Robin Sutherland is the founder of Thinking Rock Community Arts, a non-profit organization based in Thessalon, Ontario. Thinking Rock creates spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding through multigenerational, cross-cultural projects with First Nations and rural communities in the Algoma District. All photos are used with permission from Thinking Rock Community Arts. For the latest info about Thinking Rock, please visit www.thinkingrock.ca.

ArtBridges spoke with Robin Sutherland of Thinking Rock Community Arts about starting up community arts initiatives in rural and First Nations community contexts. We talked about training and networking, resources and funding, working with community, and some of the challenges along the way. Read on for five great tips from Robin and the story behind how Thinking Rock got started!

**Top Five Tips for Rural Community Arts Start-Ups**

**1. Creatively Connect to Resources**

There are not a lot of formal supports in rural and FNMI communities for the kind of work we are doing. There are a lot of supports for for-profit startups and science and tech startups, but not for nonprofit, arts-based projects. Be creative and reach out to other sectors. Business supports are important if you are talking about starting up an organization. You will need resources related to financial management, incorporating and bylaws. We received sample bylaws from five or six organizations that were willing to share them. Having something like ArtBridges is important — a resource to see what is happening in other places and connecting. An awareness of what other people are doing with this work is helpful in terms of motivation.

*FNMI: First Nations, Métis, Inuit*
2. Develop Skills for Working with Community

If you are drawn to doing this kind of work, there is a good likelihood that you have some of the basic skills that are needed. What I think is most important is having self-awareness, and an awareness of the role you play when you enter a space; how you might be perceived based on the different kinds of privilege that you carry. There’s a certain amount of genuine friendliness, going forward with a smile and kindness, that can go a long way.

Educate yourself about the context you are in; listen to people. Create relationships with people. For me it was about relationships with a lot of younger First Nations people I went to high school with. So we had trusting relationships and they could say to me, “Just so you know...this is how things are, this is why things are challenging.” Just describing the reality of the situation — it’s important to get to that point. At least having an awareness of the bigger context that exists here and not being ignorant of that is important. There’s local learning and there’s also just doing your own research into the history of a place, or of Canada. Do your own research into what’s happened and how people are affected.

3. Find People on the Same Wavelength

Go out to community events. What else is happening in the community? Be in those places. For me, I was from this community, so I had existing personal connections — people I knew who would be receptive. Start with those kinds of connections. Send an email first to outline a bit of what you’re thinking of doing and what your intentions are. If it’s someone you don’t know already, don’t be afraid to reach out. You might think, “You’re such an important person in this field! Who am I?” — but people really are interested in those conversations. When meeting people for the first time I might say, “Well this is someone who would get it.” Then I would invite them to go for tea. Being able to have an in-person conversation with someone is ideal. People would then introduce me to someone else and it would go from there. You need what you are doing to be community-informed — you can’t go in and say, “This is exactly what I want to do and this is how it’s going to look.”

4. Build a Good Team

Surround yourself with a really good team of people who can support each other. It’s what has made us so successful — it’s such a community thing. You have to have a really good base of support and people working together. I rely on a lot of people every day in different ways! There have been times when I thought someone was going to be a good ally and then they ended up
really not being there. Follow your own intuition about who those people are — it could end up being an unlikely person.

5. Avoid Burnout - Do Less!

With one of my mentors, you can send her an email at any time and she'll respond to it! But there's also a point at which you say, "How do you sustain that level of energy?" — and that's just how she is. She can maintain that, but I need a lot more rejuvenation time. Be aware of your own boundaries and don't think, "Oh, I have to be like this person," or "I have to be giving one hundred percent, one hundred percent of the time." You get to the point where you are becoming a martyr and it just destroys you — and then you are no good to anyone. Be rigorously defensive of your personal time!

The Story Behind Thinking Rock

How did you know this initiative was needed by the community?

Growing up in a rural community myself, and one in close proximity to reserves, the small town and reserve relationship was in my life from a young age. This made me very aware of the challenges that young people face growing up in that context. I was always interested in arts as a form of expression — the more I got involved with it, the more I saw it as a way of bringing people together. When I was in high school, we made it to the provincial drama festival, which is unheard of for a community of our size. It was a really amazing experience. When we got to the final stage, the adjudicator asked if I was pursuing a career in drama. Growing up in a rural community, you don't really see the arts as an option — that is not the kind of message you are usually given. So that was the moment when I said, "I'm going to change my direction."

