

# EVERYONE IS INVITED.

## Becoming a People’s Museum

**Colleen Sharpe**

Since the “Cabinet of Curiosity” model introduced three centuries ago, museums have become radically accessible. The creation of public museum buildings, many of which offer free admission or free admission days, online collections and virtual exhibitions have ensured public access for all – the museum is no longer an institution for researchers and elites, but for anyone who has a desire to explore and learn. For decades these museums have been

called on to be accessible to increasingly diverse communities. This is to ensure that public institutions become truly reflective of the people they serve so that all people can engage and participate. As a municipal museum, the Museum of Surrey has a mandate to represent and include Surrey citizens in the development of its exhibits and programs.

Opened in 2005, the Museum tells the historical and contemporary stories of Surrey residents. Exhibitions in the Museum aim to create interac-

tive, family-friendly spaces that reflect Surrey’s rich past, culturally diverse present and its future as a city of innovation and creativity. Currently the Museum is undergoing a \$15.8 million expansion that will add 12,000 square feet of space to the existing Museum. The new building has considered diversity in its very design and seeks to become a community hub. The expanded Museum will offer additional public spaces for special events, new gallery space for community-curated exhibits and celebrations, and importantly, an Indigenous Hall curated by Surrey’s Indigenous communities.

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Along with the expansion project, the Museum spent over a year developing its mission and strategic plan to truly declare its commitment to inclusion. Adopted in February 2017,



**Above:** *Urban Fabric: Patterns of Our Lives, Partial view of exhibition space and introduction panel. Guildford Town Centre, Surrey, June 2017. Photo credit: Colleen Sharpe*



**Above:** From the exhibit *Vimy Souvenirs* this image was part of the interpretive panel beside a display of a First World War wheelchair. Photo: American World War One Veterans at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C 1918, Courtesy of National Library of Medicine, USA.

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the Museum's mission is to "ignite imaginations and connect Surrey's diverse citizens and communities. [To] contribute to community life by celebrating Surrey's past, present and future through innovative, dynamic and delightful learning, storytelling, and creating shared experiences." The vision is to be the best people museum in Canada by connecting people, communities and stories.

But who are the Museum of Surrey's "people"? Communities are filled with endless layers and permutations of diversity like age, ethnicity, language, religion and sexual orientation. For example, Surrey has emerged as the primary destination for Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) in Metro Vancouver. In 2001, 37% of the Surrey population was a member of a visible minority; now more than half are from a visible minority, of which almost 60% are South Asian. With the City of Surrey

experiencing dynamic demographic change in its population, it is crucial that the Museum of Surrey reflect and engage these diverse populations. The Museum of Surrey must respond to this reality in programs and exhibits to hang the mirrors that reflect citizens and stakeholders.

In 2017 the exhibits department has had the opportunity to implement the Museum's new mission. Three of these recent exhibitions offer insights into how diversity can be used to define exhibit themes, content, and outreach.

## Vimy Souvenir

In April, the *First Collection of the Month* exhibition was launched. The goal of this new exhibit series is to display items from the collection on a monthly basis. The objects are selected in association with events and celebrations tied to the Surrey community.

*Vimy Souvenir*, was a collection of artifacts and archival documents that honored the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Included as a standalone display was a physically prominent artifact, a wheelchair used by a WWI veteran. This artifact offered an opportunity to connect to the contemporary story of persons with disabilities and offered a perspective on war that is unique and relatable. The wheelchair was displayed with a photo that depicted a wheelchair of the exact type with American veterans who had lost limbs during the First World War. The interpretive text told the story of the formation of the War Amps organization, and offered a connection between those veterans of The Great War who returned home with debilitating injuries, and all persons who have struggled with limited mobility.

