Inside

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Cataloging the climate crisis

In the past, a magazine’s front of book section — which you’re reading right now — has been used to showcase short but interesting bits of news. However, the past is not the present. The effects of climate change have become more frequent and devastating, causing never-before-seen fires, floods and storms.

The Calgary Journal believes this is an urgent matter that requires the attention of news organizations around the world. That’s why we have decided, for the foreseeable future, to commit our front of book section to covering the climate change crisis, which is too often under-reported in this city, despite its seriousness.

This new section will highlight local, national and international news related to that crisis. It is not a partisan issue. It doesn’t discriminate based on race, age, gender or sexuality. It doesn’t end when we are gone. And that's why we feel it is our responsibility, as journalists, to ensure we keep you informed about this issue which will profoundly affect all of us — politically, societally and personally.

AUSTRALIA UNDER FIRE

While Australia is no stranger to devastating wildfires, an early start to this year's blazes has ravaged the continent, while thousands of firefighters struggle to prevent their spread. Much like British Columbia and California, Australia has seen an increase in the number and frequency of wildfires. And this year's wildfire season — which stretches from December to March — is on its way to becoming part of the history books. For example, between early September and late November, roughly 1.65 million hectares of land has burned in the state of New South Wales, according to the Centre for Environmental Risk Management of Bushfire at the University of Wollongong Australia.

Eighty per cent of koala habitat in the country has also been burned, with about 1,000 koalas dying in the fires. And Sydney, the country’s most populous city, saw its first-ever “catastrophic” fire danger warning, which closed hundreds of schools on Nov. 11. That same day, the Bloomberg new agency reported, “The fires come amid increasing divisions about climate change policy in Australia, with the conservative government resisting scientists’ calls to take greater action to reduce carbon emissions.”

CALIFORNIA BLACKOUTS

As summer finally arrived in California earlier this year, so too did wildfires. High amounts of spring rain led to grass growth that became kindling when the blades dried out over the summer. Experts warned that the most dangerous time for fires would be during October to December. As of the last week in November, when the Calgary Journal was being laid out, 5,563 fires had started in the state, burning roughly 128,285 acres of land.

At the beginning of October, California’s biggest energy company, Pacific Gas & Electric, shut off power to more than a total 2.5 million customers. The rolling power outages were an effort to prevent the company’s old and outdated electrical equipment from sparking additional fires due to fallen trees and high winds. Throughout the blackouts, Californians complained about a lack of adequate information and spotty communication, while also calling out the utility company for failing to invest in upgrades that would make the system more durable.

PG&E did set up centres for its customers to power their electronics and have access to free water, snacks and flashlights and solar lanterns. But many said the length of the blackouts affected their ability to find fuel, work and store food.

VENICE IS SINKING

One of the world’s most historic cities, Venice, Italy, experienced the worst flooding it has seen in more than 50 years. On Nov. 12, 2019, the lagoon upon which the city floats rose almost six feet higher than usual, causing massive flooding throughout heritage sites, storefronts and even the Veneto regional council. The city estimates the flood will cost more than one billion euros in estimated damage, according to local news outlets.

Ironically, the Veneto regional council — whose jurisdiction includes Venice — was under water for the first time ever after a majority of its members rejected measures to fight climate change. A Facebook post by Andrea Zanoni, one of the dissenters, said the measures included funding for sustainable sources of energy and reducing plastic use, as well as replacing diesel-fueled buses for ones with more fuel-efficient engines.

EXTINCTION REBELLION CANADA PROTESTS

Climate activists across Canada took part in Extinction Rebellion’s International Rebellion in October. They blocked off streets and bridges as part of an effort to send a message to governments that more should be done about the world’s climate change problem. The group supports members who engage in arrestable action during protests. In a Facebook post, it states “the arrests are essential to get media coverage and help bring the government and the judicial system to crisis, where they are failing to protect citizens from mass extinction and runaway climate breakdown.”

During the cross-Canada protests, over one hundred people engaged in such activity, with protesters in Edmonton, Vancouver and Victoria, Kitchener-Waterloo, Halifax and Montreal blocking rush hour traffic and angering drivers. Protesters in Calgary, however, took a different approach. Instead of blocking traffic on the Louise Bridge, climate activists waited for the light to turn red. They then handed out timbids and pamphlets to drivers before making their way back to the curb as the lights turned green.

SIX IMPORTANT CLIMATE FACTORS IN CANADA

A report released in July 2019 by the Council of Canadian Academies outlined 12 areas of climate change...
Environment and Climate Change Canada released the Canada Climate Change Report in April 2019. The first study of its kind, the CCCR is "about how and why Canada’s climate has changed and what changes are projected for the future." It also documents changes across the country in "temperature, precipitation, snow, ice, permafrost and freshwater availability as well as in Canada’s three oceans." The report begins with headline statements that sum up the findings within the report. Here are some of those statements:

- "Both past and future warming in Canada is, on average, about double the magnitude of global warming."
- "Oceans surrounding Canada have warmed, become more acidic and less oxygenated, consistent with observed global ocean changes over the past century."
- "The seasonal availability of freshwater is changing, with an increased risk of water supply shortages in summer."
- "Coastal flooding is expected to increase in many areas of Canada due to local sea level rise."
- "The rate and magnitude of climate change under high versus low emission scenarios project two very different futures for Canada."

For more information, or to read the report, go to changingclimate.ca.

Flooding is becoming more common due to climate change. Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick made headlines this past spring as heavy rainfall and rapid snowmelt created an abundance of water with nowhere to go. And the damage caused by such flooding is increasing.

The Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements program was established in 1970 to provide federal financial assistance to communities affected by natural disasters, most notably flooding. Since its inception, the DFAA handouts have increased substantially, from $10 million to $360 million by 2016.

Many cities across the country are trying to mitigate future damage caused by these disasters, and Calgary is no exception. The 2013 floods in Calgary inundated the downtown core and resulted in the evacuation of 80,000 people from their homes. Damage throughout Alberta totalled approximately $5 billion, with Calgary’s share of the bill being $409 million.

Three years later, Calgary conducted a flood mitigation assessment that resulted in recommendations on how the city could protect Calgarians from future floods. Those recommendations have resulted in the construction of a number of flood barriers throughout the city. One of those barriers, along Centre Street Bridge, has already been completed. Another, along Heritage Drive, is slated to be finished in 2020, while future projects for Sunnyside and downtown are earmarked for a few more years down the road.

A flood mitigation barrier in Bowness, however, has no completion date as it’s in the first phase of development and has become a source of controversy. The berm would travel along 100 properties in the community where some of the most devastating damage occurred. But, many Bowness residents fear the berm will drop property values and affect riverside views, access and the local wildlife and habitat, according to a story by CBC. Not all community members agree, though, as “those who are not in million-dollar riverfront homes,” needs berms to protect their properties.

The berms are part of an overall project to protect the city from further floods. That project includes the building of a new dry reservoir by TransAlta and community risk mitigation projects which the city said has reduced Calgary’s exposure to floods by 30 per cent.

Projected annual temperature change for Canada under a low emission scenario (left) and a high emission scenario for the late century. Projections are based on the Coupled Model Intercomparison-Project (CMIP5) multi-model ensemble. Changes are relative to the 1986-2005 period.

ILLUSTRATION: CANADA CLIMATE CHANGE REPORT
Beekeeping is becoming more popular thanks to movements, such as Save the Bees, which are raising awareness about these helpful insects. But one local researcher is looking into how beekeeping, which involves non-native bees, could negatively impact Calgary’s native bee population.

Hobby beekeeper Liz Goldie has always been interested in nature and how different species interact with each other. This interaction drew her to beekeeping, though that wasn’t her original plan.

“I actually wanted to get chickens because I grew up on a farm and chickens were something that I knew and I thought that would be wonderful. But the City of Calgary didn’t think it was such a great idea,” says Goldie, a member of the Calgary and District Beekeepers Association.

Her second choice was to keep bees. While she didn’t like the taste of honey before, 10 years from when she first started beekeeping, she now loves to include it in her recipes.

While Goldie’s tastes have changed, it seems like the popularity of local beekeeping has too.

“When I joined Calgary beekeepers, there were about 30 people maybe and we met in the basement of Co-op because it was free and now there are about 450 members,” says Goldie.

She’s not the only one noticing this trend. Ron Miska, a researcher doing his master’s in bee ecology at the University of Calgary, agrees the honeybee population has grown due to the increase in beekeepers.

“In the city of Calgary there are about 1,400 honeybee colonies that are kept by people and that’s a lot. That’s quite a number of bees. Just 10 years ago there were only about 120 and now there are 1,400. So it’s increased over 10 times in 10 years,” Miksha says.

In fact, this trend has spread throughout Alberta, with over a thousand more beekeepers in 2018 than in 2008.

Art Andrews, owner of the Chinook Honey Company, has also seen that popularity.

“The fact that people are more aware of what’s going on around them, I think that’s important,” says Andrews. “So, they can say, ‘Oh maybe we should take care of the bees a little more.’”

But, with new beekeepers, there’s always a learning period where they figure out how to best nurture the insects.

Goldie remembers preparing for her honeybees by planting flowers in her yard for them to feed on. But she later realized those flowers were more suited to native bees.

Alberta is home to only 300 of the around 20,000 different species of bees in the world. Despite this, the sticky and dirty job of beekeeping continues to grow in popularity.

**OH HONEY!**

Are native bees being pushed aside by honeybees?

PHOTO: HAILEY PAYNE
bees such as bumblebees, as well as solitary bees such as leafcutter bees, mason bees and miner bees.

“I attracted a lot of native bees just because I was trying to feed my honeybees and doing a poor job of picking the species (of native plants) that honeybees preferred. So, I ended up with the native bees as well,” Goldie says.

Planting these flowers has helped turn Goldie’s yard into a haven for insects of all kinds, including the many kinds of bees.

In this way, beekeeping can provide flowers and natural spaces that benefit all types of bees, as well as other insects that contribute to pollinating and nourishing the surrounding plants.

But honeybees, which are not native to Alberta, enjoy flowers that are imported or brought over to Canada from Europe — which is where the insects came from 130 years ago. Those flowers include dandelions, clovers and alfalfa.

As a result, when beekeeping, each kind of bee and their preferences needs to be considered.

This is what Miksha is doing through his research — determining how native bees are reproducing and living compared to honeybee colonies.

Miksha has always been curious about bees ever since being put in charge of the beehives on his farm when he was young. His love for bees continued into the commercial field when he started his own beekeeping business in his early 20s.

That background left him curious about what effects honeybees have had on native bees already in the area.

“It’s not natural for us to have a bunch of [not native] bees or to be keeping bees, it’s really not quite natural,” says Miksha.

A hundred empty nest boxes were also placed around Calgary and monitored to see if bees made homes in them and how well they did.

To support Miksha’s research, Goldie had both a bumblebee and leafcutter bee box in her yard.

Additionally, Miksha analyzed pollen from both bumblebee and honeybee hives to see which flowers they were collecting from and if they were competing with each other.

While still conducting his research, Miksha believes that honeybees might make it harder for native bees to survive.

“The native bees probably are in trouble because nobody is really looking after them,” Miksha says. Many of them are “smaller, they’re darker, you don’t see them as often, some of them have gone extinct. So those are the ones that I’m concerned about.”

As a result, he believes those who are keeping honeybees to help the ecosystem might be somewhat misguided.

“It would be like ‘you know I’m going to put a bunch of sheep in my backyard because I hear the deer are in trouble.’ You know they kinda eat the same thing, but are you really helping the ecology by bringing sheep into your backyard?” says Miksha.

For his part, though, Andrews hasn’t seen honeybees as a problem for native bees since becoming a beekeeper in 1995, starting with just two hives to help pollinate plants in his backyard.

“Bumblebees are just going to do their thing anyways and honeybees are going to do their thing and wasps will try to steal honey from beehives,” says Andrews, who at one point had 300 hives.

“I don’t think there’s much competition there at all and I don’t think honeybees have a lot of influence on bumblebees as far as I know,” Andrews says.

Indeed, both Andrews and Goldie see the recent increase in beekeeping and awareness as good for all bees in general.

“I think that it has spilled over into the native bee population and now we’re looking at how do we help native bees,” says Goldie. “Because of how the honeybees were being impacted it made us acutely aware that the native bee population may be in decline as well.”

“A hundred empty nest boxes were also placed around Calgary and monitored to see if bees made homes in them and how well they did.

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Bee Facts

HONEYBEES
These bees originated from Europe and are not native to Canada, having been brought over 130 years ago to provide wax for candles. Honeybees don’t hibernate in the winter as many other bee species do. They like to stay warm and can withstand the heat better than the cold. Honeybees are great pollinators and “produce 33 per cent of the food pollination wise,” says Art Andrews, owner of the Chinook Honey Company.

These bees are the most common and have adapted to a variety of environments. Because of this, they are on every continent except Antarctica.

If a different species of bee, such as a hornet or wasp enters a honeybee hive, the bees will cook them alive by surrounding the intruder and raising the temperature with their wing muscles. This works because the hornet or wasp cannot withstand the same temperatures as the honeybee and will die due to the heat.

BUMBLEBEES
They are native to Canada and are characterized by their big size and fuzzy exterior. Bumblebees are great pollinators because of that size, which allows them to move pollen around. These bees don’t make a lot of honey — just enough to support themselves. Most bumblebees nest and hibernate in the ground. Nests for this species are smaller than half of a shoebox and have a more clumped or box-like shape. In typical Canadian fashion, they can withstand the cold better than the heat.

LEAFCUTTER BEES
These bees are smaller than both the honeybee and bumblebee. While they don’t sting, the leafcutter bee will bite. They’re called the leafcutter bee because they will take part of the leaf back to their hive to provide food for their larva. Leafcutters are also expert pollinators. Andrews believes that while “honeybees only pollinate the alfalfa around 10 to 13 per cent, these leafcutters will go up to 80 or 90 per cent.” Leafcutter nests hang from an object and have holes drilled into it. That makes it look like it has tubes or hollows. These spaces are where the bees nest.

