



WE THINK WE CAN, WE THINK WE CAN! **The little museum that could**

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A long road to progress

The Port Coquitlam Heritage and Cultural Society (PoCo Heritage) formed in 1988 to advocate for the preservation of Port Coquitlam's (PoCo) history and heritage. In the early years, PoCo Heritage's passionate and dedicated volunteers focused their efforts on preserving heritage homes and buildings in the city and participating in community outreach events; however, they had their sights set on a much bigger goal — to open PoCo's first museum. Their advocacy work in the community was recognized and rewarded by the City of Port Coquitlam (City) in the form of storage space for a budding collection in 1997, a small heritage display center in 1999, and a community archives in 2007.

Proud of what they had achieved during their first two decades, the Board and members of PoCo Heritage proceeded with their plan to open and operate PoCo's first proper museum. The perfect opportunity presented itself in the lead up to the city's centennial celebrations, and a collaborative project was undertaken to make this dream a reality. On March 7, 2013, Port Coquitlam's Centennial Anniversary of Incorporation, the PoCo Heritage Museum and Archives opened its doors to the community.

Residing in the very heart of Downtown PoCo, the volunteers running the museum desired to be a place where stories connect in their community. The Board and society members worked together to staff the museum, provide answers to local questions and access to the growing archives, and

"May Day 2017"
- PoCo Heritage
marches in the
annual May Day
parade which is a big
deal in PoCo.

Tree pose under the canopy of the Carol Hubbard Memorial Natural History Exhibit: *The Secret Life of Trees*.
Photo credit: Kelly Brown.

organized displays, workshops, and speakers. The museum became the meeting place for PoCo Heritage's membership, and the site of many community events.

Along with these successes, PoCo Heritage's Board and members also faced significant challenges. The management of the museum was very difficult as no single volunteer oversaw and organized the required day-to-day staffing and activities. In addition, after the community's initial excitement about the museum's opening, PoCo Heritage spent years struggling to engage the public outside of their membership. As a result, the museum became an insular members-only club, instead of the thriving community space and resource it was envisioned to be.

In 2015, funding provided by the City allowed PoCo Heritage to hire a part time employee to help with society and museum administration. In subsequent years, this funding has increased to enable PoCo Heritage to support one full time employee.

The winds of change

The confluence of two events in early 2017 shifted PoCo Heritage from an insular community group to a thriving little museum that could. The Board identified the need for a clear, succinct mission and vision for both the Society and the museum, and made arrangements to begin the process of creating a unified strategic plan. Around the same time, PoCo Heritage hired Kelly Brown, their first full time museum professional, as Museum Coordinator (now Manager and Curator) to support the Board and enact the many operational changes that have occurred over the past two years.

Together, the PoCo Heritage Board and staff have implemented fundamental changes to the structure and operations of the Society and museum using a from-the-ground-up perspective. The following four principles guided PoCo Heritage to become a place of exploration, engagement, and connectivity within their community.





PoCo Heritage Museum and Archive's Carol Hubbard Memorial Natural History Exhibit: *The Secret Life of Trees* exhibit tour with the kindergarten and Gr 1 classes from Rochester Elementary School. Photo credit: Kelly Brown

Have a plan

The greatest investment your institution can make in itself is to have a strategic plan.

The PoCo Heritage Board identified that it would be impossible to make lasting positive changes within the museum if they didn't have a strong foundation upon which to build. They selected Vantage Point, a British Columbia based company that specializes in capacity building for not-for-profits, to lead them through the process of creating a strategic plan. Over a period of six months, the Board and staff developed a succinct two-page strategic plan, which included clear vision and mission statements, core values, and organizational priorities. Operational work procedures were developed to support this strategic plan and enable the museum to transform into an engaging and professional community space.

Be engaging

PoCo Heritage strives to be a place where people and stories connect within our community to create lasting positive experiences. As such, increasing and diversifying community participation was identified as a priority. This has included complementing the in-person connections our members make at community events by boosting our social media presence. Our digital outreach campaign has been a simple, effective way to share, be visible to, and engage with our community.

