



WILLOW  
ARTS  
COMMUNITY  
*Create • Connect • Celebrate*

ONTARIO ST MURAL

# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT



I'm not a  
person who  
likes to  
be  
wrong.

I'm not a  
person who  
likes to  
be  
wrong.

I am  
empathetic  
and kind.

I am  
sensitive.

Thank  
you  
for  
your  
support.

I'm  
unapologetically  
myself.

I am  
tired of  
being  
resilient.



UNSCENE OPENING RECEPTION

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# MISSION

Willow Arts Community provides low-barrier peer-to-peer arts education, and fosters safe spaces for creative exploration and connections for people with living experience of mental illness or substance use in Niagara.



# VISION

A society free of stigma, void of shame, where artistic expression is supported and knows no bounds.

# VALUES

Respect - Treat all members as artists

Honour - Recognize that members are at different stages of their practice

Accountability - Encourage members to set goals, boundaries and be independent

Compassion - Meet people where they are at

Celebrate - Recognize members' achievements

Safety - Foster an inclusive and supportive environment

Responsive- Flexible to the needs of our community

# WILLOW ARTS HISTORY

Willow Arts Community began in 2015 as a grassroots movement in St. Catharines, Ontario.

The founding group, organized by Leigh MacLeod, consisted of artists, writers, musicians, educators, Indigenous knowledge keepers, and social service workers, all with lived or living experience of mental illness/substance use (MI/SU). They identified there was a gap in the arts and social services and a need for a peer support network where individuals living with MI/SU could participate in their own recovery through the arts.

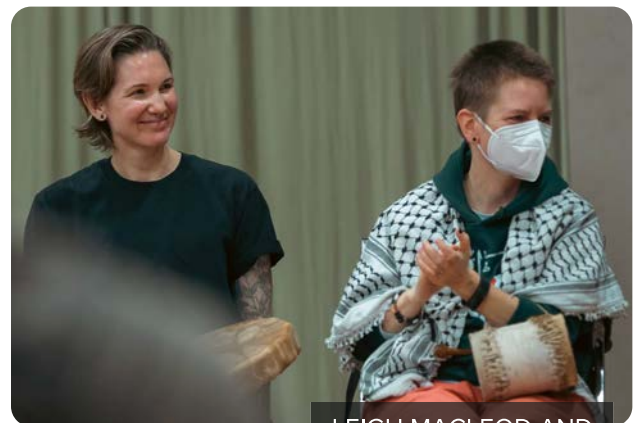
Willow Arts emerged from discussions with local social service care providers, recognizing the absence of community resources for ongoing support. Many individuals struggle to transition from the medical system due to a lack of necessary community support, hindering their success. We affirm that healing and recovery thrive within the community setting.

The group incorporated in 2016, and enjoyed a four-year residency at the historic public art gallery Rodman Hall Art Centre before its closure.

In 2018, we began a three-year project with Workman Arts in Toronto, Artfix in North Bay, and Mindful Makers Collective in Thunder Bay. Through province-wide evaluation, we successfully measured that active participation in peer-led multidisciplinary arts programming reduced social isolation. Workman Arts' evidence-based program has been implemented in Toronto for 30 years and linked Willow Arts to a network of resource-sharing, best practices, and research.

In 2021 we became a registered charity and relocated to the heart of downtown St. Catharines within a growing arts hub. Silver Spire United Church provides dinners, showers, and laundry facilities for unhoused individuals, hosts various social justice forums, 2SLGBTQIA+ events and Indigenous groups, and is also the home of Carousel Players, a company providing theatre programming for youth.

Today we proudly provide our members a 1000 sq ft studio space. We occupy a large workspace, meeting room, and supply rooms. Within Silver Spire, we also have access to a gymnasium, auditorium, and a sanctuary for classes, performances, and public events.



LEIGH MACLEOD AND  
WILLOW MEMBER

# 2024 REMARKS

As The Willow continues to evolve and deepen its impact within the community, so too does its governance structure. In 2024, the Board of Directors welcomed three new members, each bringing valuable expertise, lived experience, and a shared commitment to advancing our mission at the intersection of arts and mental health. This growth reflects our ongoing alignment with the objectives outlined in our current Strategic Plan, and further strengthens the board's capacity to steward the organization through its next phase of development.