- HAILEY PAYNE
Extinction Rebellion creates change in Calgary

Nicole Bradford fights climate change through the support of a non-violent climate change activist group

In her early years, Nicole Bradford fought to protect Clayoquot Sound, a powerful movement that pushed for environmental protection in British Columbia. But Bradford later felt alone in her fight to repair the planet and a flawed society. Now, she's found a home with the Extinction Rebellion, where she promotes compassion and cultural change through activism.

Bradtford always felt a connection to the environment. She noticed changes happening around her early on in her life, such as the population of fish and other animals slowly diminishing over time. This made Bradford begin to wonder if it was human activity that was affecting the wildlife.

“I have a really clear memory of fishing with my dad when I was quite young and I remember him wondering out loud if there were as many fish and wondering if that had anything to do with something happening industrially up-stream,” she says.

Living on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, Bradford heard about the Clayoquot Sound protest through friends and, in 1993, decided the forests in that area were something she wanted to protect. Working as a tree planter in the Tofino area of Vancouver Island, Bradford saw firsthand the devastation of logging. She also felt compelled to participate in the protest in order to stand up for her son's future.

“I thought to myself, ‘I have a child whose world needs forests and I have time to go over and participate,’” she explains. Bradford says that during the protest, the group's goal was to delay logging for as long as possible and to make as big of an impact as they could without inciting violence, even if it meant being arrested.

“People would be making the decision [to either] stand on the road and let themselves be arrested or leave the road,” says Bradford.

She adds that it was important for her not to incite conflict or anger.

“It wasn’t a fight; it was civil disobedience.”

During the protest, approximately 900 people were arrested — including Bradford's husband, who had stepped onto the road to replace Bradford in order to protect her and their son.

“I remember having this feeling of such appreciation and gratitude for someone who is willing to put themselves into this stigmatized position of having been arrested for a criminal act that to me was just so justifiable,” she says. “And to not resist arrest but [refuse to] make it easy — because it shouldn’t be easy.”

For Bradford, the protest ended when her husband was arrested. However, it started gaining media attention soon after she left, which Bradford says brought her an immense amount of joy. Then, it was announced that the protesters’ hard work was actually affecting change.

“The day that the announcement was made that the logging was going to be stopped and that this area of forest was going to be preserved was like, ‘What? Really? We did it!’” She says, “It was one of those moments where [it was] acknowledged that the people had spoken.”

Despite that victory, Bradford felt alone and noticed how flawed society had become.

“It’s been very lonely to be a person who cares so much about the planet I live on. It [was] like, ‘Oh, you’re a flaky hippie, don’t you know how the real world works?’ I had that asked to me so many times,” she says. “And I’m like, ‘You’re not talking about the world actually. You’re talking about human civilization, which is flawed deeply.’”

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Detecting forest fires all the way from space

The satellite constellation Stephen Achal is designing will be able to find forest fires before they become a problem

Stephen Achal loves the stars and thought he would end up working in academia or astronomy. But, after being exposed to the data behind climate change, he decided he needed to make more of an immediate difference. And now he is by starting 4pi Lab, which develops cameras and telescopes to improve the early detection of forest fires.

Achal remembers the first time he saw stars in the night sky. As a four-year-old living in the industrial Midlands of the United Kingdom, Achal almost never had a clear view of the sky. One night, a small patch in the clouds opened up and he was awestruck by the beautiful lights shining through the darkness. He wanted to know more about the stars. His parents tried to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, but they didn’t have the money to do so. And so his lifelong love affair with the universe and the stars began.

But Achal’s time in London was short lived. At the age of eight, Achal and his family were told by a doctor that the smog-filled skies were no place for a boy with asthma. So Achal and his family chose to move to Calgary because of its clean air. Achal remembers being mesmerized by the expansive blue skies and the twinkling black at night — images that only further fueled his curiosity for the universe.

Achal attended the University of Calgary, majoring in astrophysics. He spent much of his time before and during his undergraduate and graduate degrees designing telescopes and his own optical systems.

In the 1980s, Achal was working on his graduate project, developing an imaging device designed to look at ultraviolet light destined for the International Space Station. Achal was sure he would end up in academia when his project was completed. However, after he and his wife spent much of their savings traveling the world, Achal returned to Calgary broke and in need of work. Achal turned to Clifford Anger, his project supervisor and CEO of ITRES Research, for help. Anger had previously offered him a job, needing Achal’s skills to design optics and telescopes to look at the Earth.

“I reluctantly agreed to a two-month contract to pay off some of my debt from travelling the world,” says Achal. “That two months has turned into more than thirty years of wonderful adventures and experiences at Itres.”

Achal spent his time at ITRES Research designing systems that not only worked from the air, but also from the space shuttle. The system monitored the changes in the environment — changes which startled him.

“The news isn’t good. So, it’s changing dramatically. And unfortunately for you and the future generations, you guys are inheriting a very different world.”

While climate change has always been a part of Achal’s work, he realized he could do more.

“I thought that instead of being a voyeur watching — you know designing systems and doing research and watching how our planet is changing — to be proactive and to start to do something about it to try and help curb the effects of climate change.”

This feeling led Achal to leave Itres Research and start his own company, 4pi Lab. The six-month-old company is armed with a five-year plan to tackle climate change in its own unique way. With forest fires being a massive contributor to climate change every year, Achal’s team designed a way to detect them before they become a problem.

The solution? A camera that can detect potassium that has reached over 500 degrees Celsius. When potassium, which is found in all vegetation, reaches this temperature, it ionizes and emits a light that is easily spotted by these specifically designed cameras. The excited potassium imaging cameras, or EPIC cameras for short, are perfect for satellites.

“Sixteen of these satellites equipped with these EPIC cameras can map the entire planet once every six hours looking for very, very small wildfires — you know, ten metres or smaller worldwide,” explains Achal.

With the ability to detect forest fires much earlier, Achal believes it will give responders more time to make the decision to put out the fire or let it run its course. Achal thinks his system will be the next paradigm in forest fire detection. But starting something of this scale is a big undertaking and Achal says funding is going to be a challenge. The whole project is expected to cost around several hundred million dollars.

“We have our fingers crossed that billionaire philanthropists will look at this cause and fund at least the initial part of this development,” says Achal.

4pi Lab is starting with a goal of raising $75 million to fund the launch of their first satellite in three years.
Thinking inside the container box

New environmentally sustainable housing is pioneered in Calgary

When Jamie Turner first set out to build an ecological house, he had no idea it would be a shipping container. Nor did he realize all the other struggles he would face while building it. But now that it’s finished, he hopes it will serve as an example for others.

Turner, a manager for a large telecommunications company in Calgary, had initially been interested in creating an ecologically sustainable structure because of his love of tech.

“I think I’ve been always interested in new technology. I’ve been involved in technology in my career for a long time.”

But Turner stated one of the pivotal turning points for him was a scene from the popular TV show Mad Men which helped to spur some his environmental concerns.

“I remember a very specific scene in one of the episodes of Mad Men where Don Draper and his family are out having a picnic in a public park,” says Turner. “There are all these like paper plates and plastic plates and stuff. And they literally just shake it all onto the ground and walk away.”

Turner’s hope to not be as wasteful as the Drapers led him to research the different ways to build ecologically friendly homes. But he didn’t find a lot of inspiration.

“It’s only building codes that have basically created situations where big builders have had to move forward,” Turner said.

“It’s only building codes that have basically created situations where big builders have had to move forward.”

But the lack of innovation didn’t stop there. When he saw how little initiative was coming from Alberta, he turned to other countries that were taking more action surrounding climate change.

“I was a little bit discouraged with the advancements we were making in Alberta specifically,” says Turner. “So that led me to look at more progressive places, whether it be Europe or the state of California, which is very progressive with their climate action policies. And that kind of sparked something.”

That’s when Turner discovered Edmonton-based company 3Leafs.

3Leafs is a custom building and construction firm that specializes in manufacturing shipping container homes that incorporate green technologies into modern living.

However, due to the unique nature of the structures produced by 3Leafs, Turner soon found challenges from the City of Calgary in zoning the new structure.

“What do know is typically in municipalities you have a lot of red tape. It does this back and forth thing, but not a lot of action happens. It’s been handled by a lot of people and just gets held up in limbo.”

While the original construction was slated to be completed within 90 days, the build was held up for more than six months due to zoning issues on the construction permits.

During that hold-up, Turner stated that one of the biggest challenges was the impact the extended delay had on his daughter, Charlotte.

“The top of our priority list was the stability for Charlotte. How is she doing? What’s her mental state? What’s her emotional state? Because we knew that we were really uprooting her.”

In addition to the delays, Turner began construction during an election year, which saw a change in the provincial government. Since the new UCP government took over from the NDP, the amount of provincial support for climate initiatives has decreased.

“It’s disappointing. I think for other Albertans, who are looking to lessen their carbon footprint and put clean energy back into the grid that all Albertans use — I think it’s disappointing that the existing situation is so short-sighted.”

Turner adds, “We would have had solar panels at a 30 per cent reduction over the cost of what will what we will be paying.”

Despite the personal, bureaucratic and political climate that Turner overcame during the construction of the house, he remains optimistic about the construction of future shipping container homes.

“We’re just presenting an alternative for others maybe who have don’t have the resources or didn’t do the research or didn’t know it was even possible to look at an alternative build like this. And that’s very cool.”
Doug Collister has been passionate about bird conservation since he was young, eventually becoming a bird banded after a career in the oil and gas industry.

However, he realized more needed to be done to help scientists track the health of bird populations. That’s why he formed the Calgary Bird Banding Society, even as he struggles to get people to care about bird conservation.

Collister’s own attitude toward birds was shaped early on in his life. When he was three-years-old, his grandmother gave him a coffee table book on birds.

“She had us all write a story kind of related to that print,” Collister said. “Whoever was best would get that print — and I wanted that print so bad. I ended up writing a story and it turned out that was the one she chose. That was a big reinforcement for me.”

From there, Collister became an avid birdwatcher throughout high school, despite finding it a lonely hobby.

“But not a sad way or anything, but just the fact there weren’t many other people interested,” Collister said.

After high school, Collister applied to the University of Manitoba, graduating in the mid-’70s with an engineering degree. He worked as an engineer in the oil industry for about 15 years, simultaneously pursuing his interest in birds on the side through bird watching and eventually bird banding.

Bird banding is the process of capturing migratory birds, generally in mist nets, and retrieving them to take measurements such as species, sex, age, weight and general health. A bander applies a uniquely numbered band to the bird’s leg that fits like a watch on a wrist.

The bird is eventually released after its number and date of capture are recorded. If the bird is ever re-caught at the same banding station or elsewhere, researchers can use that data to learn about bird survivorship, population and migration routes.

When Collister got into bird banding in the mid-80s, there wasn’t much scientific oversight in the practice.

After apprenticing under permitted banders, Collister was able to receive a master permit from the Canadian Office of Bird Banding. This allowed him to take part in more administrative roles and spearheading research projects, such as the one at the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary.

The Inglewood Bird Sanctuary has been a place of interest for Collister. Located in southeast Calgary, it was registered as a federal migratory bird sanctuary in 1929 due to the diversity and density of migratory birds that pass through it twice a year.

“I wasn’t happy just being bird banding. I wanted to do something that would contribute and cherish the science in population monitoring,” Collister explained. “That’s where the project our project in Inglewood, arose.”

Around this time, Collister was also attending the University of Calgary, pursuing a master’s degree in environmental design. After graduating in 1994, he found his new career as a consulting biologist gave him more spare time. With this extra time, he started investing more time at the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary.

Collister officially founded and became the president of the Calgary Bird Banding Society in 1995, which became part of the newly-formed Canadian Migration Monitoring Network.

Collister said it is challenging for academics to gain resources for long-term monitoring programs like these, so the Calgary Bird Banding Society relies on support from the community and its members to keep the project going.

“A good way to get those long-term data sets — which are vitally important because there’s so much variation out there in nature — is through citizen science, which the Calgary Bird Banding Society does,” Collister said.

Citizen science is an integral part of the work Collister does at the Calgary Bird Banding Society — it occurs when members of the general public aid in collecting scientific data, often under the supervision of a professional scientist.

But, despite the number of volunteers Collister sees doing that job and an increased awareness of conservation issues among Canadians as a whole, Collister feels there are still a lot of roadblocks when it comes to getting people to care about birds.

“I’m still struggling with how to do that in terms of finding a way to get a message out there to folks, and have them open to it.”

Collister has also struggled with this on a more personal scale. He currently lives just outside of Calgary in the countryside with his wife and has found some people have more “traditional” views of nature.

“When they have that ‘us against the wilderness’ attitude, oh boy, they’re really closed off to hearing some of those arguments,” Collister said. “I just cringe when I talk to someone who decided they want to live in the country, and then they have a woodpecker come and peck on their house and they want to shoot it.”

He explained living alongside nature means people are going to interact with different critters and people should accept that some interactions may be negative.

“You need to find a way to manage that without killing them or having an adverse impact, you know,” Collister said. “Maybe don’t put cedar siding on your house or use cement board siding so that the woodpeckers aren’t attracted.”

So what can be done to sway people to appreciate birds and the environment? According to Collister, there might not be a definite answer.

“The way to get people outside is to try and introduce them to the magic, the beauty and the interest of birds and other natural phenomena, and hope it sticks.”
70 years after the discovery of oil in the province, Alberta may yield another valuable resource.
In the past, Alberta’s abundant lithium reserves have proven too difficult and expensive to tap into — especially in comparison to the province’s oil. But uncertainty in the oil patch and increased demand for lithium batteries have innovators in the province looking for new ways to extract it. However, they’ll face technical and regulatory challenges to do so.

An Alberta lithium industry would source lithium from brine found deep underneath the province’s soil. Brine is water that contains large quantities of minerals — mainly salt. But, among the elements in the brine is lithium. Research conducted by the Alberta government over the past 30 years says the lithium-containing brine is abundant in the Fox Creek, Swan Hills and Leduc areas. The Calgary-based company E3 Metals is hoping to take advantage of that abundance.

