

Streams marks 10 years of creating creative spaces for youth

There is a photograph from the very beginning of Streams that I love. Four of us are sitting in a room talking about the future: our three board members at the time, Marva Tyndale, Tanya Fowlow and me, along with Andrew, my co-founder in Streams and in life. We are planning an organization that does not yet exist.

There is another image from those early days that feels just as telling. I am sitting at our glass kitchen table, writing program ideas directly onto the tabletop with a dry-erase marker. That was Streams before there was much of anything else: a kitchen table, and a few people with an idea, and if I am being honest, an idea that was not always particularly clear.

At one point Andrew and I invited a group of friends into our living room to pitch them our vision. These were the sort of friends who could call each other and say, "We have an idea,?". Back then, Streams was going to be a community coffeehouse, with a stage where young artists could perform, walls where visual artists could show their work, and room for musicians, actors and creatives to engage with the community around what they were making.

Our friends looked at us like we were nuts, and in fairness, we kind of were. But there was something underneath that early idea that was real. We just did not yet have the language for it. It took older, wiser and more experienced voices around us to help us mine the idea: What were we actually trying to create? Who was it for? What need were we trying to meet? Little by little, Streams began to take shape.

This October, Streams turns 10. There is gratitude in writing that number, and also a fairly substantial dose of: how on earth are we still standing? Because 10 years of community work is expensive. I mean that financially, certainly, but I also mean it in every other sense. This has been sacrificial work, with long days and sleepless nights, and gaps in money, in capacity and in people, between what we knew and what we needed to know.

I have often told our staff that we are building the plane while we fly it. From the ground, perhaps the plane looks impressive enough. Inside, there are roughly four hamsters running furiously on wheels trying to keep the thing in the air. And somehow, here we are.

But if you ask me what I am proudest of after 10 years, it is not the plane. It is the people.

I still remember our very first program registration. We had set the full registration fee at \$125 and offered a half-price option of \$62.50 for families who needed it. The first family to register paid the full amount, and then they paid for somebody else. They were not the only ones who did that. I remember thinking, now I know what this community is made of.

Before we had much infrastructure, before we had years of programs or productions or a Hub of our own, people understood something fundamental about what we were trying to build. There should be room. If one child could access an opportunity, perhaps we could make room for another. That instinct has carried Streams for 10 years.

And in that time, the children grew. Some of the little ones who came through our doors in the early years are teenagers and young adults now. Some have come back to work, volunteer, lead and mentor. Some will be part of our 10th anniversary celebration, telling their own stories about what this place has meant to them. I am glad they will, because they tell the story better than I ever could.

You can count programs and performances and registrations. You can measure scholarships and audiences and hours of instruction. But the thing I am proudest of is harder to put into a spreadsheet. It is the young person who found somewhere safe, the child who discovered something in themselves, the teenager who found confidence. It is the friendships. The belonging. The transformation that happens when a young person is given space to be fully known, fully encouraged and challenged to become more of who they already are.

This work has never felt more necessary. That is what we are gathering to celebrate on Oct. 6: 10 years of it, together, in front of the whole community. We're calling it The Good Old Fashioned Telethon: three hours of live broadcast on Rogers Dufferin, also streamed online for anyone watching from home.

There will be performances, stories, familiar faces, a few surprises, and, yes, we will be asking people to give. But I hope when people hear that ask, they understand what they are actually being asked to invest in.

You may think you are giving us money to buy paint and canvases. You are. You may think you are helping us pay for scripts, props, instruments, instructors or a place for a child to spend an afternoon. You are.

But underneath all of that, you are helping create a chance. A safe place to land before life convinces a young person that they do not belong anywhere. A place to find people before isolation takes hold. A place to discover capability before a label becomes an identity. A place to make something, perform something, learn something, belong somewhere and begin to imagine a future larger than whatever circumstances may be pressing in around them. You are helping give young people the chance to become every bit of who they were born to be.

Ten years ago, we were writing ideas on a kitchen table. Ten years later, I look around and see young people whose stories now contain Streams. That is humbling, and it is also why we are still running those hamster wheels.

On Oct. 6, we are going to stop for a few hours and celebrate what this community has built. And then, God willing, we will keep building, because there are more kids coming through the door, and there needs to be room for them too.

This week's Community Voice column was written by Juli-Anne James, executive director of Streams Community Hub.