2024 also marked a significant milestone in The Willow's artistic journey. Our landmark project ReNew The View — a large-scale outdoor installation at the old General Motors site — was honoured with the Niagara Biennial Design Award for Outstanding Achievement (Outdoor Art). This prestigious recognition celebrates the transformative power of community-based art and is a testament to the creativity, dedication, and vision of our artists, staff, and collaborators. The award ceremony was a memorable evening and a powerful reminder of the importance of accessible, place-based art in healing and community building.

As we turn toward 2025, The Willow remains committed to fostering inclusive creative spaces, advancing mental wellness through artistic practice, and advocating for a more equitable cultural landscape.

We are excited for what lies ahead and deeply grateful to all who make this work possible.

**Patrick Crummey (he/him)**  
**Willow Arts Community**  
**Board Chair**

Ten years ago, I followed a quiet whisper that has since grown into the vibrant force that is now Willow Arts. I'm deeply grateful to wake up each day with a sense of purpose and belief in something meaningful.

Each day in our studio, we witness powerful moments of self-discovery, compassion, and true, hard-earned resilience. It's the kind of resilience that comes from overcoming real challenges — and it's a privilege to be entrusted with these stories. I hold them close to my heart.

I'm sincerely thankful to everyone who shares in holding space for these moments. This past year, I had the honour of working alongside Amber Lee Williams, Tricia Franklin, and Kate Leathers — each of whom brought incredible dedication and heart to this work. I'm also continually inspired by the local artists we partner with, whose talents and perspectives enrich our community.

To our volunteers, board of directors, and supporters — you are the foundation that keeps us strong. Thank you for your commitment and belief in our mission. Together, we are truly making a difference.

Willow Arts is a place I'm proud to belong to, and I'm excited for all that lies ahead in 2025 and beyond. See you soon,

**Leigh MacLeod (they/them)**  
**Willow Arts Community**  
**Founder/Director**

AS OF MAY, 2025

**307**

REGISTERED  
MEMBERS

**100%**

HAVE LIVED OR LIVING EXPERIENCE WITH  
MENTAL ILLNESS/ SUBSTANCE USE (MI/SU)

**45%**

IDENTIFY AS PART OF THE  
2SLGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY

**35%**

HAVE A VISIBLE OR INVISIBLE  
PHYSICAL DISABILITY

**76%**

RECEIVE DISABILITY ASSISTANCE, ARE  
UNEMPLOYED, OR RETIRED

**24%**

ARE BLACK, INDIGENOUS  
OR PEOPLE OF COLOUR

**47%**

IDENTIFY AS BEING NEURODIVERSE  
(AUTISM, OCD, ADHD)

**51%**

HAVE OVER 5 YEARS OF  
ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE

# OUR DIVERSE COMMUNITY

We prioritize hiring people who reflect the diverse makeup of our membership. Having leadership, staff, artists, and instructors who reflect these diversities and lived experiences is essential and foundational to creating a space that feels inclusive and safe for all.



WILLOW MEMBERS AT AN  
OPEN STUDIO

**“I enjoy the community. Trusting and setting healthy boundaries in a safe environment. Playing with like-minded artists and learning from each other. And knowing that the instructors have been down similar paths gives me hope.”**

-Willow Member

# OUR PROGRAMS' IMPACT

The demand for our programming grows daily with referrals from every mental health and social service agency across the Niagara Region.

## 1 IN 5

RESIDENTS IN NIAGARA WILL FACE A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN ANY GIVEN YEAR ACCORDING TO THE CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION.

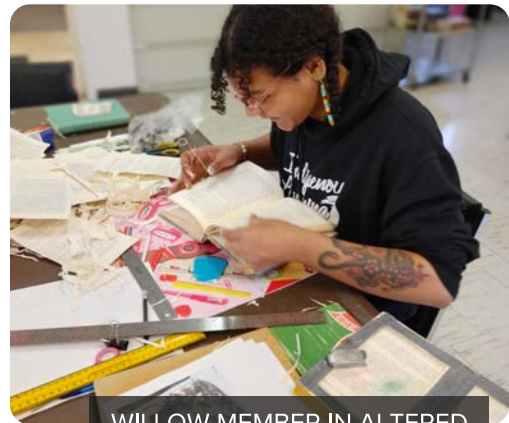
## MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

ARE AMONG THE TOP 3 ISSUES IMPACTING SAFETY AND WELL-BEING IN NIAGARA ACCORDING TO THE 2023 LIVING IN NIAGARA REPORT.