“We saw an opportunity because lithium was known in [the Leduc Reservoir] and we had research conducted by various different people showing that lithium was actually everywhere in Leduc,” says Chris Doornbos, president and CEO of E3 Metals.

“Producing the brine out of the Leduc was something that was quite easy,” says Doornbos. “If you ask anyone in the oil and gas industry about the Leduc, they will tell you all it does is produce water, not oil. So, it was a very good reservoir for producing water.”

What the producers in the Leduc didn’t have was the technology to efficiently separate the lithium from the water. Conventional methods of extracting lithium from brine require removing all the other elements and leaving the lithium behind. Unlike separating the much denser oil from water, removing the lithium requires considerable effort, energy and expense.

“It’s an extra step that normal industry in Alberta doesn’t normally go through,” says Doornbos. “Normally you just take the oil out of the water, which is quite a simple process, and sell the oil. Here we have to take lithium out of water, which is not as simple as oil and gas by any stretch.”

But a change in how the world consumes energy is driving innovators to find a solution to that challenging problem.

The International Energy Agency expects global oil demand will plateau by 2030, mainly due to the increased use of electric vehicles. And that increase means more demand for lithium.

That’s because lithium hydroxide and lithium carbonate, compounds that are refined from the lithium, are used to make a variety of products, including the batteries that power those vehicles.

More electric vehicles would also mean increased demand for electricity. That would further increase demand for lithium if a substantial amount of that power comes from sources that also require batteries, such as wind turbines and solar panels. As a result, E3 Metals is one of several companies in the province who are looking at ways of tapping into Alberta lithium.

After successfully trialling a direct lithium extraction ion exchange process — created in collaboration with the University of Alberta — E3 has partnered with U.S. chemical manufacturer Livent to build a field pilot project that will remove the lithium from the brine. The process involves binding lithium to another chemical, essentially creating a chemical sieve.

“Basically we end up with a highly concentrated, very pure stream out of the back end of our process. That stream can be made into lithium hydroxide or lithium carbonate very simply and easily using conventional technology used anywhere else in the world.”

Underneath this salt flat in Bolivia is lithium rich brine. Canadian companies are now hoping to extract lithium from the brine under Alberta soil.

PHOTO: DAN LUNDBERG

“...the economics as it is manufacturing this in a commercial scale,” says Doornbos, who believes E3’s lab-scale solution can be upscaled to produce their initial goal of 20,000 tons of lithium carbonate equivalent.

In addition to the challenge of producing lithium on a commercial scale, there are also questions about whether companies such as E3 would be regulated by the Alberta Energy Regulator, like an oil and gas company. What royalties would be collected by the government has also yet to be decided.

While the company has received support from the federal government to scale up their operations, Doornbos says a general recognition of commercial lithium as a viable industry would be another way to help kick start the industry.

“The oilsands was the same thing. You talked about oil sands in the ‘60s — no one believed it was going to be a thing. Now no one questions the possibility”

>Chris Doornbos, president and CEO, E3 Metals Corporation

Despite an opportunity to capitalize on the growing lithium demand, an Alberta lithium industry will only take off if it can make money. While eliminating the effort of extracting the lithium reduces costs, companies like E3 need to be able to produce lithium at volumes where they can make a profit.

“The risk now isn’t so much [in] the economics as it is manufacturing this in a commercial scale,” says Doornbos, who believes E3’s lab-scale solution can be upscaled to produce their initial goal of 20,000 tons of lithium carbonate equivalent.

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The United Nations’ Sports for Climate Action Framework calls on sports organizations to play a bigger role in the fight against climate change, which experts say can help send a message to fans about the importance of that issue. However, professional sports organizations in Calgary have shown a mixed response to that framework and have yet to sign this call to action.

The framework asks sports organizations to adhere to five different principles:

These principles are: undertaking systematic efforts to promote greater environmental responsibility, reducing their overall climate impact, educating for climate action, promoting sustainable and responsible consumption and advocating for climate action through communication.

In a press release announcing the framework, UN Climate Change executive secretary Patricia Espinosa called on sports organizations to “use their significant global leadership position to help us address the greatest challenge of our time: climate change.”

Espinosa was also quoted as saying those organizations should do that because “you’ve built significant global trust and moral leadership, and because sports touches on every cross-section of society, you can drive positive change throughout the world.”

Joe Vipond, co-chair of Calgary Climate Hub, agrees sports organizations can have an important role in the climate discussion.

“The sad reality of it is that the environmental community is so much smaller than the sports community,” says Vipond.

“Right now we have very few people working very hard on this. But we need a lot more people working very hard on this. This is just another aspect of society that’s being woken and can help share the work and the message,” he says.

Since the framework was announced in December 2018, a total of 91 organizations and teams have signed the framework, including two NHL teams: the L.A. Kings, and the Minnesota Wild.

Jim Ibister, vice president of facility administration for the Wild, says it wasn’t one big action but many small changes that led to the team signing the framework.

“One of the things that is really important to us is incremental change, the power of doing a lot of the little things, and getting really good at them,” explains Ibister, who says the Wild’s sustainability efforts started in 2009.

Saeed Kaddoura, a clean energy analyst at the environmental think tank the Pembina Institute, also sees the benefits of small changes.

“There is always the lowest hanging fruit in what you can do,” says Kaddoura.

“What we’ve been seeing is usually people start small and they just then build on top of that momentum and it leads to really cool leadership.”

Among the initiatives the Wild undertook during the last 10 years was reducing its waste by 50 per cent, increasing its recycling rate and purchasing most of its electricity from either wind or solar energy sources.

Ibister says it has changed the way team and facility employees think.

“One of our senior vice presidents said, ‘Now I go to these other buildings, and I’m looking for the compost bin or I’m wondering why they have all those lights on, and I didn’t even realize I’m thinking that.’ But that’s just part of our culture.”

Like the Wild, the Calgary Sports and Entertainment Corporation, which owns the Flames, Stampeder, Hitmen, and Roughnecks, has also taken some steps to reduce their environmental impact.

Since 2015 the corporation has recycled 220 tons of cardboard, decreased its energy consumption by 328,000 kWh and reduced water consumption by almost three million gallons per year. However, unlike the Wild, Calgary Sports and Entertainment has yet to sign onto the UN’s Framework.

Calgary Journal asked via email if the organization would consider signing onto the framework. Even though we received answers to the other questions we posed, that particular one remained unanswered.

Vipond says it would be game changing for an organization such as the Flames to sign onto the framework.

“The messenger is such an important part of this discussion. And [they] are that unexpected voice. People value the Flames. People value those opinions, and I think it would be very powerful,” Vipond says.

Kaddoura says having a trusted voice in Calgary such as the Flames sign the framework would send an important signal “to a group of people interested in sports who are either athletes, just fans, or people who buy the products.”

It would tell them sports organizations “feel that [climate change] is important and this is why, as a person who is interested in sports, you should be looking at this.”

Ibister explains that when the Wild first started their sustainability efforts they got a lot of mixed reactions from fans. But those reactions have improved over time.

“We got quite a bit of feedback that said, ‘Thanks so much, but focus on hockey.’ [Now] we get a lot of responses like, ‘I didn’t do much at home, but I can see what you’re doing and it makes me think about what I can do.’”

Ibister says signing onto the framework was the next big step for the team.

“Looking at [it] we said, ‘We got most of these principles, we’re already well on our way. There’s going to be a few things that are difficult for us to do, but we really think we have a leadership role to play.’ And it should step out of our arena and our convention centre,” he says.

“We’re really excited to step into it and start building the roadmap.”

The United Nations’ Sports for Climate Action Framework ask sports organizations to take a bigger role in the climate fight.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE UNITED NATIONS
OTHER ORGANIZATIONS IN CALGARY

Calgary Journal also asked several other organizations and venues in Calgary about their climate policies and if they would consider signing onto the UN’s framework. These organizations were Spruce Meadows (which also owns the professional soccer club Cavalry FC), the Olympic Oval, McMahon Stadium Society and Winsport.

Ian Allison, senior vice president of Spruce Meadows, says they would have to find out what would be involved in being part of the framework. But he wasn’t necessarily opposed to the idea of the organization signing it.

“The devil is in the details,” he says. “If the measures in the framework are realistic and attainable I certainly wouldn’t be adverse to taking it under advisement.”

Spruce Meadows, whose multi-purpose sport facility hosts equestrian events, currently focuses much of their sustainability efforts on water reuse. That includes reusing stable water for course irrigation and snow capture for their recirculating ponds. They have also planted 2,000 trees on the property since it opened in 1975.

As for the Olympic Oval, the facility is part of the University of Calgary’s utility reduction program which after being refitted with new lighting 1.2 million kWh per year since 2016. The facility also has a waste diversion rate of 34 per cent. However, those in charge of the facility, were unavailable for comment about whether they would sign the framework.

Meanwhile, Scott Chesniak, stadium manager of McMahon Stadium, says that, as a non-profit, the facility operates at a breakeven basis.

“To take a more proactive and robust approach to climate change would require a significant infusion of revenue to retrofit a 60-year-old stadium,” says Chesniak.

Kaddoura says, “This is a prime example of why we need to advocate for progressive energy and environmental policy, not everyone can afford to make changes in the energy transition and only by supporting them can we make sure we meet our climate targets.”

Chesniak, who replied via email, did not make himself available for an interview. Like Calgary Sports and Entertainment, he didn’t respond to the question about whether McMahon would join the framework.

Winsport did not respond to our request for comment by the time this issue of Calgary Journal was laid out.

“Right now we have very few people working very hard on this. But we need a lot more people working very hard on this”

> Joe Vipond, Calgary Climate Hub
The rights of ham

Animal welfare becomes central as activists ramp up action against those whose business is animals

It was a sunny day when around 90 protesters from across Western Canada converged on the Jumbo Valley Hutterite farm just north of Fort McLeod.

According to news and police reports, the protesters arrived at 7:15 am on that Labour Day weekend morning to express their concern about the alleged “inhumane treatment” of the 4,000 birds they said were being kept at the farm.

The protesters lined the highway outside the property and about 30 of them allegedly broke into one of its bio-secure barns and occupied it.

For their part, the farm’s Hutterite owners said they had nothing to hide.

Once the RCMP arrived, the protesters were given a tour of the barns. And they left around noon with five turkeys they had purchased to be given to an animal sanctuary.

Despite the peaceful resolution of the protest, the incident has underscored an emerging conflict between farmers and animal rights protesters, who believe existing systems for reporting animal welfare issues are insufficient. That’s why they claim protests such as the one at Jumbo Valley are justified, with the goal to cease all animal production.

But, in doing so, they are also highlighting how much space exists between those who stand up for producers and animal welfare, and those fighting for animal rights.

Right now, one important means of reporting those welfare issues is Alberta Farm Animal Care. It was started by producers in 1993 with the intent of promoting responsible livestock care amongst those who raise animals for consumption. AFAC provides information to the public and producers about animal welfare and has an “ALERT” call-in line where the public can report animal abuse.

“Anybody can call AFAC if you have any questions about livestock welfare, whether you have livestock, or you don’t have livestock,” says the group’s spokesperson Kristen Lepp.

Generally, the calls AFAC receives are from citizens concerned about the availability of food and shelter for farm animals seen by passers-by. For example, phone calls from those worried about cows having snow on their backs during the winter are usually answered with information about how the cold doesn’t necessarily pose a risk to the animals’ well-being. However, AFAC will receive more serious calls which leads to them dispatch one of their province-wide volunteers, normally a producer or
veterinarian. Lepp says that AFAC and its volunteers normally work with owners when they do find concerns with an animal’s wellbeing. “AFAC tries to work as a proactive organization. So we’re there to help before things get worse,” says Lepp.

However, there are instances when the welfare of farm animals is at greater risk. “If the calls are more extreme, if animals look like they’re in distress, if owners are uncooperative or aggressive, if there are dead animals — that’s when we work with the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals,” says Lepp. That’s because it’s the Alberta SPCA—not AFAC—that has the authority to conduct investigations and enforce animal welfare rules in the province. While the SPCA doesn’t keep statistics for animal welfare violations at commercial farm operations, many of the calls AFAC receives aren’t about severe issues. According to their 2018 report, 121 of the 161 calls it received were considered cases, while only 21 of them were passed on to the SPCA. Of those 21, 15 were considered unfounded.

But the work done by the group to assuage the public’s feelings about how production animals are treated is not enough for those who believe animals share the same innate rights as humans.

“I would like for them to change their product line... I mean, it’s inhumane and it’s unethical at this point”

> Alex Cuc, animal rights activist

“It doesn’t matter how they’re treating the animals. We truly believe there is no humane way to kill something that doesn’t want to die,” says animal rights activist Claire Buchanan. She was one of the four people charged with breaking and entering to commit mischief in October as a result of her involvement in the incident at the turkey farm. Activists say animal welfare groups like AFAC don’t go far enough to protect animals. “We’re not petitioning for bigger cages. We want empty cages,” says animal rights activist Sarah Gill.

Fellow animal rights activist Trev Miller shares those sentiments. “We’re asking that animals be treated with respect and not as commodities.” The activists say groups such as AFAC are insufficient because organizations like it don’t address the underlying issue of animals being killed for food.

“They’re industry-driven and they’re ultimately not in the animal’s best interests. They’re in the best interests of industry,” Miller added. Despite warnings from the province, Miller says actions like the one at Jumbo Valley will continue to happen. He used a similar protest in November at a Canmore dog kennel where 15 activists were arrested as an example.

In response to those developments, the Alberta government has beefed up laws against people who trespass on farms. Premier Jason Kenney, who described the Jumbo Valley incident as “dangerous” and “harassing” announced amendments to the Animal Health Act on Oct. 3.

Those amendments raised fines for biosecurity breaches to the tens-of-thousands.

Despite the focus on farm animals, other animal industries, like sled dogs, have had attention drawn to them.

Activist Alex Cuc says provisions within animal protection legislation that permit farmers to kill animals justify their actions. “It’s not necessarily something that we want to do, but unfortunately the reality of what actually happens to animals is hidden from the public,” says Cuc, adding that the abolishment of animal production is their main goal. “I would like for them to change their product line,” she says. “I mean, it’s inhumane and it’s unethical at this point.”