## What We Bring

In conjunction with Canada's 150th anniversary, the exhibition *What We Bring* was mounted to celebrate

the people who formed this nation. Each of three 50-year periods summarized waves of immigration to Canada; key groups of immigrants, including refugees, were acknowledged. The introductory text read, "On Canada's 150th anniversary, it is important to remember that diverse waves of immigration have shaped the Canada of today - a vibrant mosaic of peoples." The exhibition moved beyond collection items to include items borrowed from Surrey residents. The exhibit contained items brought by immigrants when forced to choose from a lifetime in another country and told the story of that object. From practical to sentimental, the objects were focal points for powerful messages of culture, values, and family history. In addition to objects borrowed from the community, donors of items already in the collection were contacted to tell their stories in more detail. Highlights from community members included a dress from Delhi, work boots from an Italian immigrant, and a small booklet of the 1996 South African Constitution written in Swahili.

## Urban Fabric, Patterns of Our Lives

Thanks to a partnership with Guildford Town Centre, the Museum was able to reach into the geographic heart of Surrey. This busy shopping centre provided an opportunity to awaken Surrey to its Museum, and make contact with people who may

have never visited. The shopping centre is a mecca for people of many cultures and economic standing, including those with limited transportation options. *Urban Fabric, Patterns of Our Lives* consisted of six display cases, 40 objects, and fourteen foot tall enlargements of archival photos in a 200 foot linear space. The theme emphasized the value of unique individuals that come together to comprise a greater whole. The exhibition introduction reads "Single threads unite when woven and in joining become an object of strength and beauty. Likewise each of our lives forms a strand in a stronger, more engaged community." The text went on to relate this directly to Surrey stating: "You are invited to discover the treasures, stories, and people that have woven Surrey's urban fabric."

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The exhibit included a loaned Punjabi *lehnga* wedding dress that described South Asian immigration as well as Surrey's Punjabi Market. The dress was one of the most popular artifacts in the exhibit based on the attention it received. During a week

of installation, the exhibit team frequently engaged in conversations with visitors from the South Asian community looking at the dress. The reaction to the inclusion of this item, on display in a shopping centre, was one of surprise and delight.

Also included was a cassette tape of Sri Lankan band, *Rajeev and the Clan*, and several large archival images reflecting Surrey's diverse youth. After two months the exhibit underwent a revision to accommodate changes to the borrowed space. Additional images were selected such as a photo of two Sikh men outside the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara temple (1987). Another image, representing the 1960s, in Crescent Beach depicted two women and is titled "Couple Relaxing in the Sun". It is unknown if this image refers to a LGBT+ couple or if it is titled using a colloquial term from a by-gone era. It was selected purposely for its ambiguity because it offered a historic possibility and the potential to resonate and reflect an under-represented community.

## Future Plans

The Museum is planning for future exhibitions to foster inclusion and storytelling. The entrance to the history gallery will be revised for the 2018 reopening to emulate the attributes of a town square, an urban feature resonant with many world places as a gathering space. In this area, a "Show and Tell" wall will invite people to contribute their personal

family treasures. History exhibits will be revised gradually over time to ensure community members are involved and properly represented in the process. For example, a drum used in the Punjabi festival of Vaisakhi will be added to acknowledge Surrey's Vaisakhi parade as the largest outside of India.

Museum of Surrey programming will tell the stories of Surrey's communities through awareness, dialogue and collaboration. To improve awareness, portable exhibitions will travel to special events and the museum will continue to partner with organizations to reach new communities. Dialogue will be improved by seeking out conversations with community members – they will be invited to inform and curate exhibitions. The emphasis is to empower people to collaborate in the creation of exhibitions. In addition, a submissions policy and selection process will be developed that will invite community members to propose exhibitions.

The intent of Museum of Surrey's vision could be described as a Talking Stick. When matters of great concern came before a council, the leading elder would hold the Talking Stick and begin the discussion. The stick was passed from one individual to another until all who wished to speak had done so. In this way Museum of Surrey seeks to use the museum itself as the talking stick and provide a voice and empowerment to the communities of Surrey.

**Colleen Sharpe is Curator of Exhibitions at the Surrey Museum and has previously worked for Glenbow Museum, The Military Museums and The Nickle Arts Museum. She holds degrees in Museum Studies, Archeology and Heritage from the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa and from the University of Calgary.**



**Above:** Exhibit detail, *Urban Fabric: Patterns of Our Lives*, lengha wedding dress, Guildford Town Centre, Surrey.  
Photo credit: Colleen Sharpe