People living with mental illness and substance use often face a greater risk of social isolation due to symptoms, stigma, poverty, and discrimination that limit their ability to fully engage within the community.



JOE LAPINSKI AND  
WILLOW MEMBER



WILLOW MEMBER IN ALTERED  
BOOK WORKSHOP

Access to the arts in a community setting is vital to people living with mental illness/substance use. Social isolation is a primary risk factor for increased rates of suicide, substance use, and poor physical health outcomes.

The Willow Arts Community is sought out as leaders and experts in our field by the mental health and social service sectors, and widely celebrated in the arts sector as providing vital opportunities that make a real difference in the lives of people residing in Niagara. We are committed to reducing barriers (social, financial, cultural, and safety) and creating opportunities for connection and healing through the arts. Evaluations of Willow's courses, workshops, Open Studios, and other programs have shown that our program reduces social isolation for people living with MI/SU in Niagara.



MUSIC GATHERING CELEBRATING  
NICOLE JOY-FRASER AND JOE  
LAPINSKI'S PROGRAMMING

**Our members have indicated that active participation in arts based programming has improved their wellbeing in a variety of ways, including**

- Increased sense of value and belonging to a community
- Feelings of motivation, creativity, and inspiration
- Increased social interaction and development of communication skills, accountability, and goal setting
- an increased sense of hope and a sense of purpose
- improved relationships with with family and friends
- Increased skills related to art practices
- Larger professional and social network and improved employability skills
- Meaningful activities resulting in fewer negative mental health symptoms

# WILLOW ARTS IN THE STUDIO

In 2024, we provided three seasons of hands-on multi-disciplinary arts programs and courses at no cost to Willow Arts members.

We hire local Niagara artists to design and teach our in-studio programs with the support of Willow staff. This helps to drive our local creative sector and build social networks among professional artists and members.

Multi-week courses in 2024 included fibre arts, songwriting, experimental photography, choral music, poetry and prose, Indigenous hand drumming, radio and sound production, soft sculpture, and more!

We also held single and multi-day workshops on indigo resist dyeing; how to document and scan artworks; theater and storytelling; altered books; letterpress; and screen printing.

We hosted 38 weeks of our tried and true Open Studio, where members have access to our shared studio space for artistic creation. We provide art materials, equipment, and support from professional artists to help members develop solo projects, prepare for our annual exhibition, experiment with new mediums, and collaborate and connect with their peers.



WILLOW MEMBER PARTICIPATING IN  
AMBER LEE WILLIAM'S 6-WEEK  
CYANOTYPE COURSE



WILLOW MEMBER CREATING NEW  
ARTWORK DURING OUR WEEKLY  
DROP-IN OPEN STUDIO

**“It helps me to have opportunities to express myself creatively and develop my artistic skills. I have made valuable connections and friendships there.”**

-Willow Member

# UNSCENE

## WILLOW ARTS GROUP EXHIBITION

In June 2024, we shared and celebrated the artworks and performances of 54 artists and creatives living with mental illness/substance use in Niagara.



BARB BAKER  
*RECLAIMING MY NARRATIVE*  
2024  
ALTERED BOOK

Willow members were encouraged to explore themes of presence and belonging. The exhibition underscored the importance of unseen narratives and the transformative power of art in expressing untold stories. It highlighted how art can bring to light the experiences and perspectives of those who often remain unnoticed or marginalized. The exhibition featured mixed media, sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, fibre arts, music, poetry, and installation.

Members were supported in our shared studio by professional artists, and had access to art supplies, space to develop work, and time to collaborate with peers. We paid CARFAC rates to the exhibiting artists, and hired a professional photographer and graphic designer to publish our first exhibition catalogue. We are grateful for the ongoing partnership with the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts/ Brock University.