Buchanan agrees, saying, “We ideally would love farmers, and everyone who’s taking part in this to switch to a different alternative — switch to plant-based farming, try to farm things other than animals.” However, that goal may be far away. The idea that these animals are being treated cruelly even though may not be mistreated under the law creates a situation without a quick remedy.

AFAC’s recommendation is dialogue. They encourage anyone who has any questions about the welfare of animals to call them or reach out to a farmer directly. “There are so many producers throughout Alberta that just love what they do, and want to talk to people about it,” says Lepp.

And while the activists don’t feel like there is much to discuss other than a transition away from food animals, Buchanan admits that she’s not sure what resources producers have which could be transferred to crop-based farming. “We are also trying to figure that out. It’s not an easy task to switch your livelihood from something you’ve been doing your whole life.”
The 8&3 has introduced a lot of spending cuts in an effort to balance the budget and reduce the deficit, but advocates say now taxes should play a role.

As the Alberta government follows through with cuts to programming and continues to depend on resource revenues in a downturn economy, public policy advocates are pushing for a new revenue mix. Those advocates are offering a variety of ideas of what new revenues may look like. But the term “sales tax” seems to be somewhat of an expletive in Alberta, so much so that many politicians in the province won’t talk about it.

Throughout Alberta’s provincial election campaign last April, United Conservative leader Jason Kenney repeatedly stated: “Alberta has a spending problem.” That position continued once the party won the election, forming a majority government. Its blue-ribbon panel, led by former Saskatchewan finance minister Janice MacKinnon, came to the same conclusion: Alberta’s spending had to be cut back.

Compared to the other big provinces in the country — British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec — Alberta does spend more per capita. In 2018, Alberta spent $13,098 per person, whereas B.C. spent $11,149, while Ontario and Quebec spent $10,776 and $12,958 respectively.

However, while B.C.’s per capita spending might be lower, the revenue its government collects is estimated to be $59 billion for 2019/20, or $11,634 per capita — with an estimated $7.5 billion in revenue coming through their seven percent sales tax alone. Ontario is bringing in an estimated $10,585 in revenue per person, and Quebec is forecasting $13,628 per person, both for the 2019/20 budget year.

By comparison, the UCP has estimated just $50 billion in revenue, or $11,438 per person, for Alberta — lower than both B.C. and Quebec. Their 2019/20 budget didn’t make these revenue comparisons, as Joel French, executive director of Public Interest Alberta.

“There was no such comparison,” said French, whose organization advocates for the preservation of public services. “Even though the MacKinnon report did comment on whether or not Alberta has at an appropriate level of spending, their opinion, of course, was that we’re spending too much — but there was no comparison there to anybody else when it came to the revenue side of things.”

Likewise, David Khan, leader of the Alberta Liberal Party, said the panel was constrained by its mandate to focus on spending. However, he does agree there’s high spending in some areas, such as healthcare.

“It was a real wasted opportunity to look at the whole picture of spending and revenue in Alberta,” said Khan.

During the 2019 provincial election, he and the Alberta Liberals advocated for a revenue-neutral sales tax of eight per cent, while also eliminating the personal income taxes of Albertan individuals who earn $57,250 or less per year.

A major argument for consumption (or sales) taxes is that taxing the consumption of goods is less of a drag on the economy than income taxes. That’s because it’s argued consumption taxes encourage investment and saving, making the economy more efficient. Meanwhile, income taxes penalize workers and businesses alike.

Personal income taxes leave workers with less money in their pockets, creating fiscal drag — a damper on the economy, advocates argue. But Khan and co. advocate for a new sales tax-based revenue stream to provide a stable revenue source.

PHOTO: AMAZON.COM
economy caused by excessive taxation or lack of spending.

The carbon levy is another example of a consumption-based tax which has less of a drag on the economy because it taxes emissions, not personal or corporate wealth. So, not all taxes are created equally.

These taxes also bring in revenue from tourism and visitors into the province. Like sin taxes — such as on tobacco or alcohol — sales taxes and carbon taxes are only applied when people spend money. Imagine the revenue that could be generated from 10 days of the Calgary Stampede?

“(Sales taxes) are less damaging to the economy and allow the economy to grow more than if the same amount of revenue was collected via income taxes,” said Khan.

The downside of a consumption tax is that the low-income bracket is hit the hardest, as the taxes take a bigger chunk of change from those who have smaller sums of money. Most jurisdictions get around that concern by creating a rebate — a tax-free payment to off-set some or all of the service taxes paid — much like the GST rebate the federal government has had in place for years.

Consumption taxes aren’t the only way to increase revenue in the province. They’re a part of a tax mix that other provinces in the country utilize. And a stable mix of revenue for Alberta would mean less reliance on resource revenues that have been in decline for some time.

**“The political culture in this province is such that... we don’t deserve to pay taxes”**

> Robert Ascah, fellow for the Institute of Public Economics, University of Alberta

Since the oil boom of the 1940s, Alberta has been the resource powerhouse of Canada, bringing in billions of dollars in revenue. But, since the oil crash in 2014, those revenues have dropped significantly. Yet, the province continues to depend on it to fund programs and balance the budget.

Throughout the early 1970s, resource revenues accounted for roughly 25 to 75 per cent of Alberta’s overall revenue. Fast forward almost 50 years and that number dropped to just over six per cent of the province’s total revenue in 2015.

In that same year, the then Progressive Conservative government estimated $9.2 billion in resource revenue in their annual budget. At the end of that fiscal year, the actual collection of resource revenue was just over $8.9 billion — a loss of almost $260 million, which is equal to last years’ expenses for Indigenous relations in the province.

“Resource revenue is what we’ve relied on so far, for the last 30-plus years, to balance the budget and to pay for the services we want,” said French. “I don’t think it’s a secret among the public that a lot of those revenues have dried up and that they’re likely not coming back in the numbers that they were.”

He added the next part of the conversation is how to make up for the lost revenue.

“I do think sales tax should be part of the conversation,” said French. “It’s an important part of the tax mix in every other jurisdiction in the country.”

But not all policy pundits agree revenue should be the focus.

Ben Eisen, a senior fellow in fiscal and provincial prosperity studies at the Fraser Institute, a public policy think tank that has been described as having conservative, libertarian or right-wing views, said government revenues are not the issue. Rather, he said the Alberta government spends its money inefficiently.

“There’s no good evidence that Albertans are, in exchange for all that extra money that the government is spending, getting better public services,” said Eisen.

Focusing on health and education, he added, there’s evidence that British Columbia is out-performing Alberta, yet spending less. And he said the UCP’s “subtle, but important,” rise to personal income taxes also isn’t the way to go.

“The focus should be on reducing government expenditures,” said Eisen. 

But reducing spending does not mean a reduction in the standard or quality of provincial programs, he added.

“Change the way programs are designed so they cost less and deliver better value for money for taxpayers,” However, exactly how that would or should be done is still up in the air.

Even if the province does reel in its spending, the oil and gas sector has shown very little sign of bouncing back to its pre-2014 levels, meaning Alberta could face a greater revenue problem on top of its spending problem.

“I think the real problem is dependence of resource revenue and spending all of that in the good times and depending on that in the bad times when it’s depressed,” said Khan.

And this dependence on or expectation of resource revenue in Alberta has created a culture that views “tax” as a dirty word.

“The political culture in this province is such that...we don't deserve to pay taxes,” said Robert Ascah, fellow for the Institute of Public Economics at the University of Alberta.

“We seem to have some manifest destiny, like Texas, that we have low taxes partly because of our natural bounty and partly because of our ingenuity, and it’s a type of exceptionalism that we’re special.”

As a result, ask an Albertan what PST stands for and the answer could very well be “political suicide tax.”

Politicians know this and many don’t mention a sales tax on the campaign trail or even while in office. That includes members of the recent NDP government.

For example, during her first question period as premier in 2015, Rachel Notley promised her government would not bring in a new sales tax when asked by then-Wildrose leader Brian Jean, as reported by the Canadian Press.

And, in an interview with CBC Calgary in December 2018, Notley said a sales tax for Alberta wasn’t a “conversation she’s interested in having while trying to get the provincial economy back on track.”

“I think it’s a failure of leadership,” said Khan. According to him, the NDP “should’ve been focused on doing the right thing rather than being timid and doing whatever they thought might get them re-elected because, in the end, they weren’t.”

But how do politicians have a meaningful conversation about revenues with Albertans without fearing a backlash? Ascah said education about public finances and a shift in the rhetoric are two places where politicians can start.

He explained this with a much-used analogy about revenues versus spending of a typical family home. Ralph Klein, Alberta’s premier from 1992 to 2006, compared the finances of the province to that of a family who needs to pay their bills and mortgage. When funds started to get tight, the family would cut spending and live within their means.

But Ascah said that isn’t always the case.

“For a family that wakes up and they find they can’t manage their expenses without failing, there is an alternative and that is to work more hours or find a second job,” he said.

“Why are we just mainly focusing on one thing?”
I’ve always heard stories from my mom’s childhood and painted obscure pictures in my mind of her growing up.

But that childhood never really seemed tangible or relatable until a few weeks ago when she came out of the basement with a doll she’d uncovered.

It was her favourite one growing up, which she still had, even after all these years.

It was such a small, simple doll - with a stuffed fuzzy body topped by a head and hair carved out of plastic.

But somehow it made my mom so human and our lives seem so cyclical.

Suddenly I can see her, three-years-old, cradling her doll and playing with it just as clearly as I could see any other child today.

And, although adults grow up from children, they are still the same person inside who cherished a toy and maybe still do.

We really were all kids once.

That got me to wondering who else might be holding onto a distant memory, a cherished childhood toy, a souvenir of a simpler time, and what stories can they tell us.
Anne Yates's mom had passed her teddy bear down to her about 20 years ago. Yates says her mom got the doll after she “went off to church camp in Oxford, Mississippi and some little boy, who was probably 12 years old, was totally smitten for her. They spent a couple of weeks together and at Christmas time he showed up at her house with this bear, like in 1949 or 1950.”

The bear now sits on Yates's dresser and creeps her kids out. “It's just really neat to me. It has this plastic nose. It's not a normal bear thing. And you can tell it is handcrafted which doesn't happen these days.”

Tawnya Jennings

When Tawnya Jennings was growing up, all her friends had dolls. But she had a teddy bear that her great grandmother had made her before she was even born. One sunny afternoon, when she was taking the bear for a walk, she spotted her father trimming the grass. And, as soon as she saw his lawn mower, “I thought, 'That's a great name,'” over her parent's objections.

“He came everywhere with me, even pictures with Santa,” says Jennings. “He's been stitched up about a hundred times. My mom used to throw him in the laundry every time she did my sheets, so he would get torn up.”

And now Jennings has passed Lawn Mower on to another generation. “It must have been three or four years ago that my son was digging around boxes in the basement and he found him and brought him upstairs and asked, 'Can I sleep with him?' and I said, 'Well yeah, of course, he loves cuddles!'”

Tracy Braun

Tracy Braun doesn't remember getting her bear Teddy. But she does remember when she renamed him.

“When I was in grade 1 I went to a small school,” says Braun. “So there was a grade 1/grade 2 combined class and there was a Tracy A. in grade 2. So Teddy got renamed Ted D. And this pink teddy bear is named Pink.”

Brent Watson

When Brent Watson was growing up, The Smurfs—a Belgian comic about a woodland village of small, blue human-like creatures—became a popular cartoon. And, 30 years later, he still has a relic of the popularity in the form of a Papa Smurf doll.

When he was young, Watson says the doll, “would just sit on my shelf. I would talk to him and say, ‘Hey, how's it going?’ I can't do his voice very well.”

But it wasn't just those one-sided conversations that made him important to Watson.

“Of all my stuffed animals, he was the one that, I don't know, he seems to have more structural integrity, and to me that was kind of what is important to a stuffy. If they're just like this limp, doughy mass I didn't really care for them. I can feel his fingers and he is a better feeling stuffy. He feels like Papa Smurf. I don't know if he is the right height though.”
RACHEL ROSE
For Rachel Rose, Mr. Beaver isn’t just a reminder of her childhood. The doll and its single eye are also reminders of a broken friendship.

“I used to live in the States. When I was moving home, I was really young and a friend of mine was really mad that I was leaving. He went and took Mr. Beaver’s eye out. I asked him, ‘Why would you do that?’ And he said, ‘Because, you will never forget that. You are always going to have Mr. Beaver in your life and you will always look at his missing eye and think of me.’ It was like this teenage angst. ‘How dare you leave me? I’m going to wreck your stuff’ – like a little temper tantrum from a teenager. But it’s true. Here I am, decades later, saying, ‘Clay took his eye off.’”

TAYLOR KRAUSE
Taylor Krause has had her bunny since her first Easter in 1996. It has been left at the hospital more than once, as well as at a Walmart, in Grand Prairie and at the airport.

“You don’t even know how many times we’ve had to retrace our steps because I was so attached to it. There was no way I was leaving it!”

And, along the way, Krause recalls that her grandmother had to make a new nose for it when their family dog bit it off. “Which is probably why it’s whiskers are all messed up!”

HELEN WIRRELL
Helen Wirrell and her cousin played with her mom’s dolls when she was growing up in Australia. She even has a photograph of it. The dolls were dressed in clothes her mom had handmade. The one that was porcelain didn’t make it through their childhood. But another – brown-haired and rose-cheeked – was passed down to her and came with her to Canada.

“Her name is Mary Jane. We didn’t have a whole lot of toys back then. It’s quite neat. She had her hair redone, because, in those days, I guess there were doll doctors. So if something happened to your doll’s head – I mean you can see it’s pretty tidy – there was someone who would fix it.”

HEATHER RAMSHAW
Heather Ramshaw says her grandparents brought her childhood teddy bear Honey back from Australia nearly 28 years ago.

“They said I used to fit in his lap. And, of course, I grew up and he sits in my lap now,” says Ramshaw. “He’s just my teddy bear and I love him so much. I’ve always thought like he’s definitely one of the ones who come alive at night.”

