



Photo by Kayla Isomura

Manuel Abrego, 38, sits near the boat ramp at Ballinger Lake in Mountlake Terrace, WA on Jan. 23. Formerly detained at the Northwest Detention Centre (NWDC) in Tacoma, Abrego said he's spent the last five years working with advocacy group La Resistencia to support people currently in the facility.

Former detainee longs to be free

By Kayla Isomura

Nearly four years after leaving an immigration detention centre in Tacoma, Wash., a former detainee said he still feels controlled by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

Formerly held in the Northwest Detention Center, now called the Northwest ICE Processing Center or NWIPC, and bounced around facilities in Arizona and Oregon, Manuel Abrego said he's spent more than half of his life living in the U.S. As an undocumented immigrant, he said he remains at risk of deportation.

"They couldn't deport me back to El Salvador because I was going to be harmed or killed," said Abrego, 38. "So I have been deported, but my deportation has been deferred to a different country that will accept me but right now, I'm not looking for nowhere."

Abrego said ICE has labelled his case as similar to asylum seeker, but according to him, "with little quotes in there that say 'Convention Against Torture.'"

A request for general comments with ICE was declined, and questions regarding COVID-19 and the centre were referred to Immigrations and Customs online information.

While Abrego said transitioning from life inside the detention facilities was difficult, he said he feels it continues to be a challenge living under ICE's supervision.

"They still monitor everything that I do," he claimed. "They are in control of my life."

This includes, he said, asking for permission to leave the state and annual visits to the ICE office in Washington.

"I'm still following the rules, but every time I go [to the office] I get nervous because they can hold me," Abrego

explained. "And of course, they have the right to come to my house and that's what worries me because if they come to the house, I feel like they're going to take me back in. It's stress."

Part of Abrego's concerns centre around his wife, he said, whom he considers a support and vice versa.

When released from the detention centre, he said she was one of the reasons he had somewhere to go.

"Some people, they don't have a place to go when they're released, so sometimes they put you in a transition home..." explained Abrego. "It's like being in the detention centre, but they only give you a chance to stay there for like a couple of months and after that, you have to find your own way."

"By staying with my wife, I got a foundation where I can start from there and not have to be homeless or anything."

Andrea Lino, a supervising attorney

with the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, said Abrego's experience isn't uncommon among released detainees.

What's worse, she said, is that ICE retains all forms of their identification.

"That's extremely hard because you need an ID to travel, an ID to go to the bank and they have nothing," said Lino. "After being detained, there is that struggle to go back to 'real life' and they have no support."

Unless a detainee is working with a lawyer, which is often costly, Lino said most people are left without a transition plan.

"There are people who have been detained for years in immigration detention and they are just released on the street," she said. "It's a pretty traumatizing experience for many of them and for people who have a criminal history or even a drug addiction, it's very hard to [avoid] relapse if you don't have a plan."

Many people released from detention centres struggle with mental health and face financial barriers due to challenges in finding work or paying for legal fees, added Lino.

Working with the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, a non-profit legal service defending immigrant rights, Lino said ICE does little to communicate with the court system, lawyers and detainees, further impacting the process.

According to the Washington State Office of the Attorney General, NWIPC was the fourth-largest U.S. immigration detention centre in 2021. Those held at the facility are "undergoing proceedings to determine their immigration status."

ICE describes its facilities as "safe, secure, and humane environments and under appropriate conditions of confinement."

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Pandemic furthers accessibility gap

By Paige White

Like so many teachers, Laurie Gashinski has witnessed firsthand the struggles to education that the pandemic has created. Gashinski teaches kindergarten through Grade 2 at Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville saying that "with the pandemic, it's the foundation again, again, and again. It is like trying to build a foundation on sinking sand. We can't get that foundation to put the scaffolding up."

Unlike most teachers, Gashinski's role as a hearing staff member at Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf allows her insight into how this pandemic uniquely impacts students with disabilities. From the most extreme examples like students who cannot go to school because the student residence is closed, to the minutiae of daily technology challenges, Gashinski knows that many of her students are among the most impacted.

"School isn't just about academics. It's also a service provider for things like speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers. Schools have become the one-stop shop or hub for all services for children and youth. So, when they're closed, the children that require those services are the ones that will lose those services... and they were the ones that were at risk to begin with."

Students at Sir James Whitney are not only following the Ontario curriculum, but also many are learning American Sign Language. Gashinski knows that as a teacher of young children, the early



Photo by Paige White

Laurie Gashinski teaches her grade one and two students geometry in the snow through outdoor education. Gashinski and her students are glad to be reunited at Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf, yet Gashinski acknowledges that in-person learning throughout the pandemic is an imperfect system in the best of circumstances. Only three of Gashinski's usual class of seven students are currently able to return to in person learning.

years are among the best for students to develop language skills. Using visual language like ASL is not easily practiced online, even with the presence of inter-

net connections. At best, this visual language online is not ideal, and at worst, a weak or buffering internet connection makes ASL choppy and incomprehen-

sible – especially for young children.