THE WILLOW CHOIR  
PERFORMING ORIGINAL SONGS  
BY WILLOW MEMBERS  
CHORAL ARRANGEMENTS AND  
ACCOMPANIMENT BY SARAH JERROME

# WILLOW ARTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Our award-winning organization reaches thousands of people each year through special projects in partnership with local agencies across the Niagara Region.

We work with members in our studio to develop artistic and leadership skills, which they use to facilitate programming with community partners.

These partnerships allow us to engage with and reach the wider community, provide paid opportunities for our members, and reduce stigma.

## JANUARY

### Gillian's Place "Felt Feelings"

Willow staff led an arts-based activity designed to collect feedback and perspectives from diverse members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This project helped inform Gillian's Place (women's shelter) new 2SLGBTQIA+ programming.



## FEBRUARY



### Family Day at the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre

We hosted an all-ages community art project with over 150 participants. The completed "Family Tree" artwork is installed on the second floor at the performing arts center downtown St. Catharines for all visitors to enjoy.

### Canadian Mental Health Association of Niagara "Wellness for All" Event

Willow members performed spoken word and original songs, and facilitated an impactful community art project that now lives in Safe Beds, an emergency shelter.





## APRIL

### **Niagara College, Welland Campus**

We partnered with Niagara College to bring together newcomer students and Willow Arts members to create four, large scale artworks. The work is installed in the reception area of the Health, Wellness and Accessibility Centre to help welcome students seeking support.

## MAY

### **May Day 2024**

We facilitated a community art project for May Day (International Workers' Day) with OPIRG Brock and various social justice and labour movement groups. The banner is now carried at various local marches in St. Catharines.



## JULY & AUGUST

### **Niagara Falls Community Health Centre**

Last summer we hosted one day workshops in drumming and sound bath, acrylic painting, needle felting, songwriting, wire sculpture, weaving, drawing, watercolour, and found poetry. We also hosted arts programs in acrylic painting, fibre arts, and mixed media for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.



# RENEW THE VIEW ONTARIO ST



SEVEN GRANDFATHER TEACHINGS ON  
ONTARIO ST

Our largest public art project to date started in the spring of 2024. ReNew The View is a unique, large-scale project to transform the boarding surrounding the construction site at 282 Ontario St in St. Catharines into pieces of art. The owners of the former GM lands have joined forces with Willow Arts, City Councilors, and sponsors to help transform the eyesore into vibrant art that celebrates the local community and land.

In consultation with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, this mural was designed and led by Indigenous Willow Arts members, and painted in collaboration with non-Indigenous Willow Arts members and staff. The mural highlights the natural heritage of 12 Mile Creek “Ashquasing”. Our intention was to honour the land the GM site sits on, which was once rich hunting, fishing, and trading grounds of the Haudenosaunee. We also depicted the Anishinaabe Seven Grandfather Teachings, as well as paid respect to our ancestors and the sky world.

The Ontario St mural won the Niagara Region’s Biennial Design Award for the Outstanding Achievement in Public Art. This visual narrative promotes dialogue, empathy, and reconciliation.



ONTARIO ST MURALISTS AND  
GRANDMOTHER JACKIE LABONTE

*Left to right: Kim Height, Tricia Franklin, Doug Paget, Leigh MacLeod, Grandmother Jackie Labonte, Marvin Dale, and Tammy Fenner*

Indigenous elder Jackie Labonte hosted a potluck to bring together the Ontario St muralists with participants of her programming at De dwa da dehs nye (Aboriginal Health Centre).

# RENEW THE VIEW HAIG ST

Last fall we developed and painted four murals on Haig St in St Catharines. Working with three communities—The Manchester Regional Housing Neighbourhood, Haig Neighbours and Fitz Neighbours—lead artists met with community members to learn more about what's important to them. The artists designed three murals inspired by this input, and the community helped paint the murals on our first Community Paint Day in October 2024. The Haig St murals are a high traffic area for the kids and families who walk to Harriet Tubman Public School and local parks. These murals create a vibrant streetscape for all ages.