That love means Honey has come with Ramshaw everywhere, including when she spent eight months in Botswana for her university degree. “His size is unfortunate because I’ve dragged him with me everywhere. I just bring him on the plane. I’m never embarrassed about things like that and he makes a great pillow!”

That travel and constant companionship means “he’s really ratty now. He’s been really loved and come everywhere with me. He’s probably full of germs and likely the reason my immune system is so good,” adds Ramshaw.

But Honey isn’t the only teddy bear Ramshaw takes care off.

“This guy is my Mom’s teddy bear. He’s probably 60 now because he was given to my mom when she was a baby.”

Her mom was born on an air force base in France which Ramshaw’s grandpa had been deployed to. It was gifted to her by one of his air force buddies. Ramshaw then inherited it when she was eight or 10 years old.

“He was always really delicate so I would try not to play with him, he was always the sick bear and had to lie in his bed.”
Since March 2018, the Calgary Zoo has had the pleasure of housing four giant pandas, adding them to the list of animals in its breeding program. But it will soon be time to send two of the pandas back home to participate in one of China’s breeding programs.

The Chinese government’s National Forestry Administration has stated that, at the end of 2013, there were around 1,864 giant pandas in the wild — the most recent count available. In the same year, the country had 67 panda reserves. But only 66.8 percent of China’s panda population is protected by them.

Since 1996, China has been loaning the endangered animals to different zoos around the world as part of a program to re-establish the species, with San Diego being the first. But, in 2012, Ottawa signed an agreement with the Chinese government to bring two pandas over for a 10-year period.

So far, the captive breeding program for those pandas has proven successful.
Parent pandas Er Shun and Da Mao were welcomed to the Toronto Zoo back in 2013. Two years later, Er Shun gave birth to the twin baby pandas, Jia Panpan and Jia Yeuyeu. But that didn’t happen naturally. That’s because pandas are typically only in heat for one to three days between March through May. Adding to the complexity, pandas also don’t reach sexual maturity until they are five- to six-years-old.

As a result, Er Shun was artificially inseminated using fresh semen from Da Mao and frozen semen from other Chinese pandas. But the complexity of her pregnancy didn’t stop there.

According to the Calgary Zoo’s lead panda keeper Cissy Kou, the only way to tell if that insemination was successful was by using an ultrasound.

“Er Shun is trained for ultrasounds. She will voluntarily lie down and the vet will be able to put gel on her tummy and perform the ultrasound.”

When Jia Panpan and Jia Yeuyeu were eventually born — 15 minutes apart from one another — they weighed 181.7 grams and 115 grams respectively. And, like other baby pandas, they were almost completely hairless.

To ensure they were both kept warm, keepers at the Toronto Zoo took one of the baby cubs into the incubation room as mother Er Shun took care of the other, warming the baby by putting it in her armpit. This is what they call twin-swapping, and has proven to be a very successful technique in raising twin cubs in captivity.

Pandas are solitary animals and cubs will often leave their parents and siblings when they are between one and one-and-a-half years old. Jia Panpan and Jia Yeuyeu, however, are still seen together at the Calgary Zoo.

“Because we still do not see signs of the twins not being able to live together - they still cuddle, eat and play together — we can still keep them in the same enclosure. But, most likely, when they are back to China they will be separated,” says Kou.

The exact date the twins will return to China had not been set as the Calgary Journal was being produced in late November. But when they are given back, Chinese scientists will evaluate the pandas to see if either have diverse enough genes to be bred with other pandas, ensuring the quality of future generations. The panda parents will remain at the Calgary Zoo until 2023.
MEET DA MAO
Born in Chongqing zoo, he is a quite vocal father and seems to like socializing with keepers.

MEET ER SHUN
She is a caring, patient, nurturing mother and is a little more aloof with her caregivers.

MEET JAI PANPAN
His name means “Canadian Hope” and often initiates play with his sister.

MEET JAI YEUYEU
Her name means “Canadian Joy.” She is clever, curious and enjoys new games and challenges.

Source: Toronto Zoo

(Above) Da Mao walking around the enclosure. (Middle Left) Da Mao climbing on his fallen tree. (Middle Centre) Welcome sign outside of Da Mao’s enclosure. (Middle Right) Da Mao lying on his rock looking out at the guests coming to visit. (Bottom) Da Mao happily eating bamboo leaves for breakfast.

PHOTOS: CASSANDRA JAMIESON
Thrown under the school bus

Students speak out after post-secondary cuts

When the United Conservative government tabled its first budget back in October, it warned the budget would require belt-tightening by many in the province. But it seems post-secondary students will have to tighten their belts more than most. That’s because universities and colleges suffered critical cuts that are sure to create hardships for current and future students alike.

First, most post-secondary institutions across Alberta saw cuts to their provincial grants of up to 7.9 per cent with the goal of reducing overall operating expenses by 12 per cent by 2022-23.

Second, as of Jan. 1, the government has allowed tuition to be raised following the end of a five-year freeze. Institutionally, post-secondary schools in the province can increase their tuition by up to seven per cent during each of the next three years, while individual programs can increase their tuition by up to 10 per cent per year over the same time period.

Third, the government plans to eliminate $225 million in education and tuition tax credits over the next three years.

Finally, students will pay more in student loans as the interest rate, which is currently set at prime, is raised to prime plus one per cent.

Calgary Journal spoke with four Alberta post-secondary students about how these budget decisions will affect them and their educations.
When Coleson Proudfoot first heard about the Alberta budget and its post-secondary cuts, he was worried not just about his education, but about his job.

“I’m also employed by Mount Royal University,” he says. “I work for the Institute for Community Prosperity. It’s kind of an off-branch institute which, you know, could be susceptible to being disbanded altogether because there’s been institutes at Mount Royal in the past that have just dissolved from lack of commitment or funding.”

Although Proudfoot acknowledges that all students, including himself, will face financial strain due to rising tuition costs following the removal of the tuition freeze, he can still see a silver lining in the budget, at least for MRU students.

“[MRU] kind of got the better end of the deal. Everyone got cuts except for a few institutions. But the cuts in other places, like the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, they were huge compared to us. So, I think we got off pretty lucky,” he says.

In the budget for 2019/2020, MRU saw its provincial grant funding decrease by a little more than one per cent, or just over $1.3 million. Meanwhile, both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary saw an almost seven per cent decrease to their provincial grant funding, totalling over $44 million and $32 million respectively.

“There will be rollbacks, of course,” Proudfoot says. “But I don’t think we’ll see it drastically in terms of services and amenities provided by the school.”

Annie Gee, a social work major, is worried about her future.

ANNIE GEE
PROGRAM OF STUDY: SOCIAL WORK
YEAR: 2

Annie Gee hasn’t always known that she wanted to study social work. Instead, she began her education by studying biology at the University of Alberta before discovering her desire to work in a more people-oriented profession. That’s when she was drawn to social work. After two years in Edmonton, she moved back to Calgary to pursue her diploma in the field at MRU.

Although she’s happy she made the decision to follow her passion, that decision is part of what made the recent provincial budget cuts so hard to swallow.

Gee says the ending of the tuition freeze and the interest rate hike on student loans makes it even more difficult if not impossible for her to consider furthering her education. This is made worse by the fact that she feels as though she has “in a sense wasted my tuition for two years being in a program I didn’t enjoy.

“I’ve already accumulated so much in student loans already and I just feel very discouraged from pursuing more studies beyond my diploma,” she says. “I feel like there’s a financial stress and it will create a burden for me that I feel like I don’t think I can get out of.

“I would love to move on to the bachelor level for social work, but I feel like, ‘Do I have the money to do so now?’”

Gee feels even more stress knowing she’s going into a profession that will also face hardships due to budget cuts in the social service sector. But she feels for other students who likely have it even worse than she does.

“I can’t [help] but think about the students who already barely struggle to keep themselves in school,” Gee says. “I would hate to see people just drop out of school and drop out of a program they’re very interested in or passionate about just because they didn’t have the means to afford it.”

Annie Gee, a social work major, is worried about her future.
realize just how much one change in particular is going to affect her.

“Being in my final year of school, the increased interest on student loans is definitely going to affect me the most,” Saigeon says. “I have about $80,000 of student loans behind me, which causes enough stress. Now that interest is going up I am very concerned for post-grad and I know I am going to have to work two jobs full-time for a couple years in order to stay on top of all my bills.”

Saigeon now sees the cuts as not only hurting students, but also hurting the province.

“The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow,” she says. “If we are cutting student funding and making it near impossible for people to attend university now, then the educated minds of Alberta are going to dwindle away.”

For her own part, Nazir says that she has been contemplating how she is going to navigate the rest of her education.

“Even though I only have about seven courses left, I know that once my executive term is finished, I might have to potentially work a little bit more over the summer and maybe come back to school next winter to finish up my courses.”

It’s not only her current education that she’s worried about. Recent changes have also caused Nazir to reconsider her future education plans as well.

“For my undergrad, I have been able to rely on scholarships and things like that, my parents have supported me and my post-secondary and I’ve also been working part-time,” she says. “However, I know that I want to pursue a master’s or a professional degree.

“For my undergrad, I have been able to rely on scholarships and things like that, my parents have supported me and my post-secondary and I’ve also been working part-time,” she says. “However, I know that I want to pursue a master’s or a professional degree.”

For now she says, “I will probably have to wait until I can afford it.”

Frustrated, Saigeon has been contemplating leaving the province after graduation, taking her knowledge and skills elsewhere because of the way she feels about the current government and its policies and budget decisions, including its advanced education cuts.

“For the past couple of months, I have been considering moving to New Zealand after graduation on a working holiday visa, and now that the UCP is in power I want to move for more than just travel reasons,” Saigeon says.

“It is no longer a desire to just travel and work somewhere else. I fear living in a province that is run by someone who is so right-wing extreme and doesn’t care about the future of not only the provincial economy but the environment as well.

“I can’t wait to leave and escape what [Jason Kenney] is turning Alberta into.”

Sadiya Nazir, a member of student government, is most concerned about what the tuition freeze will mean for future education.
Decolonizing mental health

Three experts weigh in on the importance of an oppression-focused mental health system, especially for people of colour

KARINA ZAPATA
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ILLUSTRATION: KARINA ZAPATA
I immediately after Mimi Khúc gave birth to her daughter eight years ago, she fell into severe postpartum depression. While many mothers spend the first several months after giving birth fighting to stay awake, Khúc spent that time trying to figure out how to survive.

“I couldn’t find resources. I couldn’t find things that explained why life felt so hard for me,” says Khúc, a writer, scholar and teacher in the Washington, D.C. area who specializes in Asian American mental health.

People suggested the cause might be a chemical imbalance that could be cured with medication. But it wasn’t enough. So Khúc turned to her expertise in Asian American studies to find answers on her own.

Along with the difficulty of being a new mother, she found many underlying narratives that contributed to her sense of suffering: the difficulty of belonging as an Asian American in North America, her family’s refugee background and the pressures of being an Asian American mother.

Understanding these narratives helped Khúc acknowledge her pain and find new tools for healing when the individualistic and medical approach she was prescribed didn’t — having failed to account for important external factors that contributed to her declining mental health.

Indeed, according to Khúc, that approach can sometimes be counterproductive for many other people, including people of colour, who are often mentally affected by acts of oppression. This is why professionals across North America are working to decolonize mental health by working toward collective healing to save the wounds of colonization and oppression-based trauma, guided by Indigenous decolonial work.

A SYSTEM THAT DOESN’T WORK FOR EVERYONE

Elisa Lacerda-Vandenborn shared a similar experience to Khúc. When she moved from Brazil to Canada in 2002, she confided in a therapist about her extreme bouts of loneliness and depression. But Lacerda-Vandenborn left each appointment feeling like it was her fault she was struggling.

“It was very individualized. Like, you know, go into a corner and figure out who you are and work on your self-esteem,” says the University of Calgary professor and PhD candidate in educational psychology.

On her own, Lacerda-Vandenborn discovered her sadness was actually caused by missing her family and a sense of community, which was a core part of her life in Brazil. She then moved into a co-op, allowing her to be part of a community in Canada. Her mental health improved dramatically.

She says the way the mental health system works now — with medical professionals who use individualized, day-to-day coping mechanisms and medication as their main solutions — can be isolating and more detrimental than helpful for people who need more than traditional psychiatric help.

Both Lacerda-Vandenborn and Khúc think about how especially detrimental it can be for people like them, who were raised in more communitarian societies due to their cultures. They also say the mental health system needs to do more to recognize the cultural dynamics and racism that affects their daily lives — and the lives of many other people of colour.

Khúc says this is where the current mental health system can be improved for people of colour.

“We say that somebody is struggling because they visually are depressed or they’re going through their individual grief or individual struggle and we don’t often think about pain in the context of historical forces or social structures or cultural dynamics,” says Khúc.

That context, she says, is crucial for people of colour whose cultural backgrounds shape so much of who they are.

“Therapy is wonderful and it’s one tool but it also does not capture the extent to which suffering is experienced,” she says. “Therapy cannot explain to me — or at least most therapists can’t explain to me — how racism shapes my daily suffering.”

Although Jennifer Mullan, an author, academic, clinical psychologist and founder of Decolonizing Therapy in New Jersey, says that some people need individual therapy and medication to thrive, she agrees with Khúc.

“We cannot separate the people and our lack of wellbeing or dis-ease — not disease — we cannot separate it from what is happening systemically.”

This is why all three women — Lacerda-Vandenborn, Khúc and Mullan — are working towards decolonizing mental health throughout Canada and the United States.

DECOLONIZING MENTAL HEALTH

Mullan focuses on decolonizing therapy through a peer education group she runs as a therapist at New Jersey University and as the founder of Decolonizing Therapy, which aims to raise awareness online.

“We do a lot of ancestral work, a lot of intergenerational trauma work, dealing with rage as a function and a normal understanding system of living in a world that continues to oppress us and not provide many of us with what we need,” says Mullan.

According to Lacerda-Vandenborn, many oppressed individuals need connection, which the current mental health system doesn’t make space for.

