

WePress

The Story of WePress in 2020

We respectfully acknowledge that WePress is a community art space on the occupied and unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Nations. We are grateful to be here uninvited, to live and work alongside the people Indigenous to and who have stewarded these lands since time immemorial. In 2020 we worked alongside and learned from many Indigenous folks in and beyond the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood in ways that center decolonial relationships between people and with the land.

Like many community-based organizations, 2020 was a challenging year for WePress. It was also a year of much reflection, learning, and building new relationships.

Winter 2020: Calm before the storm

Before COVID-19 pandemic hit, we planned to slowly expand the Open Studios. Before the pandemic reached us, we ran 19 Workshops and Open Studio drop ins. We had hired additional facilitators and had a facilitator training workshop with Cadence Chen. We had planned on supporting Open Studio participants to become hired art workshop facilitators. We were gearing up to start a project exploring how WePress can support Indigenous Language learners and speakers in the DTES, which we had deferred from 2019. The Chinese Seniors Project group was meeting regularly for to collaboratively translate stories they had collected in previous years.

Spring 2020: Pausing, reflecting, and redirecting

Then, in March 2020, with public health restrictions around large gatherings and social distancing, we stopped in-person programming altogether. We paused to assess what was needed and what resources we could mobilize to support the neighbourhood.

So many people's lives were in peril due to major shortages in basic necessities, such as food, personal protection equipment (PPE), and hygiene supplies, not to mention the unimaginable prospect of a dual health crises —COVID-19 and toxic drug supply. We reflected on what it meant for WePress, as an arts organization dedicated to dismantling systemic barriers to accessing art-making, to continue to operate during a time of great distress and dire need in the community.

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Nations

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 [@WePress_YVR](https://twitter.com/WePress_YVR) 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

We dug deep and went back to our original mission and values as an organization. Since opening in 2016, we had done a lot of work thinking about accessibility and mitigating barriers. We had created various ways of working at WePress to address a range of systemic barriers, including offering ASL interpretation and simultaneous translation in Cantonese and Mandarin. We pay facilitators and participants right away with cheques or cash. We also had food and snacks in all of our programs, maintained a stock of snacks at WePress, and included snacks/meal purchase and pick-up as part of event organizing plans. We offered high flexibility for contractors and were developing a system for substitute workers so casual workers could call in sick without cancelling programs. When we reflected back on our commitment to meeting folks where they are at and meeting basic needs, it became evident to us that we absolutely needed to support the emergency response work in the DTES during this time, particularly around the acute food insecurity.

By early April, WePress diverted staff hours to support DTES Response, a new grassroots group that emerged to organize and fundraise to support mutual aid efforts around COVID-19 in the neighbourhood. Mutual aid “is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and build new social relations that are more survivable” (Dean Spade, 2020), especially in a context where public resources are lacking. While the various levels of government have not done enough to address the growing crisis in the neighbourhood, individuals and groups on the ground stepped up to take care of people and fill the gaps. In this group effort, WePress played a pivotal role in establishing DTES Response by diverting Kathy’s hours to this work.

The role of WePress and DTES Response was in helping to coordinate and provide resources to many DTES frontline groups, including funding, PPE, access to cell phones with free data plans (from Telus and SPARC BC), street cleaning equipment and supplies, printing for COVID-19 info sheets, and other supplies. As well, we coordinated a meal distribution network that provided 1200 meals per day for 7 days a week for over 6 weeks (between April 17 and June 2, 2020) with Aboriginal Front Door (AFD), Friends of CCAP (Fiona York with Erica Grant and Bernie Williams and others), Overdose Prevention Society (OPS), Health Through SPIRIT, Vancouver Women’s Health Collective (VWHC), The Blue Door, Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS), DTES SRO Collaborative (SRO-C), Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU).

Meals were provided by Potluck Catering, HAVE Culinary Training Society, South Hall, Wildebeest through a Community Response Fund grant and private fundraising. This work was also supported by volunteer drivers including Sarah Common from Hives for Humanity, Ed from The Blue Door, Aboriginal Front Door, Vancouver Women’s Health

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

2

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 @WePress_YVR 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

Collective, Rider Cooley, Bernie Williams + crew, Yolanda Dyck, Carly O'Rourke (DTES Response/SpencerCreo Foundation), and Meriah Main from Health Through SPIRIT.

This summary attempts to capture some of the incredible, often unacknowledged, hard work and dedication of these frontline groups. Each meal that was delivered was also an individual human connection with a person who is unhoused or precariously housed. Through the meal distribution network, community organizers shared critical information (about COVID-19, what was going on, where to find resources and services, etc.), and supplies including: PPE (masks, hand sanitizer, gloves), personal hygiene products, bottled water, juice, fruit, other food like granola bars, chocolate, candy, gift certificates, free meal coupons, and much more. It was social connectedness for those who did not have internet, computers, or phones. It was community organizers with lived experience working on the frontlines, risking their own health and lives for their family, friends, and the community-at-large.

