

Thom students create a memorable experience in Deaf Forest

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Deaf Crows, a group of deaf and hard of hearing students at Thom Collegiate, pose for a group shot at the Dunlop Art Gallery along with their teachers and artists-in-residence. *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

The Leader-Post's reporting team is looking back on the funny, heartbreaking, uplifting and surprising stories of 2017 that stuck with them the most.

A forest of painted and quilted trees represented months of work by deaf students, and the triumph of a community that has received inadequate provincial government support.

In October, 11 students from Thom Collegiate's deaf and hard of hearing program presented The Deaf Forest (<http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/thom-students-view-hearing-world-through-a-different-lens-in-deaf-forest-art-exhibition>), an art installation at the Dunlop Art Gallery in downtown Regina.

Before attending high school, many of the students didn't know how to communicate.

"They have grown up essentially language-less, so you're starting from scratch," said Joanne Weber, a Thom teacher since 2003 and a deaf person.

Fatima Nafisa, who moved to Regina in Grade 5, had been in a mainstream elementary school class.

In Grade 9, when she started to learn sign language and interact with her classmates, "We realized that all of the students, we all shared the same feelings and the same experiences. ... I felt, 'Wow, I am the same as everyone else, we all have that same experience,' so I started to understand that it was OK to sign."

"Socializing is very important in the deaf community," said deaf elder Allard Thomas, who works with the students. "But the mainstream kids don't have access to that additional knowledge."

Deaf people "learn mostly through community," he added.

In 1991, the Progressive Conservative provincial government closed the R.J.D. Williams School for the Deaf, a boarding school for deaf children that had operated in Saskatoon since 1931.

There was a push to incorporate deaf students into mainstream classrooms, but often they didn't have the proper supports. They were discouraged from

learning sign language. Further, the opportunities to socialize and communicate with other deaf students were few and far between.



Fatima Nafisa, a student at Thom Collegiate, works on an art piece at the Dunlop Art Gallery. With their collective, known as Deaf Crows, the students create visual art and theatre to express what it's like to be deaf in a hearing world. *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

In Regina, though, there was one bright spot for families of deaf and hard of hearing children.

For about two decades, the communication preschool (CPS) program immersed deaf children ages three and four (<http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/parents-upset-about-cuts-to-special-needs-preschools-eas-may-be-next-on-the-chopping-block>), and taught them language.

But in April, the Regina Public School Board announced it would be phasing out the program (<http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/regina-public-cuts-programs-teachers-to-cover-9-5-million-funding-shortfall>), as well as closing its Discovery Preschool for developmentally challenged children. That was due to a \$9.5-million budget shortfall, a result of the provincial government's 2017-18 education budget.

The programs united special-needs students with so-called “typical” students. Prior to 2009, the programs received Ministry of Education funding.

In the years since, the school board relied on the ministry’s “early entry” supports for learning funding (<http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/regina-parents-argue-government-is-discriminating-against-special-needs-students>). That amounted to \$6,900 after applying the ministry’s complicated funding formula, or \$88.46 per student. An average pre-kindergarten student is funded \$3,975.47.

Don Morgan, education minister at the time, said he would not approve the Regina board’s budget if it meant cutting the programs (<http://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/education-minister-says-regina-school-programs-for-kids-with-special-needs-wont-be-eliminated>). But the budget was approved, and the programs are being phased out.

Further, the provincial government announced in its spring budget that it would scrap a subsidized provincial hearing aid plan (<http://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/hearing-aid-plan-to-continue-past-july-1-in-saskatoon>) to save \$3 million per year; however, that program continued as of early December (<http://leaderpost.com/opinion/columnists/mid-year-update-shows-current-budget-remains-a-red-hot-mess>).

In spite of these hurdles, the students at Thom — as the Deaf Crows artistic collective — have bonded over their artwork and built a community.

They wrote and performed a play in 2015 (<http://leaderpost.com/entertainment/local-arts/regina-play-deaf-crows-hopes-to-bring-insight-to-a-hearing-world>), which ended with the line, “We are not animals anymore.”

“They’re coming out of a state where they almost felt like they were not human,” said artist-in-residence Chrystene Ells, “and now they’re being seen as human beings and they feel like human beings.”

“In (the Deaf Forest) you see these trees and it’s so welcoming,” said student Mustafa Alabssi. “You enter, the deaf community embraces you and gives you things you need.”

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