“It is our time to participate in decolonization. This is a shared process,” says Lacerda-Vandenborn.

Mullan emphasizes that decolonizing mental health is more than just doing research on cultural competence — the ability to understand and interact with people of different cultures. Instead, it’s recognizing that for many Black, Indigenous and Brown individuals, the trauma from oppression and colonization plays a major role in their state of mental health.

“Decolonization is not a metaphor and trying to be better mental health advocates is not going to be enough. Being culturally competent, in my humble, loving opinion, is not enough,” says Mullan.

Khúc’s work, which is focused on decolonizing Asian American mental health, aligns with this statement.

“I mean who’s best to say how something hurts and why something hurts than the people who are experiencing it — not random doctors who think they’re trained in cultural competence,” says Khúc.

MOVING TOWARD COLLECTIVE HEALING

For Khúc, a decolonized mental health system would be one that allows communities to decide what is considered suffering, rather than having the system decide for them.

“When I say decolonizing, I want to question and interrogate the ways that these larger forces and institutions have told us what counts as mental health and what counts as suffering,” says Khúc. “In order to interrogate that, I have to draw on community and think about the kinds of knowledge that come out of our own communities around what suffering is.”

“How do we disrupt those systems of power to have people be able to claim their own knowledge and experiences?”

But, according to Mullan, the idea of collective healing was systematically taken away from people of colour by giving them no time to come together in groups or think about their emotional needs.

“I think that what has happened in the last 20 or 30 years is that many people of colour have started to just try to survive, understandably,” says Mullan. “The system is really good at having us just focus on surviving so much that we don’t have the time to collectively come together and heal in community, which I think is pretty crucial,” says Mullan.

Acknowledging colonization and oppression-based trauma, she says, would help with that.
COLONIZATION AND OPPRESSION-BASED TRAUMA

However, it may also be difficult for people to recognize trauma caused by colonization and oppression as mental health issues.

Khúc, for one, struggled to make this connection until she dug deep into her narratives of suffering when she was experiencing postpartum depression. Now, she encourages others to use their experience and knowledge with trauma to decolonize mental health.

“My hope for decolonizing mental health is to centre community and to use the arts to think of new forms that can address our suffering and to empower those who are suffering to be the producers of their own knowledge, in their own healing practices,” says Khúc.

This suffering, says Mullan, is often rooted in colonization and oppression.

“I feel like so much of the depression, of the anxiety, of the constant state of trauma that we are going through, this complex, developmental trauma, this concept of ‘flight, flight, freeze’ response that we’re in are due to systems of oppression — are due to these overt and covert acts of racism and colonization and the effects of colonization on our minds, bodies and spirits.”

Mullan says microaggressions — comments or actions that subtly and often unintentionally express a prejudiced attitude towards someone — are also acts of oppression that can cause a race-based traumatic stress in many people of colour.

“The constant level of heightened awareness and hyperarousal and cognizance that Black and Brown folks have to constantly be aware of truly is staggering and it is often why we are very burnt out and very traumatized and very sad,” says Mullan.

The suffering or trauma caused by oppression, according to Mullan, is often passed down through generations. She says many people of colour are now feeling that trauma. This is often referred to as intergenerational trauma and sometimes as historical trauma.

According to a 2018 study published in World Psychiatry, scientists suggest trauma can be passed down to subsequent generations through an enduring change in the function of DNA. This change is epigenetic, as opposed to genetic. That means the structure of the DNA itself isn’t changed, but the expression of the DNA is. This can have a lasting effect on the individual and their offspring.

This is especially true for people of colour who may not have had the time to think about their emotional needs. Mullan saw this play out with her own parents, who worked two to three jobs to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads, but were still constantly struggling.

“There was no way that my father was going to look at any of his histories of trauma. There was no way at that time that my mother was going to look at any toxic relationships in her family,” says Mullan. “That minimization of our emotions, I truly believe, has just been passed down generation to generation until many of us now are re-remembering and reconnecting with our ancestors.”

Mullan is now trying to teach that many people experience intergenerational trauma, despite the term often being associated with victims of residential schools, the Holocaust, Japanese internment camps and slavery. However, she wouldn’t have learned this if it weren’t for Indigenous ways of knowing.

“We don’t often think about pain in the context of historical forces or social structures or cultural dynamics”

> Mimi Khúc
writer, scholar and teacher

GUIDED BY INDIGENOUS DECOLONIAL WORK

When Mullan began her research on decolonizing mental health, she looked to many Indigenous authors to lead the way and educate her on postcolonial psychology, such as Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Eduardo and Bonnie Duran.

This literature allowed her to see a connection between the decolonizing work Indigenous communities are doing and the decolonial work she currently is doing, which are both rooted in intergenerational trauma.

“Since I was already doing intergenerational trauma [research], I started looking at all of the ways we had — I had — forgotten myself,” says Mullan. “That I had forgotten my people. I had forgotten because I had the privilege to, even my blackness because my family was trying to push that down.”

Indigenous decolonial work is also extremely important to Lacerda-Vandenborn, whose work focuses on Indigenous science, knowledge and ways of being and how that perspective is applied to psychology in Canada.

This perspective allowed her to feel a sense of familiarity when she was first suffering from loneliness and isolation in Canada.

“When I started to look for things that aligned with a more communal perspective, it was in Indigenous ways of knowing that I found a place. It’s almost like I found the home,” says Lacerda-Vandenborn. “We are connected to similar things — to the importance of community, to the importance of relationships, to the importance of looking at the context.”

Khúc often thinks about this similarity when using the term “decolonization” to refer to Asian American unwellness.

“I want to be respectful to Indigenous folks who are doing decolonial work and not to use the term lightly, but for me, as somebody who is Vietnamese American and Asian American, we have our own histories of colonization — our own histories of relationships with colonial practices,” she says.

“As a refugee, I feel like a displaced colonial subject,” she adds, referring to the history of colonization in Vietnam and how that still affects her today, despite her now living in the U.S. “So to decolonize the system is to take a practice related to Indigenous decolonial projects but is also separate from it.”

Lacerda-Vandenborn refers to this as “a third space,” which sits in between Western perspectives and Indigenous perspectives. For her and Khúc, this space integrates pieces from all three perspectives so the mental health system can give people what they really need, which is crucial to the decolonization of mental health.

Mullan adds that, in order to work towards a decolonized mental health system, healing for all people should come in more forms than just individualized therapy and medication.

“I really believe that our understanding of therapy needs to shift out of it only being a problem, an issue, with the brain,” says Mullan. “I also believe that Indigenous work and spirit work needs to be more included as a form of therapy, that it shouldn’t be considered that only one-on-one therapy in an office with a licensed person is therapeutic work.”

This means when prescribing resources for healing, ideally mental health practitioners will recommend methods that are appropriate specifically for the patient they are treating. That can look like Indigenous spirit work, yoga, shamanism and more.

Mullan says that some people need individual therapy and medication in order to thrive. However, she would like to see more collective, holistic healing approaches to mental health as options — the way they were done, and successfully worked, before colonization.

“I do think that we continue to blame ourselves or our brain or our trauma histories — and not that they do not have a major impact — but we are not continuing to look at and hold these systems of oppression accountable.”

Khúc stresses this work is important for everyone — not just people of colour.

“I think that decolonization practice has come out of communities of colour but the idea is that it benefits everybody because it takes mental health and put it back in the hands of communities,” says Khúc. “All communities would benefit from it being in their hands and not in the hands of so-called experts.”

Jennifer Mullan believes that therapy needs to be politicized, which is the basis of her work as a therapist.

PHOTO: JENNIFER MULLAN

Mimi Khúc spoke at the 2019 Asian American Literature Festival about Asian American unwellness.

PHOTO: TOMMY PIANTONE
Q&A with Jennifer Mullan, therapist and founder of Decolonizing Therapy

What is the difference between what people see as regular therapy and decolonized therapy?
The point is that, first, we have to go back to the individuals that are on the ground. The one struggling with the three jobs. The individual whose land has been taken away from them. The individuals who have been moved and displaced from other countries, or other lands or their very lands in the U.S. or Canada. Decolonizing therapy focuses on the premise that mental health oppression impedes all liberation movements. We need to start looking collectively how we've been socialized and how not only racism but imperialism, sexism, fatphobia, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, continues to cause more illness, so to speak, in individuals. We really focus on how the collective socialization has permeated people's well-beings, as well as ancestrally. A lot of our parents, grandparents, for seven generations before us, have not been able to feel their feelings. I believe that right now, our generations have the privilege and the wherewithal and our ancestors have brought us here. We're here now in order to politicize every single aspect of our work, and politicizing our work to me and to Decolonizing Therapy also means honouring our ancestral lineage. We can't talk about decolonizing without talking about ancestral wisdom and activating that ancestral wisdom within us.

Can you tell me more about how this affects all communities?
Decolonizing therapy really focuses on the ways, in my mind, that Black, Latinx — if that's how you identify — Asian brothers and sisters, Indigenous brothers and sisters, South Asian, our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters — how we have all been dehumanized by these isms. I think it is really, really crucial to look at the ways in which, let's say for instance, Black-identified folks in general like myself have this pervasive sense of vacant self-esteem, unless we really work on it. A sense of not believing in myself. Not feeling as if though I can get through and get by. Feeling as though what I am going to say is going to be minimized. It's like impostor syndrome times 100. There's a sense of ever-present anger, which is why I do a lot of work about rage. Rage is an understandable feeling and response and reaction to not having our goals and needs met. Also, there's a collection of socialization where we have internalized the oppressor's or Eurocentric ways of doing and seeing things — White people's ways of believing. So thinking that if we're smaller, we're more attractive. If our features are more fine, then that's pretty. Believing that working hard is a goal in life and having a house and having a certain amount of kids. The ways that we have drank the poison continues to poison us.

Can you tell me more about parent wounding?
We inherit so much from our parents. Not just physical attributes and beliefs, but also behaviour patterns and habits and also intergenerational pieces. For example, at the time of slavery when we were on the plantations, oftentimes the African female would be protecting all of the boys and all of the girls and sometimes reports would say that there were beatings, and that too would be very hard on the male-identified individual. But when we look further, we see that some of that is just plain old fear — that if I don't keep you "in line," the master is going to keep you in line and that would mean death. So, there is a deep, deep feeling, I think, for many Indigenous, as well as Black and other Brown-identified individuals, that we're still going to be killed when we step out of line. And as we know, that's true. We know that for many of us, we cannot trust the police. For many of our communities, the police is just another form of the overseer.

Would you say that plays into race-based traumatic stress?
Yeah, I do. Literally walking in Black, Brown, "othered" identified bodies, it's literally all of this is going to cause an enormous amount of stress in the day-in and day-out. I don't even think that microaggressions cuts it. One of my followers once said, "It's not a microagression, it's a macroagression." And it's like, yes, it is. The macroagressions — the literally knowing when we're going to be followed, knowing that if I'm not doing well on my paper and I wear in a certain way, that I'm going to be spoken to and, "Well, you know, you need to do better, your people are rooting for you" — that's a form of a microagression. Assuming that I'm not a doctor. Assuming that the White person standing next to me that is my student is the doctor over me, on a consistent basis. The constant level of heightened awareness and hyperarousal and cognizance that Black and Brown folks have to constantly be aware of truly is staggering and it is often why we are very burnt out and very traumatized and very sad. Not all of us — we also have so much joy like music, our culture, our food, our connection — but there is a deep, pervasive sense for so many of us of disconnect. We continue to be dismissed and it is violent. It is violent on our minds, bodies and spirits.

What would therapy, or the mental health system as a whole, look like in an ideal world?
In my university counselling centre, we now have a waitlist of probably 80 students. Eighty students are not having their needs met. I'm only supposed to see the students I'm working with now for 12 sessions. I have individuals whose mothers have just passed on. I have individuals who have had a bestfriend shot and killed in front of them. I have individuals that are now just remembering a very traumatic long-term sexual abuse history. I have individuals that are living out of a car that I'm chronically trying to get them resources and in dorms for emergency housing with a child. We are dealing with real-life trauma consistently, and sometimes that collective healing — we need shaman work. We need medicine work. We need our natural healers, and those natural shamans from all across the globe. So I would love — and I believe this is where we are headed — that we are headed to a world and a place where healing is not always just going to be synchronous with therapy. That it's going to be connected to, well maybe this person needs to dance, this person needs to get in their body more, this person does need yoga, this person cannot do yoga because it would be too traumatic for them, they need to mess up some bags and do some kickboxing and some taekwondo. I really believe that our understanding of therapy needs to shift out of it only being a problem, an issue, with the brain.
Diane Jones Konihowski was once considered one of the top pentathlon athletes in the world. However, she lost out on her best chance for an Olympic medal when Canada boycotted the 1980 Summer Games held in the former Soviet Union. Forty years later, she says she still disagrees with the boycott.

“It was a political situation at the time that hurt many athletes,” says Jones Konihowski, who initially played both volleyball and track at a high level.

“It wasn’t until my third year at the university [that my coach said], ‘Diane, you’re going to have to make a choice here.’ I chose track because I knew that I could control my own destiny and I would get to the Olympics a lot faster than in a team sport,” she says.


Jones Konihowski says the win in the pentathlon — which sees athletes compete in the 100 meter, 800 meter, shot put, long jump and high jump — was an important milestone. “That was just a really good indication that I was on target for what I wanted to do in Moscow,” she says.

She never got that chance. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, many western countries boycotted the Moscow games in protest. Jones Konihowski, who was training in New Zealand at the time, was one of the few Canadian athletes who spoke out against it.

In March, she watched as American athletes visited the White House to do the same thing, hoping to change President Jimmy Carter’s mind about the boycott.

But, a month later, the phone rang as Jones Konihowski was heading out the door to train.

The call was from Corey Elliott from CFRN radio in Edmonton who asked for her opinion on Canada’s decision to join the US-led boycott.

The Canadian Olympic Association had overwhelmingly voted to do so, despite having opposed that boycott initially.

The boycott was also strongly supported by the Olympic Trust of Canada, the association’s principal funder.

