

Deaf Crows: Art opens up a different world for Regina students



Deaf Crows is a performance by youth from hard of hearing and deaf program at Thom Collegiate

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Deaf Crows will be performed one night only on Friday, June 17 at 7 p.m. CST at the Artesian on 13th Avenue in Regina. (Submitted by Joanne Weber)

The experience of growing up deaf or hard of hearing is a story that is rarely told.

For many people in Regina, being unable to communicate with your parents, friends, and the hearing world brings isolation. But now, the youth from the hard of hearing and deaf program at Thom Collegiate in Regina are speaking out.

They are sharing their personal narratives through art in a play called *Deaf Crows*.

- [Deaf community feels marginalized in Saskatchewan, says human rights report](#)

Chrystene Ells, director of the play, told CBC's *The Afternoon Edition* it's been an amazing experience and a big learning curve.

"I'm a hearing person, and I don't have a background in sign language interpreting or anything like that," Ells said. "But I am a puppeteer and a longtime physical theatre director and performer, and a mime. And so a lot of the visual performance work that I've done in my life has kind of folded into this project."

'A pretty crazy' experience in a 'different world'



Chrystene Ells said the play Deaf Crows is highlighting the lack of services for deaf education in Saskatchewan. (Submitted by Joanne Weber)

When Ells stepped into the program, she said she didn't realize what a "different world" it would be for her.

"It's been humbling," she said. "It's been really exciting, and it's been really emotional. Overall, uplifting and a really positive experience."

Ells said her experience in the program at Thom has highlighted the lack of services for deaf education in Saskatchewan.

"A lot of deaf children in Saskatchewan, a number of them, grow up actually language deprived. And this happens when they don't have full access to either ASL — that's American Sign Language — or speech training."

- [Deaf teen leaves rural community for fresh start in Regina school](#)

According to Ells, language deprivation begins when kids are at a young age. She said by kindergarten, they can be "one to two years behind their peers in terms of just speaking and communicating."

By the time they graduate to high school, she said, they can be up to 10 years behind.

"Some of the students that we are working with are really delayed in terms of being able to read and communicate, speak and sign," Ells said.

Art opening up a new world





The youth from the hard of hearing and deaf program at Thom Collegiate in Regina are performing a play called *Deaf Crows*. (Submitted by Joanne Weber)

Deaf Crows has been a revelation for everyone involved.

"The students are learning how to use art to communicate with, and it's also sparking new modes of communication," Ells said. "It's actually changing the way that they think, and read, and are participating in their academic work."

Since they began working on the performance in the past year, Ells said some of her students have gone up "several reading levels".

The play itself was created collectively by the students over the past six months. Ells said it's a "multimedia performance using masks, mime, American sign language, poetry, performance, dance, and some just regular acting."

- [**More support is needed for Sask. deaf and hard of hearing, advocates say**](#)

Perhaps most importantly, *Deaf Crows* shares with the hearing and the deaf audiences their "true stories" of the deaf experience.

"In the show, the crow costume represents a deaf person. So if you see a crow among other normal hearing people on the stage, you know that person is deaf. And that's how they feel — they feel completely isolated and different than everyone else in the hearing world, especially when they were little kids."

Ells said the idea came from one student who painted himself as a crow isolated in a cave, as well as another painting of him as a crow with words flying all around.

"He said, 'I went from being a deaf crow to being a deaf crow in a hearing world. And the hearing world is really confusing for me as a deaf crow.' And so all the kids loved this idea and so we all kind of jumped on it."

Deaf Crows will be performed one night only on Friday, June 17 at 7 p.m. CST at the Artesian on 13th Avenue in Regina. Tickets can be purchased in advance or at the door.

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