HAIG ST COMMUNITY PAINT DAY



AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

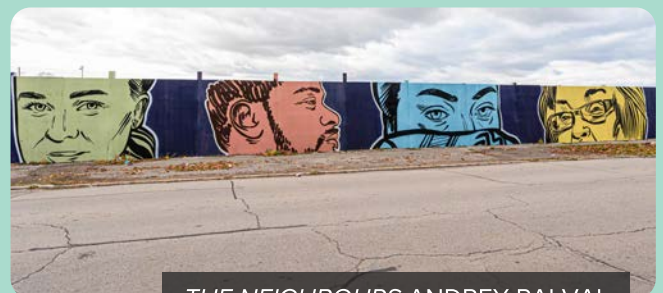


HAIG ST MURALISTS AND VOLUNTEERS

*Left to right: Ashley Dawn, Heather Fraser, Sarah Carter, Lisa Forstinger, Yenis Camargo, and Katherine Sunita*

We worked with The RAFT through their after-school program at Manchester Street Regional Housing to provide arts education activities and involve at-risk youth in the Haig St mural creation.

In November, internationally celebrated street artist Andrey Palval created a mural titled 'The Neighbours' inspired by his journey from Ukraine to Canada, bridging cultures and inviting passersby to see the extraordinary in the everyday.



THE NEIGHBOURS ANDREY PALVAL

# OUR STAFF & RESOURCES

WE REACHED MORE THAN

# 10,000

PEOPLE WITH FREE ARTS PROGRAMMING, PUBLIC ART, EXHIBITIONS, PUBLICATIONS, AND PERFORMANCES

OUR OPERATING BUDGET GREW BY

# 61%

COMPARED TO 2023

WE RAISED

# \$95,942

FROM DONATIONS, FUNDRAISING, AND SPONSORSHIPS

AND SPENT

# \$175,852

ON ARTIST FEES, ARTISTIC SALARIES, HONOURARIUMS, STUDIO AND SUPPLIES COSTS

# 85%

OF OUR OPERATING BUDGET WENT TO ARTISTS AND ARTS WORKERS LIVING IN NIAGARA, MAJORITY LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS/SUBSTANCE USE



COMMUNITY YOUTH AT THE *HIGH FIVES FOR THE FUTURE* MURAL  
RENEW THE VIEW COMMUNITY PAINT DAY

We experienced rapid growth in recent years, including a 61% budget increase in 2024. In response to this expansion, our focus was on stabilizing our programs and activities by building a sustainable operating model and resource base.

In 2024, we were able to maintain two part-time staff positions: a Program Coordinator and a Studio Assistant. With these people supporting our Director, we have been able to increase the number of in-studio programs we provide for our members and do more in-community projects throughout the year.

The Willow Arts Community is able to offer its in-studio programs at no cost to members due to funding from the City of St. Catharines, project grants from foundations, and vital sponsorships and donations from organizations and individuals.

An interruption in services would be destabilizing to participants, so we are financially cautious while adding part-time staff, new programs, and paid opportunities for members when new partnerships and sponsors come on board.

# THANK YOU FOR YOUR VITAL SUPPORT

WE COULDN'T DO IT WITHOUT OUR DONORS, SPONSORS, VOLUNTEERS, FUNDERS, AND PARTNERS. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT IN OUR MISSION AND VISION.

We thank our generous donors in 2024: Patricia Alexander, Thomas Beaudry, Sheila Beiko, Andrea Eby, Tammy Fenner, Marcel Grimard, Susan Hroncek, Dani Hummel, Sarah Lesniewski, Bob Mallen, Sandy Middleton, Bianca Neufeld, Maureen O'Neill, Sara Palmieri, Jessica Potts, Tina Teichroeb, Maureen Walters, Jessica Wilson, and our many anonymous donors

## FUNDERS



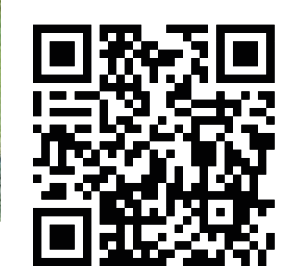
## PROGRAM PARTNERS



## DONORS & SPONSORS



Big thank you to Lauren Garbutt and Ami Holmes for capturing these wonderful moments and artwork this year at our exhibition and murals.



FARROW MASCOE  
LILY POND  
2024  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

Scan the QR code to donate to our registered charity

**The Willow Community Support Services is a Registered Charity**

**Charity Registration Number: 760231696RR0001**

**Willow Arts Community**

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