In April we also helped support the re-establishment of the Downtown Eastside Community Kitchens (DECK) network that was taking shape among organizers in the community. Groups doing food security and sovereignty work were meeting bi-weekly virtually to share information and resources—this was one of many mutual aid networks that emerged in 2020.

We also supported our own network of artist facilitators (~20 individuals) stipends because we couldn't hire them to facilitate workshops. Many of these artists are self-employed and were facing economic precarity, before and during COVID-19.

Since we could not run the Indigenous languages project as planned (i.e., with large in-person community gatherings), we redirected the funds to financially support eight individual Indigenous artists with their art and community practices. We offered them as low-barrier residencies from home or wherever they lived.

In March 2020, we decided to delay our application to the Vancouver Foundation Systems Change Test Grant. This was a difficult decision, as this grant could have meant 3 years of funding. However, with the deadline coming just two weeks after the pandemic arrived in our communities, it felt impossible to regroup and re-imagine our entire approach to meet the challenges of COVID-19. In the following 6 months, we were changed by the pandemic, and this change informed a successful System Change Test Grant application submitted in late 2020 that revolved around mutual aid and low-fi methods of bring artmaking to intersectionally marginalized communities.

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

3

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 [@WePress_YVR](https://twitter.com/WePress_YVR) 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

By late spring, we began to see the additional effects of the lockdown on the neighbourhood—'isolation & mental health crisis'. We knew from our previous work at WePress how art-making could be healing, dignifying, and supportive for mental health. However, offering access to art-making during COVID-19 required creative thinking and understanding of the challenges in the neighbourhood to ensure the safety of everyone. While many other arts organizations in Vancouver were moving their programs, exhibits, and performances online, we knew it didn't make sense for us to do the same when the DTES faced a massive digital divide.

We began developing the idea of making art kits containing art-making supplies and a zine, created by an artist commissioned for this work, on how to make art using the supplies in the kit. This was a reimagining of our in-person Open Studios, where participants dropped in to make art with the support of an artist facilitator. The idea was to bring the spirit of Open Studios and the joy of art-making to people wherever they were at. We also thought about including the art kits in food deliveries as larger care packages. These ideas brought together our prior learnings (i.e., bringing the joy of art-making to people with regular consistency and with as few barriers as possible, and creating paid opportunities for low-income and marginalized artists) with our new work in the community (i.e., food security and working in close partnerships with others on the ground). By Feb 2021, we distributed 1000 art kits, another 1000 art kits were distributed by mid-June 2021, and we have plans to distribute up to 2500 more in 2021.

Summer 2020: Settling into the new reality

The WePress kitchen became a core activity during the summer of 2020, as there was still an acute need for food and meals in the community, and social distancing and other precautions slowed down our plans for organizing and distributing art kits. As new streams of emergency relief funding for food security were released in the summer, WePress applied for and received funding from the Government of Canada through the Emergency Community Support Fund through the United Way Lower Mainland, and the Community Food Centres of Canada to establish the WePress Community Kitchen at the Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall (VJLS-JH). We hired a chef and peers with lived experience to prepare and package 200 meals per day, 5 days a week alongside volunteers. The meals are distributed to the unhouse and precariously housed through Aboriginal Front Door, WAHRS, VANDU, OPS, and to encampments through our delivery team.

We would like to give a big shout out to all of the WePress volunteers who helped with the massive job of pairing 400 donated cell phones from SPARC BC with 400 Telus

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 [@WePress_YVR](https://twitter.com/WePress_YVR) 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

Plans (SIM cards) and preparing them to be COVID-19 safe and documenting the numbers for about 30 DTES organizations. These lifelines were also critical for the neighbourhood-wide peer work that has been so important during the pandemic and is still continuing.

Fall 2020: Reimagining the future of WePress

Grant applications are necessary and at times stressful things on our to-do list as a non-profit organization, but writing grants can be an opportunity to reflect on our vision for the future and plan it out in concrete ways. This was the case in Fall 2020 when we applied for three major grants: Vancouver Foundation Systems Change Test Grant, Canada Council Public Outreach Grant, and Canada Council Sector Innovation Grant. We also applied for and received a City of Vancouver DTES Capital Grant to purchase equipment for community kitchens in the DECK mutual aid network and bridging the digital divide.

The beginnings of the pandemic revealed that our contributions as an arts organization are much stronger and more meaningful when we work closely with organizations and groups doing work on food security / sovereignty, housing, and harm reduction as a network of mutual aid. While writing the VF grant, we thought of art-making as being part of mutual aid in the DTES—a way to connect (with) people and being a galvanizing force to bring people together to advocate for rights and resources in a community-led way. We began to see ourselves as supporting the development of smaller networks of artists and organizations to help create communities of care.

We are also learning how to create a way of working collectively in a healthy and sustainable way. The pandemic took a toll on the health of our collective members and staff, accentuating social inequities we already face. We are learning how to take care of ourselves and each other without burning out, how to avoid concentration of decision-making and knowledge in few individual persons, how to avoid putting founders on a pedestal, how to distribute work and accountability in an equitable way, how to create accessible spaces (physical and not) within the organization, how to create a flat work structure, etc. As we expand our inner circle of staff and volunteers, this internal work of creating a community of care within WePress seemed just as important as helping to create and support them outside the collective. We are grateful to each other and those who invested energy into the beginnings of WePress, and with whom we made mistakes and grew.