“Of course, I spoke honestly and openly about how wrong it is,” Jones Konihowski says. “I wasn’t in Canada at that time and I wasn’t being brainwashed by the media. I felt it was wrong. It didn’t prove anything. And, really, the athletes were the only ones that were being penalized. Boycotts don’t prove anything, at the athlete level anyways. We’re just there to compete in peace.”

Jones Konihowski says the use of athletes in this way was hard to understand, especially since the United States only called for the boycott after the Winter Olympics were held in Lake Placid, New York, earlier that year.

“Had they really been serious about hurting Russia they would not have had them at their games,” says Jones Konihowski.

Diane Jones Konihowski says Canada’s boycott of the 1980 Olympics only hurt the athletes who were expected to compete.
Moreover, she says “sport was not a priority” with the Canadian government at the time. “So why suddenly did they go along with it?”

While remaining steadfast in her opposition to the boycott, Jones Konihowski, and her husband John faced backlash for her criticism, something that affected both their careers.

“My sponsor called me the [day after the phone call] asking me to retract my statements. I said I couldn’t base that on principle. He withdrew his financial support and sponsorship of me,” Jones Konihowski says.

John Konihowski, who was a wide receiver for the Edmonton Eskimos at the time, was also villainized by the public.

She also says she was concerned for her safety, having received death threats and hate mail, which she didn’t read, but her husband did.

“Boycotts don’t prove anything, at the athlete level anyways. We’re just there to compete in peace”

> Diane Jones Konihowski

“Honestly, I don’t know that I would have gotten out of this country alive,” she says.

While Jones Konihowski didn’t get her Olympic medal, she did win two gold medals that year. The first was at the Liberty Bell Classic for track and field athletes held in Philadelphia just a few days before the Olympics. However, she says this event didn’t mean much to her and her competitors.

“It was a very big deal for the U.S. media, but meant nothing to any of the athletes in any of the sports because the best in the world weren’t competing. For the athletes, it is always about having the best athletes to compete against,” she says.

Two weeks after the Olympics, she also beat all of the Moscow medalists in a pentathlon in Detmold, Germany.

Following her retirement from competition, Jones Konihowski remained involved in sports for many years, holding many different positions, including being the Chef De Mission of Canada’s Olympic team for the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia.

The role as the head of Team Canada gave her a greater appreciation of everything that goes into sending a national team of athletes to the Olympics.

“There’s more of an appreciation of what goes on behind the scenes to make sure that everything is as perfect as it can be for our athletes to compete at their best,” she says.

She stepped away from sports in 2010 when she chose not to seek re-election for the board of directors of the Canadian Olympic Committee, where she had been a member since 2005.

“I’m a firm believer in new blood and getting new athletes involved in the process,” she says.

She also knew it was time to move on.

“I’d been doing sports since I was five, and when you’re in sports, you almost kind of put your life on hold to do what you want to do in sports, whether it’s being an athlete, volunteer, or coach,” she says.

“I had some job opportunities and career opportunities that were really interesting to me. I had a lot of skills and I was just looking for something different and new and something that was very inspiring."

“It’s been fun. I look back on my life and I go, wow, I’ve done a lot and I really enjoyed every job that I’ve done.”

Jones Konihowski is currently the director of fund development and communications at the Calgary Distress Centre.

“We’re an agency that saves lives every day. That’s meaningful to me. And I’ve got a whole new appreciation for the work that our volunteers do to save lives,” she says.

The Distress Centre is an important resource for new Canadians who might be struggling with English, as its 24-hour phone line offers services in 200 languages.

“So if they’re struggling, and need information, if they need help, and they speak Tagalog, or Hindi, or Punjabi, or Mandarin, or whatever, they can call us,” she says.

“That’s huge for me.”

4 KEY EVENTS THAT LEAD TO THE 1980 BOYCOTT

1979
- December: The USSR invades Afghanistan

1980
- Jan. 26: Canada joins boycott
- July 19 – Aug. 3: Summer Olympics held in Moscow
Colin Carbonera and drummer Riley Clark record drums for an upcoming single in their Calgary studio.

MUSICAL EVOLUTION

Carbonera is sitting in a hipster coffee shop, a fisherman beanie resting just above the ears. His short-cropped pink hair just barely peeks out from underneath. Black nail polished fingers hold a tin coffee mug.

Despite his artistic nature, he didn’t come from a particularly musical family. His parents, Filipino immigrants, were not afforded the luxury of playing music during their childhood years.

Nevertheless, they decided to instill musical learning in Carbonera at a young age. He recalls playing an electronic keyboard as a toddler. Chuckling at what he characterizes as the “classic Asian stereotype,” he was then enrolled in piano lessons at six-years-old, with his mom thinking, “Maybe he’ll be a prodigy or something.” Carbonera excelled in his lessons. To this day, Carbonera still composes his music on a piano during the early stages of production.

But it wasn’t until years later, when he learned to play guitar at age 13, that he developed a true passion for music. Carbonera says he began recording songs on an old camera and posting the finished products on YouTube. Then, with a slight groan, he immediately regrets this disclosure, advising aspiring musicians to only put quality music online.

“I just think back to when I was 13 and putting things out…and then wondering why no one really listened to it.”

Whatever the quality of his creations at the time, a love for music had begun to form. Having seen his interest in recording, Carbonera’s parents got him the Shure sm58, a standard vocal microphone. He began recording vocals, guitar and any other musical elements.

But the young Carbonera struggled to keep the household quiet enough to record.

“Tried to take advantage of every moment my parents weren’t at the house,” he says.

He also continued to advance in piano until high school when, with many other commitments, he decided to stop taking lessons. Instead, he joined a band called Disharmony which played what Carbonera calls a mixture of alternative rock and blues.

Another groan.

“I’m not even really sure what it was.”

He was also in musical theatre, choir and had begun experimenting with acoustic folk-pop at the time.

“There was this whole range of influences that was seeping into my music creation,” he says.

After graduation, he moved towards acoustic folk and singer/songwriter music before exploring R&B.

RABINO - “IT’S LIT AND IT’S LITERATURE.”

Then, in 2018, Carbonera started Rabino, a four-piece alternative pop band with elements of R&B and classic 80s music.

Rabino is Carbonera’s mother’s maiden name: the “spicy Filipino touch” in the band’s moniker that reflects his heritage. But that name also has another profound, if accidental, meaning. Carbonera learned the word means teacher, or rabbi, in Spanish. But he only found that out when various rabbis began liking his pictures online.

Amused, Carbonera embraced this unexpected interpretation because it already aligned with his goals of “teaching” his listeners with thought-provoking music.

“People are so used to pop music being bubblegum or super shallow, but I’d like to explore the deeper mysteries of pop.”

He lists the popular dance-influenced pop-rock bands like The 1975 and Maggie Rogers as key musical influences, appreciating the philosophical depth of their lyrics.
“One day I just saw my streams hit 20k and I was like, that doesn’t make sense. And the next week it was 50k, the next week it was 90k and then finally it hit 100k”

- Colin Carbonera

Rabino’s new single, “U Ain’t” is a microcosm of this approach. The song is a critique of party culture. Sung in Carbonera’s self-described “really warm blanket and a fire” voice, one of the second verse lyrics, “you can be cruel when you’re lonely,” explores this theme. Then, the song erupts into a full scale 80s-esque guitar solo – something Carbonera describes as a sonic portrayal of the main character’s feelings.

He hopes this sort of raw exploration of culture through music appeals to his audiences.

POP IN CALGARY?

Yet, despite these aspirations, Rabino and it’s pop sound have struggled to find a place in Calgary. “As a prairie city, Calgary has always been focused more on roots, singer/songwriter, folk, rock, country, those genres,” he says, leaving him to wonder what sort of venues his style might appeal to.

While the band has been able to grow a small fan base, reaching the next level has proven difficult. So, for now, Carbonera submits his music to every streaming platform he can find, hoping for the broadest possible exposure.

“Even if 900 of these don’t reply, or don’t post, or whatever if one does it could be amazing. It could be the thing that changes everything.”

Rabino has already had a small taste of this success. Carbonera’s first single, Crocodile, made it onto two of Spotify’s editorial playlists.

“One day I just saw my streams hit 20k and I was like, that doesn’t make sense. And the next week it was 50k, the next week it was 90k and then finally it hit 100k.”

The song has now been played over 117,000 times.

And perhaps it’s this sort of phenomenon that introduces the most daunting challenge for Carbonera — a more philosophical one by nature — namely, what actually awaits on the other side of fame.

“Whatever” is the song that everyone encounters at some point — the friend who asks for advice but never takes it. Featuring a non-chalant “talk sing” performance by Rabino, dynamic background vocals and a vibey piano with an attitude.

“Whatever” is the song that everyone encounters at some point — the friend who asks for advice but never takes it. Featuring a non-chalant “talk sing” performance by Rabino, dynamic background vocals and a vibey piano with an attitude.
Celebrating diversity in drag

Calgary makes space for female and non-binary performers

For many, the perception is that drag has to be done by cis gay men — a notion that continues to hold true in Calgary. But the drag community in this city is much more diverse. Its members are trying to prove that through their performances, hoping to change this common misperception.

The American reality TV series, RuPaul’s Drag Race, has unfortunately contributed to the perception that drag has to be done by cis gay men. Its host — the titular RuPaul — has asserted that “drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f/uni2010 you to male/uni2010dominated culture.” Speaking to the Guardian, he said, “for men to do it, it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity.”

Despite the growing roster of trans-women and non-binary performers competing on the show, RuPaul’s Drag Race continues to help enforce the idea that the only way to do drag is to be a ‘man’ performing as a ‘woman.’

“Everyone believes that RuPaul is the quintessential queer experience. Everyone watches drag race, even the straight people,” says Calgary drag monarch Tess La’Coil. “But Ru himself has proven to be transphobic on many occasions.”

In response to such criticisms, RuPaul tweeted, “I understand and regret the hurt I have caused. The trans community are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement.”

Local drag artist Vanta Blaque notes the popularity of RuPaul’s Drag Race has been beneficial in bringing more attention to Calgary’s drag community. But Blaque says only offering one portrayal of the artform onscreen can also negatively affect an audience’s perception of what ‘real drag’ should look like.

“[The art form is] stereotypically seen as a gender swap. So most people think men are drag queens and women perform as drag kings, but drag is so much more diverse,” says Blaque.

La’Coil has seen a similar reaction in Calgary agreeing that “it’s terrible for people to see [RuPaul’s Drag Race] and internalize it as the norm.”

La’Coil says the main reason she wanted to begin performing was she was tired of only seeing one kind of performer represented on stage.

“I was continually watching the same people do drag. I’d go to Twisted and see a drag show and it was five cis, gay men, almost always white, prancing around looking like really hot women,”

She said seeing these performances “felt like a mockery” and she decided to become part of the resurgence of drag monarchs in Calgary, describing her drag as “a hyper-queen and a genderfuck; I call it a hyperfuck.”

Terms like hyper, faux, bio or diva queen have been used to dismiss performers that are not cisgender men. Blaque, La’Coil and other performers in the city are trying to reclaim the terms.
by using them as affirmations for the work they're creating. And, in the process, they're trying to change Calgarians perceptions of what drag is.

One new performer is Her-Mena. She describes her drag as “what you get when an exotic dancer and a demon make a baby.” When introducing her on stage Blaque says, “Her-Mena's favourite thing is making you question one, if not all, of three things: your sexuality, your sanity, and your belief system.”

Her-Mena decided to start performing as a drag artist because she wanted to create a persona as different from herself as humanly possible.

“Her-Mena has become a vessel through which I express not only my femininity but those feelings I oftentimes can't put into words. Her-Mena is a way of maintaining my sanity while still being closeted at home.”

Another performer, Hexen Sublime, describes drag as “theatrical and messy.”

“It's the opportunity to explore gender performance in a space that already confuses the binary and to say a heavy thought under a sexy veneer,” Sublime says. “As a non-binary performer [drag] lets me pull from my whole box of tricks with the security that the audience knows that Hexen is the face, but not the whole.”

Hoping to help change the idea of what drag can look like, Blaque recently hosted the first showcase for female and non-binary femme performers in Calgary called FEMME4FEMME. It’s a night that puts the focus on artists who both exist as well as perform as feminine characters or drag queens.

“FEMME4FEMME is a show where the cast consists entirely of hyper queens,” says Blaque who was also one of the performers. Hyper is “the official term for performers who are feminine on a daily basis and also perform their drag as a feminine character.”

“(Drag) is being creative with gender expression and there are no limits within that. Having a space where performers feel safe and welcome and encouraged to be as creative as they like was really important to me.”

La’Coil says the work the current drag community in Calgary is doing excites her. She thinks fellow artists should celebrate the truly subversive art coming out of the Calgary scene, and “stop prioritizing cis, gay men.”

She wants the community to continue to push monarchs and other gender-diverse performers into the spotlight.

“Make room for them at Twisted where the straight, white people go for bachelorettes, push [the audience] to see subversive drag —the real thing — not RuPaul lite.”

> Tess La’Coil, performer

Words to be familiar with

**DRAG ARTIST, MONARCH:** someone who performs as an entertainer, especially leaning into creating a caricature.

**CISGENDER (CIS):** of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.

**MISOGYNY:** a hatred of women.

**NON-BINARY:** of, relating to, or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female.

**GENDER-FLUID:** of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity is not fixed.

**FEMME:** having a distinctively feminine nature, (historically a term created by and used by lesbians).
Riddle me this
How three gender minority performers became a part of Sphinxes, one of Edmonton’s most popular improv shows

Sphinxes, with its cast of all-female, trans or non-binary and racially diverse improvisers, is one of the most popular comedy shows with Edmonton’s Rapid Fire Theatre company. The show, which runs out of the city’s old Citadel Theatre, is the brainchild of Amy Shostak, an Edmonton-turned-Vancouver improviser who created it for a Fringe Festival performance.

But, after seeing the impact of the show, she decided to hand over its reins to Sphinxes’ current directors, Joleen Ballendine and Julia Grochowski.

Since Calgary doesn’t have any similar kind of group, Calgary Journal interviewed some of the Sphinxes to find out why and what it’s like being a gender minority in the comedy improv community.