PoCo Heritage has received an overwhelmingly positive response to this approach. More consistent communication with the community has resulted in new and exciting opportunities in the form of collaborations with community groups, businesses, and City staff. The measurable outcomes of these collaborations include improved exhibit, event, and programming quality and content, and a visible increase in community interest in, and overall engagement with, our organization.

PoCo Heritage's museum exhibits have also become more relevant and creative by partnering with community groups. Our current exhibit, *Naturally PoCo*, showcases photographs of Port Coquitlam taken by passionate community photographers. The wider audience attracted to this exhibit has enabled PoCo Heritage to book public tours, and develop additional events and programming, including a *Creating Art With Nature* workshop.

PoCo Heritage Manager and Curator Kelly Brown unveiling Port Coquitlam's Historical Continuum with Kwikwetlem First Nation Councillor Fred Hulbert and Planning Coordinator Kelsey Taylor.
Photo credit: Port Coquitlam Heritage and Cultural Society.

Be a resource

PoCo Heritage is the only community organization focused on preserving and sharing PoCo's history and heritage. As such, the Board wanted to make sure that the museum space and collection items which document the community's milestones, memories, records, and objects were more accessible.

We look for spaces where we can be of service to our community.

The first step towards improving accessibility was to connect with local educators and students. Offering guided exhibit tours and activities to School District No. 43 classes saw a rise in school-age participation from a couple dozen annually to over 500 students! The educators indicated that they were happy with PoCo Heritage's efforts to tailor the information presented in each tour to their curriculum learning objectives, as this made the museum and exhibits more relevant to students.

PoCo Heritage also connected with the home learner groups and discovered that they often struggle to find community spaces where they can focus on group learning and research projects. PoCo Heritage jumped at the opportunity to offer the use of their space. In addition, PoCo Heritage volunteers and staff offer professional development events and workshops for teachers, students, and parents. Connecting directly with community educators and identifying their needs has created many new opportunities to serve our community.

A museum's collection is one of its most valuable resources, and in early 2017, PoCo Heritage prioritized making its collection as accessible as possible. The purchase of museum collection software has initiated a digitization program with an end goal of sharing collection items online through our website. The most common research requests PoCo Heritage receives relate to PoCo's heritage buildings (many of which are no longer standing), and archival photographs. This information is ideal for sharing with a broader audience online.





PoCo Heritage Museum and Archive's current exhibit, *Naturally PoCo*, explores Port Coquitlam's natural beauty through the lenses of community photographers!
Photo credit: Kelly Brown

Leverage what you already have

PoCo Heritage has operated on a shoestring budget for the majority of their 30 years. Frugal and thrifty to the bone, the PoCo Heritage Board knows how to stretch a dollar and make it count! When PoCo Heritage started to expand, they took stock of the resources and funds they already had, and leveraged those to make their dollars work a little harder. This included seeking out matching funds from project and programming assistance programs, including the Canada Summer Jobs Program and Canada 150 grants. PoCo Heritage also makes use of free online local and provincial (including the BCMA) calendars and event websites to promote exhibits and events, community meet-ups and roundtables to continue learning and sharing.

For small museums like ours in PoCo, a team of volunteers is absolutely essential for keeping the doors open. PoCo Heritage has been driven and supported by the hard work of approximately two dozen core volunteers over the past three decades. Without these dedicated community members, PoCo Heritage would not be the organization that it is today. However, volunteering is not just a one-way street. A strong volunteer program

that offers a variety of opportunities is also a wonderful way for museums to give back to the community. PoCo Heritage creates meaningful experiences for those who are looking to contribute to the community, as well as provides training and skills development opportunities for students and young professionals. PoCo Heritage now boasts a volunteer pool of at least twice that of earlier years, and many of the students and young professionals who have volunteered with the organization have pursued heritage related education opportunities and paid museum work.

The PoCo Heritage Museum and Archives is very proud of what we have achieved over the last two years. By stepping back and developing a plan, communicating with our community on a more consistent basis, sharing our resources with other community organizations and the public, and leveraging our assets, we have been able to transform and redefine our organization to become relevant to our community. We are still working towards our strategic priorities, but the progress we have made has encouraged us to continue working towards being the little museum that could!



KELLY BROWN