Gashinski knows all too well that even in the best of online teaching circumstances, "teachers with young chil-

dren are competing with playrooms, televisions, siblings, refrigerators and never-ending snack options" and the life situations that children experience at home – that is until record-breaking snowfall decided that in class learning would still need to wait. When Gashinski did finally see some of her students in the classroom, she described one of the highlights being the general sense of reunion and the excitement of being together again.

On Jan. 17, Gashinski, her students, and the rest of Ontario prepared to trade online learning for the classrooms again – that is until record-breaking snowfall decided that in class learning would still need to wait. When Gashinski did finally see some of her students in the classroom, she described one of the highlights being the general sense of reunion and the excitement of being together again.

Gashinski laughed when explaining that at the beginning of the pandemic, masks "were just used for everything in anything, except for on their faces". She describes her students using them as makeshift purses, to carriers of toy cars, or even the unlikely of hammocks – the perfect size for snails.

In this latest return to the classrooms, the familiarity with masks and the "new normal" were a little different. In a stark contrast to early mask blunders, Gashinski says that her early age students "have put it on themselves, that they have to stay safe, and they don't get sick." Some of her students have taken to policing others, and although many are happy to be together again, there are also some students and their parents who have considerable anxiety.



Photo by Ethan Cairns

David James Allen in his studio in Prince Edward County. He is a country and folk artist and recently released a new album, *The Architect*.

Album tells story of young musician's life

By Ethan Cairns

Thirty-three-year-old David James Allen is a talented local musician located in Picton in Prince Edward County.

Allen grew up in Barrie, ON and studied business communications in St Catherine's, where he decided to continue to pursue music. His career eventually led him to move to the Quinte area.

Allen was born into a musical family who inspired him to learn to play. He has since been playing for over 10 years professionally.

"It's a long time since I started. My parents were both campfire musicians, guitar or violin around the campfire.

So, it was ingrained in me early on," he said. "Probably in my early 20s. I started taking it seriously and trying to give it a go."

Allen recently released a new album in November, titled *The Architect*. "I think it's my best album to date," he noted. Allen has been working on this album for the last 10 years and spent over a year recording at Katherine North studio in Hamilton as well as in his home studio. The album focuses on documenting his 20s and the ups and downs of what life threw at him.

"I pull a lot of inspiration from experiences that I've had, maybe substances or depression, anxiety, that sort of thing."

Allen also has a connection with

'I pull a lot of inspiration from experiences that I've had, maybe substances or depression, anxiety, that sort of thing.'

David James Allen

nature and that has influence on his music as well.

"Nature's a big inspiration to me. That's part of the reason why I love living in the county, going for hikes in green spaces and kind of the country

fields and stuff is very inspiring."

Allen hopes that others will be able to connect with what he is doing and use that to inspire and relate to what they hear in his songs.

"At any point in my life, I was always looking for some type of guidance, some advice that's going to click and with music, I feel like could be an avenue for me to try to write a song that might impact somebody else. All that kind of stuff inspires me."

The single *The Architect* is based on a character that Allen made to represent negative thinking in his mind.

"Architects, they build buildings, from draft boards. And I thought that the field was relatable to a character of negative self-talk that I have inside my

head, crafting these fake imaginary situations and that kind of architect character kind of came out of those ideas," he said.

Compared to his previous album, Allen collaborated with more musicians and friends.

"With this particular album, I got to kind of reconnect with old friends and musicians, and new musicians and new friends and in new spaces," he said. "it was more collaborative in the way that it came together."

The goal for this album was to make good songs that he could play acoustically by himself and have anything extra as supplementary.

"I think I executed it pretty good," he said. "I'm proud of the songs."

Detainee...

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Abrego said it is the latter statement that, for him, made him want to advocate for both the rights of those detained and for the closure of the detention centre.

From his experience, he described the detention centre as a "jail," and a "prison".

"People get disrespected by guards, people get mistreated by officers, [there's] no medical help and the food was horrible," he said.

At the time Abrego was held at the facility, he said they were operating their voluntary dollar-a-day work program as well.

As a result of poor conditions, Abrego said he organized a hunger strike in the hope of change.

Demands included better medical care, increased pay for labour, better food and for asylum cases to be expedited.

A list of ICE National Detention Standards published in 2019 states that each detainee receives a "site-specific handbook to serve as an overview of, and guide to, the rules and procedures in effect at the facility."

At the Tacoma detention facility, which is privately operated by GEO Group, Inc. on behalf of ICE, Abrego said the handbook allowed for detainees to protest or complain.

Despite this rule, Abrego said he was labelled as an instigator and was sent to a facility in Arizona for three months. Eventually returning to Washington to address his case with ICE, he said he was moved to solitary confinement for eight months. He said he was then taken to another facility in Oregon before returning to segregation in Washington again.

"The first time they took me down to Arizona, they put me in a room where I couldn't talk to anybody, I couldn't see anybody," he said. "They used to slide my food under . . . a little opening in the door like a dog. My bed was chained to the floor and all I have in the middle of the room to go to the bathroom was a small hole."

Abrego claimed conditions seemed to worsen at NORCOR, or the North-

ern Oregon Regional Correctional Facilities, which has since discontinued its contract with ICE.

