



# Local **LOOKING BACK**

North Peace  
Cultural Centre  
celebrates 20 years

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Dec 14, 2012



Aleisha Hendry Photo

Kids got a visit from Santa Claus during Story Time  
at the Fort St. John Public Library on Dec. 15.

Dec 21, 2012



# Culture continues to thrive in Fort St. John

DSC 14, 2012

**CONT. FROM A3**

Hampton said she was impressed upon first look at the structure a couple of years ago.

"When I first saw the Cultural Centre... I was surprised and impressed with the facility," she said. "Assuming that this was out of the way, assuming wrongly that this was out of the way in terms of geography, I also assumed that maybe they wouldn't have an amenity like this.

"If this is the kind of facility this community invests in, therefore, this community must consider arts and culture in a very important light," Hampton continued.

She said the cultural centre is used in a number of different ways, from dance classes to Stage North theatre productions to the art gallery to the public

library to an arts preschool, a café and also renting space to companies for meetings.

"All manner of corporate and community groups use the centre," she said. "We're... happily booked (and) our schedule is really tight."

She said the interaction of all the people who use the building is great in terms of "learning and sharing and celebrating what others in the arts are doing."

"For the people who had the foresight and had the vision and the determination to create this and to develop this and actually put the arts and cultural community together - hats off to them, they need to take a bow," said Hampton.

When looking to the next 20 years, much like the population of Fort St. John,

the North Peace Cultural Centre is due to grow.

"We're probably going to need more space, (though) I really don't know how we're going to do it," said Atkins. "We want the library to stay in the centre of the city, it will need more space; the arts space needs more space; the gallery needs more space.

"In a growing city, everything that the city has to offer will need to grow to cater to the increase in population," he said.

Popesku agreed.

She noted the Fort St. John population has gone from about 6,000 people in the mid-seventies to around 20,000 now.

"We've gotten to the point where we have 20,000 people in town and we could use a larger theatre," she said. "We, in Fort St. John, are blessed here because

we have the performance centre because we can teach young children how to present themselves on stage in front of an audience."

She also pointed out that the arts occur throughout the community with at least 26 unique arts-related groups, not just in the Cultural Centre.

"Art takes place everywhere, but we have a cultural centre where we can present it and sell it," said Popesku.

Evans pointed out that the North Peace Cultural Centre is one of the city's amenities.

"I would like to see it keep status quo and try to expand the best they can with new shows, what have you," said Evans. "It's a building that there's always something going on in."

Hampton agreed.

"We'd like to dream about the physical changes, but really the fundamental changes are growth in the arts," she said. "If we can keep doing what we're doing and do more of it... Then that creates a healthier community, it creates a happier community, it creates a more educated community and people will stay here longer," said Hampton.

