



ROUGH DIAMONDS

Creative Arts Society

Photo from L to R: Jesse Leon Easter, Zaman Naimi-Roy, Seth Egger, Brandon Cummings, Jesse Marshall, Bashu Naimi-Roy (seated), Aaron Campbell (in the back), and Renée Therrien. *submitted photo*

BY DAVID MORRISON

“Look at this as an open kitchen. It’s full of ingredients and anyone can walk in, make some food and put it on the table. Then anyone can eat it. This is the kind of free-flowing, no competition, no judgement creative environment that I want to establish.”

I like how Mehdi Naïmi describes his approach to the climate of free expression he ardently encourages within the Rough Diamonds Creative Arts Society (RDCAS). Food metaphors by their very nature are usually pleasing, but in respect of artistic endeavours I find them particularly satisfying. It’s the latent sculpting saucier in me, I guess.

Seriously though, Naïmi’s analogy is a good way of illustrating how this wonderful youth-centred venture operates. For the uninitiated, RDCAS – a non-profit agency – was founded to get teens and young people (14-24) in the community involved in the visual and performing arts in an environment where they can express themselves, share

ideas and nurture respect for each other in the process. The organization’s mission statement is To Support, Promote and Showcase the Creative Expression of the Young and the Disadvantaged, while the RDCAS Facebook page poetically embellishes this intent in simply stating, “Let’s make a world more beautiful”.

He would be the first to admit that many people have contributed to the RDCAS story so far – especially the kids themselves – but it is essentially Naïmi’s brainchild. A Registered Canadian Art Therapist and Play Therapist, he set the ball rolling towards what would eventually become RDCAS shortly after settling here 16 years ago.

“I soon got involved in any form I could working with kids and teens in this area,” he begins. “The first thing was volunteering to do an art course in Qualicum Beach. Then in 2000 I proposed to my employer that I would start an after-school programme that would be based on free art expression, and they supported that. It was once or twice a week; I’d bring in art supplies and be there

as a technical support. There would be some basic ground rules about respecting each other and their environment, but aside from that there was no expectation. The kids loved it and I did that for four years. After that I helped set up the Child, Youth & Family Centre at SOS (Society of Organized Services).”

(At this juncture I think it’s only right to point out that the SOS website homepage – www.sosd69.com - bears a famous Albert Einstein quote: ‘Try not to become a man of success but a man of value.’ Rather apt in this instance, I feel.)

“We set up a programme where kids would come in on Friday nights and get involved, socializing and making art. I stayed with that for about a year, then started volunteering with ArtSpeak in Parksville, using the time to get the kids to make art and murals, which we set up around an empty lot in Parksville. After ArtSpeak we slowly started to form Rough Diamonds as more of a cohesive entity. My wife and I went to the Arts Council in Parksville, and as they

were looking for some diversity in their programming, wanting young people to get involved, we matched up pretty quickly. Then late last spring we registered as the Rough Diamonds Creative Arts Society and started looking for a space to work out of. By the end of the summer we got our registration and in November found this building in Parksville on the corner of Jensen (Ave.) and Alberni Highway.”

The building to which Naïmi refers has become the Youth Arts Market (YAM), a multi-functional space the young people of RDCAS write and make art in, sell their creations from, rehearse their bands, act, dance and perform in, help to run and proudly call their own. It opened in December last year, marking a considerable leap forward in Naïmi’s aims.

“It was sitting vacant for a long time and through a contact in the community we found the landlords and explained our situation. They were very cooperative and generous because it was a community-oriented type of activity, so gave it to us at a price we could afford,” he explains with obvious delight. Assisted by funding from Regional District of Nanaimo, Parksville-Qualicum Community Foundation and Oceanside Literacy Now, Rough Diamonds has become the entity Naïmi always dreamed of, with a headquarters to boot.

Yet despite such a sharp local focus, one of Naïmi’s long-term aims is to build an Island-wide community, putting creative youngsters in touch with each other.

“My ideal is to have a network among creative communities in the region,” he says. “So, for example, teenagers writing in Parksville can be connected with teenagers writing in Tofino or Port Hardy, so there’s a support group where the kids can be read and critiqued by their peers.”

This may well come in the future, but RDCAS has already reached much further afield by establishing international links through Naïmi’s work on child-centred art projects in small communities in Singapore, Sri Lanka and India. One of his goals is to loosen attitudes in these more structured societies, where free creative expression such as exercised here is uncommon in pre-school and early education.

It seems certain that more overseas connections will be made in the future, but at home and sooner rather than later for RDCAS will be the reissue of the ingeniously titled and truly excellent compilation CD, *Some Assembly Required*. Originally released on August 30 last year, the new version will boast a revised running order and different artwork, but I for one can already attest to the high quality of the musical content.

The CD features three bands with overlapping personnel – including Naïmi’s evidently talented sons, Bashu and Zaman – plus rootsy singer-songwriter, Renée, and beautiful, piano-led solo material from Bashu. (I’m particularly impressed with the emotional clout he is capable of delivering via such lyrics as, “I see a stopwatch in your smile / I see a timer in your eyes,” from his heartbreaker, *The Bitter End*.) All three bands are great: Born By Science deal in gritty, edgy rock; The Plastic Chair Explosion’s sound is acoustic-based and smart, with stunning guitar playing seen to full effect on the awesome *Shoplifter*; The Detective Collective trade in complex and exciting indie rock, their *Surf Tango* being one of the best songs I’ve heard from any Canadian band since relocating here three years ago.

Launched on its release date with the celebratory 11-band Vancouver Island Young Music Festival at Parksville Community Park, *Some Assembly Required* is testament enough to exactly what Naïmi and his young charges are capable of achieving. It exudes joy and confidence, and in the ambitious arrangements of some of the material the spirit of creative free expression Naïmi strives for flows from every note.

So with the YAM now up and running, a CD release and music festival behind them in the space of just a few months, the RDCAS is making huge strides. And with the guidance and expertise of Naïmi helming the project, it seems the future for the area’s creative youth looks very bright...especially as there are many more rough diamonds yet to be mined. ~

For further information on the activities of the Rough Diamonds Creative Arts Society, to contact Mehdi Naïmi or to make a donation, please visit www.roughdiamonds.ca.

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There are admirable potentialities in every human being. Believe in your strength and your youth. Learn to repeat endlessly to yourself, 'It all depends on me'.

~ Andr