JOLEEN BALLENDINE

Ballendine started improvising in 2007. While still in high school, she won several awards for her work and was asked to be a cast member of Rapid Fire Theatre — Edmonton’s longest-running and award-winning improv group. Despite this success, she had never thought of herself as funny in high school.

“I started improv because I wanted to hang out with my friends after school,” she said. “Those five guys all considered themselves hilarious, but I never did. Even my drama teacher, who I loved, never thought that women improvisers were funny. And it’s not because she thought that women weren’t funny. It was because the only successful shows she had seen were all white men.”

This ingrained idea of comedy being just for men stuck with Ballendine, especially when she was first starting improv. “I felt like there was no permission to be funny. Or if there was, it was always the same roles and patterns.”

These experiences, however, were exactly why Ballendine and Grochowski wanted to continue Sphinxes after Shostak had left to pursue her career in Vancouver.

“It was a space that we all needed to feel safe and just plain funny. We had that permission.”

While casting the show, there was a lot of work to be done in making the space as inclusive as possible. That is when Ballendine and Grochowski decided to make any cast member of Rapid Fire Theatre that was a gender minority part of Sphinxes.

Once the show had been cast, Ballendine and Grochowski turned their attention to figuring out its format and making it freeing and safe for the performers.

“There’s always those shows that are titled, ‘Ladies Night Out!’ and are always advertised like, ‘women are funny too!’ or something else that’s dumb and under-cutting, and the audience is always small and weird, and everyone is always uncomfortable. People can do that. That’s fine. It just doesn’t feel liberating. So when we were chatting about how to make Sphinxes, we knew that’s not what we wanted.”

Ballendine, a director of Sphinxes, has been through many trials as a woman in comedy. PHOTO: GEORGIA LONGPHEE
The full cast of Sphinxes 2018/19 season shows how diverse comedy shows can be.

SYDNEY CAMPBELL

Campbell, another seasoned improviser, started improv in 2010 while they were still in high school. It was then that they were given the opportunity to be in the Wildfire festival, an annual improv festival for teens hosted by Rapid Fire Theatre. This eventually led to their career with the company.

Then, in 2017, Campbell was cast as one of the original Sphinxes, and was the company’s first non-binary member, meaning that they identify as a gender outside the binary of female and male.

However, they didn’t start in Rapid Fire as an out, non-binary person. Campbell’s identity grew from their time there as a performer.

“Any one time before a performance, before I had told any one about my identity but my current girlfriend, we were introducing ourselves and I introduced myself as they/them. And everyone accepted it. It made me feel safe, and like I had an actual space there.”

But that wasn’t the only time Campbell was allowed to safely proclaim their identity as part of the Sphinxes.

In their first performance with the group, Campbell was their first “director,” or the first person to introduce a scene to the audience.

“I went up there and said, ‘Hi, my name is Syd, and today is transgender awareness day. And I’m proud to stand here and say that I’m trans. And it was amazing.’”

According to Campbell, the biggest difference between Sphinxes and other shows like it is that it emphasizes the idea that gender minorities can be serious in comedy.

“In Sphinxes, it’s about being able to say, ‘I’m a woman/non-binary/trans person and I’m funny,’ rather than ‘I’m a woman/non-binary/trans person but I’m funny.’ And that’s extremely important in representation.”

However, gender minorities aren’t the only marginalized group that faces issues in the improv and comedy community — something that Campbell experienced firsthand.

“I started Rapid Fire with a friend of mine who was the first Indigenous member of [the] Rapid Fire cast, and her struggle was very different from mine. There’s a lot of things we all have to go through, but I had it much easier than her.”

Rapid Fire Theatre, in Campbell’s eyes, cultivated an inclusive place so that Sphinxes were able to grow.

MEG PRUSKO

Prusko, a younger improviser, started out improvising a little later than the others. But, similar to Ballendine, Prusko didn’t start improv for the simple love of theatre.

“I had really bad anxiety in high school and I did the auditions for the improv club because I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it,” they said. “My drama teacher put me on the team and drilled it into me that I had something and that I was actually funny. It was a really positive experience.”

Because of this support from their teacher, Prusko started doing more and more improv. That eventually resulted in them representing Alberta in the 2017 Canadian Improv Games.

After that, they were asked to be a cast member for Rapid Fire’s improv team once they graduated.

“If feel bad because my experience going into improv wasn’t really an uphill battle like lots of others,” they said. “It was really inclusive and gave me the space to be comfortable with who I was.”

Prusko first saw Sphinxes perform while they were still in high school, just as the show was starting to get popular. As it turns out, that performance contributed to Prusko’s success as a non-binary performer.

“I had watched Sphinxes before I knew I was non-binary. When I saw it in high school it was all women and one non-binary person. And even though it was only one, I didn’t realize how much I needed that space for being a non-binary person.”

Now, as a member of Sphinxes, the troupe has helped Prusko feel accepted in their community.

“At the beginning of the show, it’s all directed scenes by the whole cast. So we rotate. And it’s nice having that role as a non-binary person because you have the choice to show your unique experiences and perspectives which isn’t really all that common.”

The show also gives Prusko the chance to be comfortable in their humour and relating it to their identity.

“I remember at the end of a scene I said, ‘Bless my trans ass!’ and the whole audience laughed. And that’s when I realized that it was okay to be trans on stage, and it was okay to be funny about it.”

According to Prusko, the main reason why something like Sphinxes exists in Edmonton is because of Rapid Fire Theatre itself.

“I think that Rapid Fire has created a really special thing,” they said.

“It allows us to share our unique experiences and it also allows us to be like, ‘this is who we are!’ and be completely honest about that. Plus the fact that we are still a part of the community, but we’re given that specific place by the theatre to be authentically ourselves.”

The show evolved into a question-based format, where the cast members ask the audience meaningful questions to spark ideas for scenes in their performance. This is also where they found the name for the troupe, Sphinxes, which is named after a mythical creature who would allow you safe passage if you solved a riddle.

But neither the questions nor the show focuses on the gender of the performers. “The idea is just to have a space to be funny and to feel like you’re heard. It’s just about creating that inclusive space.”

But why does this type of theatre exist in Edmonton, but not Calgary?

According to Ballendine, the show exists mainly because of the opportunities provided by Rapid Fire Theatre, such as space to hold workshops for the cast.

“We pitched the idea and there was no micromanaging, they just told us to roll with it. That’s an experience that isn’t too common in the industry.”
How the sport’s high cost and time commitment is putting a burden on hockey parents

It's not difficult to see where the obsession for the game comes from. The sport dominates television viewership, is printed on currency and is played on outdoor rinks from coast to coast. From early ages, kids develop a passion for hockey. And that's what convinces parents to continue signing their kids up to play.

One of those parents is Carla Hicks, a credit specialist with two children in the Indus Minor Hockey Association. Her daughter Liz plays ringette and her son Jay plays hockey. She says that both kids love the sport.

"Since they both started, they've jumped in with both feet to hockey and ringette," says Hicks. "My son is now obsessed with hockey. He plays road hockey, indoor hockey, mini sticks in the house, [watches] YouTube videos, and [plays] hockey video games. Anything to do with hockey, he is now in love with. He wants to show up early and it's hard to peel him off the ice."

Another parent with a child obsessed with the game is CJ Murphy, a furnace technician with a 15-year-old son playing in the Midget Okotoks Oilers league.

"Blake loves the game, it's simple as that," Murphy says. "Everything is hockey for him. He never complains [and] it's hard to get him off the ice. As challenging as it is, I'm glad to keep him in it because of how much joy the sport brings him."

Nor are Murphy and Hicks's children alone. This year, according to Hockey Canada, more than 500,000 were registered in minor and junior hockey leagues. But high involvement means hockey has become extremely competitive and the sport now demands more from parents starting at young ages.

The first challenge parents face is the high cost of the game. Even at a more recreational level, Murphy says he's felt the financial strain of being a hockey parent.

"Fees are over $1,200 just to play a normal season," he says. "Then there is travel and gas because we're in Okotoks. I spend between $2,000 and $2,500 just to keep him in the sport." He says he no longer thinks about hockey costs as extras.

"Hockey is part of my family's finances," he explains. "I have other kids in other sports and I don't really have to worry about them too much, but the cost of hockey is part of my finances just like heating my home and paying other bills."

But, at the top levels, those bills get bigger. Drader has two boys playing Novice and Atom division one hockey at a cost of over $2,000 in league fees alone. There's also usually a cash-call for another $300 to $500.

As a coach at the Midget AA and AAA level, Drader has also seen parents spend around $5,000 and $10,000 respectively. Add the cost of equipment and parents can sink tens of thousands to keep their kids competing at the highest levels.

And that figure may not even include the costs of the off-ice sessions many kids at higher levels take to improve their game - something that Drader says wasn't the case when he was a kid.

"I remember as a kid we used to practice on the outdoor rinks, which was free and you
I don’t think I should have to worry that my son is going to love the game so much or get too good that I can no longer afford to keep him in it

> Carla Hicks, hockey parent

Five Year Trends 2015-2019

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CANADA POPULATION</th>
<th>HOCKEY PARTICIPATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016 - 36,109,487</td>
<td>2015/16 - 636,539</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017 - 36,543,321</td>
<td>2016/17 - 637,010</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018 - 37,057,765</td>
<td>2017/18 - 626,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019 - 37,589,262</td>
<td>2018/19 - 643,958</td>
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</tbody>
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5.3% POPULATION INCREASE
0.7% PARTICIPATION INCREASE

would just meet up and play hockey,” he recalls. “The climate has definitely changed here. Right now, there are all these extra skill sessions, power skating coaches, and shooting coaches.”

“For example, my Atom team that I assistant coach and help out at hired a power skating coach to come in and teach the team and all of that stuff costs money,” he says. “We have five to 10 dryland sessions scheduled for seven and eight-year-old kids.”

Hicks’ own children have also been approached about joining those kinds of extra off-ice programs to improve their play. They have been offered power skating classes, skill development classes and dryland training sessions, each costing a few hundred dollars. It’s a lot of extra training for a nine-year-old in ringette and a six-year-old just starting off in hockey.

Another financial obstacle for parents to overcome is the cost of tournaments. Drader says with two kids, there are weekends when both compete in different places.

“One of the biggest problems for cost is tournaments,” he says. “Coming up right away, I’ll have one kid in Golden for a tournament and another kid in Lethbridge. So you’re spending a few hundred dollars on a hotel for both places, add gas and food and they haven’t even stepped on the ice yet. Then the cost of the tournament as well. So it certainly adds up.”

Hicks runs into similar challenges. She says managing her children’s education and sport schedules can be tricky.

“We have to pull kids out of school early on Fridays and leave work early to get to a tournament which sometimes wrap-up late Sunday nights and you drive through the night,” Hicks explains.

That adding up has meant that, according to a Hockey Survey Report by Scotiabank, 86 per cent of parents are concerned about the impact hockey has on their finances. Nevertheless, 35 per cent of parents are willing to take on more personal debt to keep their kids playing.

“Such, it’s clear at least some parents are willing to take on the financial stresses of hockey. But that’s not the only sacrifice they’re willing to make to keep their kids on the ice. According to the same survey, 70 percent take fewer vacations as a result of hockey. And Hicks has personally seen how it’s affected her own life schedule.

For Hicks, a typical month includes 20 to 25 ice times for both kids. With her and her husband working full-time jobs and their children in school, the Hicks family schedule is both unpredictable and jam-packed.

“I don’t really have a story to describe where the sport has changed my life because hockey has become my life. Our weekends revolve around it. There’s no more sleeping in. Vacations or weekends away don’t really happen,” she says.

And that’s causing frustration for some.

“People don’t want to spend the time,” Drader says. “They don’t want to drive around. People don’t want to have that burden of having that regimented of a schedule. Cost is definitely one thing but I think schedule is the number one driver to that.”

Murphy’s concerned this has made the once beautiful game of hockey not a game for everyone.

“This sport isn’t for everybody,” he says. “You want everyone to play it, but not everyone can afford it.”

At a community level, according to Hockey Canada, the country’s hockey participation numbers have been sluggish. In 2013/14, Canada had 639,510 registered ice hockey players.

In 2018/19, the number was 643,958. The statistics get worse when you consider that Canada’s population has increased during that same period.

For Drader, one of the main concerns surrounding these statistics is that parents need to spend more time gauging what they want their children to get out of hockey.

“For me, my goals of having kids in sport is more around what are they going to learn about commitment, teamwork, dedication, work ethic, overcoming adversity, understanding self-esteem, how to deal with a bully, how to rally around teammates, how to put team first and everything else on the laundry list of reasons why we spend the money we do to play a game,” he says.

Along with making sure that the kids and parents are united with goals Drader says there are cost-effective solutions for families.

“There are rec leagues out there and they’re good for kids that aren’t necessarily as competitive,” he says. “They just want to play the game and have fun. There is the opportunity to play the game at a lower cost.”

Drader recommends parents find creative ways to lower equipment costs as well.

“You can buy skates for $1,000 or for $200,” he says. “There’s also ways to get second-hand gear. I phone around to my buddies for skates and sticks that their kids used and grew out of.”

Drader, who also notes carpooling lowers travel times and gas costs, says there are ways to have kids improve off-the-ice that don’t require spending a lot of money.

“Ultimately if the kid wants to get good at the game he can do it without sinking a bunch of money into it,” he says.

“You can find YouTube videos or go to a field and they can do drills where they don’t even have to be on the ice.”

Nevertheless, a look ahead to a future in the sport of hockey still concerns Hicks.

“As a mother, I’m thankful for what hockey has brought my family but at the same time, I am also worried about the future. I don’t think I should have to worry that my son is going to love the game so much or get too good that I can no longer afford to keep him in it.”
JAN. 23–25
REVV52

FEB. 10
CAMPBELL, CHOI, AND MONTGOMERY
WYATT SERIES

FEB. 14
DAVE KELLY LIVE
VALENTINE’S DAY SPECIAL

FEB. 28
ANDY SHAUF

MARCH 8
ELMER ISLER SINGERS

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