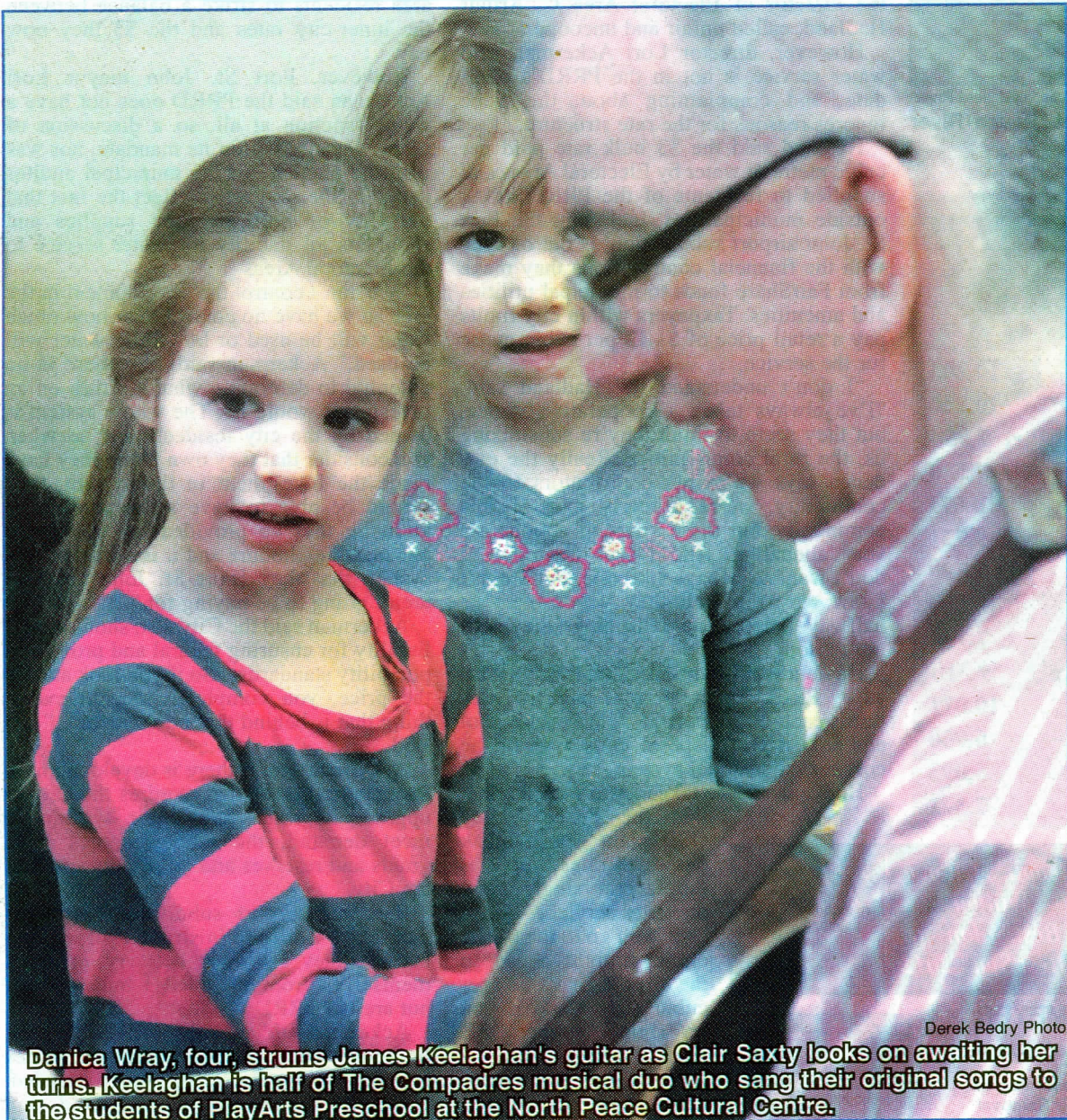
Though she also has visions of physical expansion.

"We can go up!" she said with a smile. "It is structurally engineered to hold a second story."

Whether it's attending a show or appearing on stage or going to the library or singing in a choir, Hampton encourages the community to "take a risk."

"Part of what the arts is about is dreaming and taking a risk."





Derek Bedry Photo

Danica Wray, four, strums James Keelaghan's guitar as Clair Saxty looks on awaiting her turns. Keelaghan is half of The Compadres musical duo who sang their original songs to the students of PlayArts Preschool at the North Peace Cultural Centre.



# LOCAL NEWS

## Take a bow

The North Peace Cultural Centre celebrates its second decade

**KATELIN DEAN**

*For the Alaska Highway News*

From theatre to music to visual art to literature to dance and more, the North Peace Cultural Centre has been a focal point in Fort St. John for the past 20 years.

The centre, which now sees at least 160,000 visitors each year, had humble beginnings.

Tony Atkins, who is currently a director on the Cultural Centre's board, said the project got off the ground in the late eighties.

"It was a legacy project where we received money from Expo (Expo '86, which was held in Vancouver) to initiate the purchase of the old Hudson's Bay building, which was vacant at the time," said Atkins.

He noted that while he wasn't involved in the initial concept, he had been involved with a similar project in the recent past that would've seen a theatre and library space with the Pomeroy Sports Centre is currently located.

"That lost (a) referendum, so it didn't go forward," he said. "A few years later, this idea came forward."

