting wonderful food and meeting kind, compassionate people. This was one trip I will never forget. I have been fortunate to share time and learn with the people of the First Nations of the Wiki Reserve. Many in the community let us into their culture and world for a week.

As artists, my partner and I exchanged stories and laughed about myths. Our original idea morphed over the week and through artistic formats, from live theatre to video to writing.

This artistic experience is not over yet! The second half of this story will bring our friends to Toronto in February for completion of all of our projects, which will be shared amongst all via website and television."

CULTURALL

A related project, the CulturAll Network, is a national multi-sector network developing innovative approaches, tools and strategies to ensure that everyone in

Canada can participate in the Canadian cultural exchange. The CulturAll Network is ensuring that inclusive design becomes a naturally integrated component of Canadian cultural production and acts as a catalyst for innovation and creativity. Through pioneering exemplars, the network is reaffirming that advances that benefit people with disabilities also benefit all Canadians.

CulturAll encompasses seven projects overall, three of which are described here.

Artists as Innovators

This project will engage cultural and new media producers, artists and students in a number of events, workshops and contests to address the inclusive design challenges of online cultural content and new media. These workshops and events will be moderated in part by people with disabilities, including artists. These workshops will also be used to disseminate and evaluate tools and processes developed in the other projects within the network. The project will also include new media projects exploring human perception, senses and views of self and others, to include people with disabilities.

Intersections

Access strategies developed to make culture online accessible to people with disabilities also benefit individuals who find the web environment difficult to access due to cultural differences. To date, online environments presume comfort and competence with a print or text culture. However, oral communication is the communication means of choice among most native Canadian cultures. Individuals with print disabilities, such as dyslexia, also benefit from oral communication. Through collaboration between the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group, the Learning Disabilities Resource Community

and the Ryerson Disability Studies Program, the project will explore how online environments can be designed to benefit both people with disabilities and people who are more comfortable in an oral tradition. One of the things the project will create is a website that showcases and advances Ojibway art and culture. The website will explore the use of web objects that provide multilingual oral access to information within the constraints of standard computer workstations.

Integrated Cultural and New Media Production Workflow and Practices

This project will show how a standard production company or team can integrate inclusive design into their everyday practices. The project is based on the premise that if artists or producers more broadly define their audience to include individuals with a variety of abilities during the design and production phase of their work, they are likely to produce a richer experience, and inclusive design will be more naturally integrated. Building upon a successful pilot, the project will develop multiple episodes of the Web version of the TV cartoon *Odd Job Jack* with audio descriptions seamlessly integrated into the narration. The project will explore the cultural and business implications of this approach. The lessons learned from *Odd Job Jack* will be applied to other productions.

If you are interested in participating in CulturAll as a tool evaluator or focus group participant, call the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre at 416-978-4360 or visit <http://culturall.atrc.utoronto.ca>. To participate in Stretch as a mentor to a young artist, send an e-mail to info@abilities.ca.

Both Stretch and CulturAll are funded by the Government of Canada through the Canadian Culture Online program of Canadian Heritage.