I chose the arts because I had that empowering experience. In school, I came across arts for social change and people like charles c. smith and d'bi young really opened my eyes to how
the arts are political. I heard about Jumblies Theatre. I was into the idea of arts and social justice, and bringing that back to the rural community I came from was always my end goal. I worked in arts nonprofits in Toronto for a few years, and I did my Master’s thesis about Blind River. That was my first time running an arts project in a rural community. It confirmed for me that this kind of work is really necessary and impactful, and I thought, “Ok, I’m going to do that.”

**What mentorship and training prepared you for this work?**

I reached out to Jumblies and said, “I’m really interested in doing this work.” I had no idea how to go about making it happen. Community arts is a particular way of working with communities - it needs a specific skill set; it’s not just about developing an organization. I did the professional theatre training with Jumblies and Theatre Ontario. I was able to spend a year observing and training with them. I got training on incubating an organization. I quit my job at Arts Network for Children and Youth and said, “I’m going to do this.” It was a huge leap of faith!

**What groups or networks did you connect with from the start?**

We connected mostly with individuals, because our work is very grassroots and there are not a lot of organizations involved in grassroots approaches in rural communities. We connected with some social service delivery groups, and Municipalities and First Nations. I connected with Phyllis Novak at SKETCH, and the YSI Network. With the people in Algoma I wanted to work with, I was finding out the needs in the community, connecting with other youth organizers, and getting a sense of likely allies. I was watching and learning that year.

**How can you tell when things are working well?**

We know it’s working well when we see people of different cultural backgrounds and ages physically working together on something - like building a giant puppet. Elders from town and reserves were sitting together sewing the scales, kids who didn’t know each other before were painting the cardboard frame that would become our giant river serpent. This was all being led by a team of young artists from inner city Toronto, alongside local artists from the middle of nowhere. Just a wild mix of people who otherwise would never meet, coming together to create together, and having fun. You can tell they are feeling like they are all part of something together. When you step back in the middle of a workshop and the whole space is messy, and buzzing, and people are totally into what they are making or doing — it’s a very natural and original way of being together and creating together, and something that is missing in most of our everyday lives. It’s so old it seems new! And then of course we hand out surveys and have check-ins afterwards and people tell us things like they feel like they are part of a community, like this is the most fun they’ve had in a long time, that they learned things about this area they never knew before.

**Where did you get your first funding from?**

I was lucky to get support incubating the project from the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) Agents of Change program, which provided training in starting a social enterprise and also free desk space at CSI. At the same time I got funding from Theatre Ontario’s Professional Theatre Training Program to support my living costs while training in community art practice with Ruth Howard of Jumblies Theatre. I also applied to the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) Creator’s Reserve to get things off the ground.
In 2013 our founding funders, the Laidlaw Foundation and the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, came in to support the Rivers Speak pilot project. Both of these were available to me because I was a 'youth' — I was 28 when I started Thinking Rock. I partnered with Jumblies to access the money, since Thinking Rock wasn’t yet incorporated as a nonprofit. Other funding came from OAC’s Artist in the Community and Northern Arts programs.

We did a few workshops early on and charged registration fees for those as well, so there was some earned revenue. And I did a few consulting contracts for various regional and provincial groups. We also accessed some funding through different employment programs, like Employment Ontario and Metis Nation, to hire staff on a short term basis. So there were a few different revenue streams coming in from the beginning. Being a youth and being able to position it as an arts-based, youth-led social enterprise startup in Northern Ontario was helpful!

What major challenges did you face as a start up?

Our funding is all project-based and so you end up with an overall budget of $150,000 that is made of little chunks and you have to manage each source of funding individually. The admin burden of that is challenging. It’s also important to note that I wasn’t able to access any local funding — groups like Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation and the Economic Development Corporation wouldn’t fund us because we were setting up as a nonprofit social enterprise. So that was — and remains — a barrier.

There was definitely a point of burnout. It was the result of the challenges of developing an organization and building infrastructure — especially financial management. Coupling that with cross-cultural work and the vicarious trauma we were encountering…if you develop trust, you are going to be hearing things that are hard to hear. Also, we had to navigate conflicting protocols within and across First Nations communities. We are a young team - we are all in our early thirties or younger, so we are just learning about how to do this work. We are making mistakes and learning from them as we go.

Start Ups in Rural & FNMI* Communities was compiled by Skye Louis.
For more insights from Robin Sutherland, check out these reflections on the ArtBridges site:

Community Arts and Social Change in Rural Northern Ontario (Master’s Thesis)
Inspiration and Trepidation: Starting a Community Arts Organization
Where It Started
Different Stories, Common Experiences

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