Larry Evans, who is currently a city

to the table (and) without that, we don't get this.

"There were enough who understood the value to do that."

Sue Popesku, who had been involved in the initial library and theatre project, was also part of the cultural centre's inception.

"There were always a number of people who were very passionate about getting the cultural centre," she said.

Though not everyone was in favour.

"There was every attitude and every degree of passion for and against the building," she continued.

Popesku noted that it took \$4.6-million to take the cultural centre from "the beginning of the project to operation."

She said it was kicked off with the Expo '86 grant of one million dollars, in addition to a \$1.65-million dollar grant from GoB.C., \$400,000 from the federal government and \$1-million raised in the community.

"At the very end, they had done phase one of the building (and) they couldn't find the money for phase two," said Popesku. "The city council, over great discussion and controversy, put in \$800,000 to finish the project."

Evans said this final stage took about a



KATELIN DEAN PHOTO

Bettyanne Hampton stands in front of the North Peace Cultural Centre. This large red structure has been a mainstay in Fort St. John for the past 20 years, and Hampton, the cultural centre's executive director, hopes it will be around much longer.



councillor, was a member of the centre's building committee.

He explained that the centre sat unfinished for a number of years.

"They did some work on it, then the money kind of dried up," said Evans.

He noted that the building itself was constructed in the mid-seventies when the Hudson's Bay company moved in, but after the opening of the Totem Mall in 1979, the store moved out.

It sat vacant for a number of years prior to the Cultural Centre's inception.

Bettyanne Hampton began as the executive director in March of 2010.

She commended the people who launched the project more than 20 years ago, saying that it was not easy to get off the ground.

"It takes economic will, it takes government will, it takes community will – huge political will and it takes funds," said Hampton. "Everybody has to come

year.

"We opened in 1992," he said.

He said they carried every one of the 413 theatre seats into the building.

"We actually hired a consultant to show us how to put all the seats in," he said.

Atkins said the Cultural Centre filled a need in the community.

"There was not a centre in Fort St. John where there was a theatre, where visiting artists and local artists could perform," he said. "Prior to that we had used the old high school gym or school gyms or anything that seemed available at the time.

"You had to sort of juggle it around whatever else the schools were doing," he continued. "It was a major problem to find where things could be presented, and as a result, we didn't get a lot of things in."

He said the centre has brought many

outside artists into the community and also given local performers a place to perform.

"To my mind it's been a great success and I've been happy to see it develop because I feel it was something definitely missing in the city," said Atkins. "We had quite a number of sporting facilities, (but) there was nothing that sort of looked after the arts or provided presentation of the arts."

Evans said one of the first shows he remembers after the centre opened was Little Shop of Horrors.

"I was in it," he said.

Little Shop of Horrors was one of Evans many on-stage experiences at the centre, but the benefit is two-fold.

"It gives people a chance to be entertained by acts that normally wouldn't come in here," he said.

"It's 413 wonderful seats; there's not a

bad seat in the house.

"People can watch anything from Irish dance to plays to comedies to whatever," he said. "We didn't have that before."

Though he did note the centre has had its "ups and downs."

Atkins said one of the main challenges has been economical.

"The change has always been financial because it's a non-profit organization," he said. "We do receive grants from the city and we do receive grants from the (Peace River) Regional District, but there is never enough money to do everything that we want to do.

"I think we raise approximately 60 per cent of our expenses ourselves, which is a major achievement for a group," Atkins continued. "Finances have always been the difficult part because we're always on the edge."

He noted that the numbers of people

who have used the centre from year to year has continually increased, along with the number of presentations.

"It's also given local artists a place to exhibit and sell their wares; it's allowed the library to serve its community very well," he said.

He said the Cultural Centre is part of a well-rounded city.

"You can only plug so many potholes (and) you do need something else in addition to the sporting activities to have a fully round city," he said. "You need all of these things to make a city a fully vibrant place to be.

"We have developed this building to what it is (and) that is a mainstay at the centre of the region," said Atkins. "Everyone knows where it is and that we've survived 20 years and gone strength to strength along the way."

**SEE CULTURE ON A5**