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliilwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

5

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 @WePress_YVR 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

Other activities

Chinese Seniors Project: The working group continued to meet virtually in 2020. After completing the translation work, the group members tried to find a way to curate the book—written text, artwork by seniors, photographs from the workshops, and artwork by commissioned artists—that could continue their collaborative process, but this was very difficult to do without meeting in person. The group continues to meet but less frequently. Currently, the content is being edited.

Online art workshops: We invited Dora Prieto to run three marbling workshops online (in English then Spanish on May 10 and in English on June 3, 2020). Dora’s workshop was originally scheduled as an in-person event for the spring and was cancelled, and she was able to redevelop her workshop so that participants could use household items to make art without needing specialized art supplies or equipment. About 15 participants in total attended these workshops.

Heart of the City Festival: We ran two free Heart of the City Festival workshops online: Marbling workshop by Dora Prieto on October 31st (5 participants) and Introduction to Beading by Haisla Collins on November 4th (8 participants). HOTC Festival and WePress jointly supported these artist facilitators. We also financially supported the creation of two murals at 312 Main by the OPS DTES Artist Collective. It was wonderful that the Festival could happen both virtually and in person in 2020 and we were happy to be part of it.

Virtual art drop-ins: In late fall, we began a weekly virtual art drop-in on Monday evenings from 6-8PM and Hollis volunteered her time to host/anchor them. The art drop-ins were mainly for the collective, board members, volunteers, staff, and by invitation to make sure that we could create an intimate setting. Folks dropped by to check in with friends, meet one another, and make art together.

Aboriginal Writers Collective West Coast (AWCWC) and the Warriors Against Violence Society (WAVS): We collaborated with AWCWC and WAVS for the first time to deliver a poetry reading by Indigenous poets and artists called “Exchanging Words” on December 30th. With funding acquired by WAVS, AWCWC hosted and WePress provided in-kind support by offering technology support and the webinar platform. 16 people attended the webinar.

Slow Print for Queers: Planned and launched a 13-week collaborative printmaking project (executed in Spring 2021) during which participants made multilayer linocut prints in collaboration with each other from a distance. WePress supported Collective

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

6

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 @WePress_YVR 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

Member Luca Cara Seccafien's FUTURES/forward mentorship in Community Arts with the International Centre for Art for Social Change, and Judith Marcuse Projects. Under the mentorship of Sharon Bayly, Luca facilitated this project, a pilot for future collaborative print projects.

Non-corporate and secure digital infrastructure: Nina researched and developed a way for WePress to hold virtual meetings on our own server using as much non-corporate and open source technology as possible. While this was quickly done in 2020 to meet remote work needs, the approach was in line with conversations we had already been having at WePress before the pandemic around creating safe, reliable, community-owned, non-corporate digital infrastructure and information sharing. We already had our filesharing system (Seafile) on our internal server, but in 2020 Nina made it much more usable and the collective and staff used it quite extensively. As well, we used an open source video software hosted from our own server to run online meetings on a regular basis. We put a pin in additional digital infrastructure until our capacity was greater.

Thank you

Thank you to our donors: Jodie Mak, Hannah Bennett, Peeranu Visetsuth, Namiko Kunimoto, Janice Shimizu, Shirley Lum, Sandi Liang, Sara Montgomery, Jennifer Ouson, Anna Vieira, Monica Kumar, Ashley Bodily, Pierre Leichner, Danielle Enright, and Melissa Muller. [Please donate to WePress.](#)

Thank you to our [funders and partners](#), including the BC Arts Council, City of Vancouver, Canada Council for the Arts, Government of Canada through the United Way Lower Mainland, Community Foundations of Canada / Vancouver Foundation, Community Food Centres of Canada, and Career Launcher, Province of British Columbia, Vancouver Foundation, Community Response Fund, DTES Response, Community Impact Real Estate Society, Powell Street Festival Society, Gallery Gaget, and Opus Art Supplies.

Emergency Response Work was done with support from DTES Response, Network of Inner City Community Services Society (NICCSS), Potluck Catering, HAVE Culinary Training Society, South Hall, Wildebeest, the Community Response Fund (Vancouver Foundation, Vancity Credit Union, United Way Lower Mainland, Anonymous individual donors to Vancouver Foundation), City of Vancouver and CIRES Peer Fund, Hives for Humanity, Powell Street Festival Society, and the SpencerCreo Foundation (to name a few).

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliilwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 @WePress_YVR 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver

WePress

And thanks, as always, to all our volunteers and supporters who make WePress what it is!

A Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Arts Space on the occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliiwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations

8

9 W. HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC V6B 1G4

✉ info@wepress.ca ☎ 604-670-3424 🏠 WePress.ca

📘 facebook.com/WePressVancouver 🐦 [@WePress_YVR](https://twitter.com/WePress_YVR) 📷 instagram.com/wepressvancouver