For Abrego, he said it felt like many people detained there were also seen as instigators or were seeking to appeal cases with ICE.

He called NORCOR a facility meant to "punish" these individuals.

"It's actually a dungeon because you don't see anything, you don't see the light of the day," said Abrego. "It's just yellow walls with yellow, bright lights that stay on all night long, all day long, and a TV [with] one channel all day long."

Just like in Tacoma, he said the conditions encouraged him to organize another hunger strike.

Detainees refused to eat for four days, eventually coming to an agreement with the administration and facility, he said.

"They said that they were going to try to treat us a little better because we were immigration detainees and not people that came in for committing a crime even though they criminalize our people," Abrego said. "But we are not in there as criminals, we're in there as immigration detainees."

What helped was receiving support from outside the facility, he said.

Demands were met, organizers had won, said Abrego.

After his eventual release from all detention facilities, or officially the NWIPC, in April 2018, Abrego has continued to work with La Resistencia, one of the organizations that supported his protests during custody.

"I don't want my people to go through the same thing I went through so that's what inspires me," he said. "Fighting for everyone else's rights and mine at the same time."

Over the last seven years, La Resistencia has fought to close the Tacoma facility and demand the release of all detainees, said founder Maru Mora Villalpando, who recently won her own deportation case with ICE.

Last year, the group made strides in stepping closer to their goal, she said.

For example, House Bill 1090 was passed by the Washington House of Representatives and the Senate "to prohibit the use of private, for-profit prisons and detention facilities in the state."

"Washington has not supported use of private prisons, and this bill contin-



Photo by Kayla Isomura

Maru Mora Villalpando, 51, stands outside the Northwest Detention Centre (NWDC), a for-profit, privately run facility operated by the GEO Group on behalf of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, on Jan. 22.

ues that policy by prohibiting private detention facilities from operating in the state," said Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, prior to signing the bill on April 14, 2021, according to a report from the Associated Press.

Mora Villalpando said this means that the NWIPC must shut down when

its contract with ICE expires in 2025.

The dollar-a-day work program that Abrego tried to change years ago ended as well, she said.

In October, a federal jury determined that GEO Group, which is a for-profit company, was violating state minimum wage.

"This multi-billion dollar corporation illegally exploited the people it detains to line its own pockets," said Bob Ferguson, Washington State Attorney General, in a news release. "Today's victory sends a clear message: Washington will not tolerate corporations that get rich violating the rights of the people."

The GEO Group was also ordered to pay USD \$23.2 million in back pay "as a result of unfair labour practices," said the Attorney General's office.

According to the Associated Press, GEO Group suspended the program shortly after.

Prior to the program's pay increase, Mora Villalpando said guards had pressured detainees to contribute free labour at the NWIPC through something she referred to as "the Hunger Games."

"Even if you chose not to work for the dollar a day . . . they still expected you to clean for free in order to win a piece of chicken once a week," she said, adding that detainees could also "win" a movie night, popcorn, soda or an evening with an Xbox.

After the program was suspended, she said guards continued with the games until calls to the Washington Attorney General allegedly put an end to them.

It's through concerns like this that Mora Villalpando said she is pushing for more than change at the detention centre. She's advocating for the release of all detainees prior to the expected closure of the facility in 2025.

"We don't want to be shutting down the detention centre and then they transfer 395 people to who knows where," said Mora Villalpando.

The ongoing pandemic is another concern for advocates and detainees, she noted.

According to Mora Villalpando, COVID cases have surged through the NWDC over recent months, likely due to the Omicron variant. Mora Villalpando recently cited higher numbers of cases among guards and staff compared to detainees. She said there are concerns of unvaccinated or infected outsiders, the lack of adequate sanitization and the inability to physically distance inside.

Mora Villalpando said La Resistencia is presently using COVID to push for releases, in addition to prosecutorial discretion.

City seeks to fight homelessness

By Luke Best

In October 2021, at least 287 people were experiencing homelessness in Peterborough City and County. The city has made it a mission to end homelessness in the community by Dec. 31, 2025.

There are many initiatives within the area that try to provide help to those most vulnerable. One of the most recent to be established is One City's winter outreach program. One City Peterborough is an organization focused on housing, food security, community safety and inclusion. The group is made up of volunteers and relies heavily on donations from the public and businesses.

The winter outreach program is a push to support people who are experiencing homelessness and not using a shelter.

People will choose not to use a shelter for many reasons, but sometimes, it is as simple as there is no room for them. It might be a better, more consistent option to settle into a temporary solution outside, such as a tent. One City provides basic food, clothes, and other gear that may be needed for survival. The organization's volunteers will also be happy to share resources, educate and have a conversation and help to problem solve for other shelter options that may be available.

Anton Selmeczi, who was previously a school teacher, has now been working with One City as an outreach worker. He shares how he got into this field of work.

"While teaching, the conversation came up about people on the street asking for money. This is what started the whole thing now. I've been interested in all kinds of issues all my life, and homelessness has been one of them. I said, 'That's interesting guys.' I told them about some experiences I had. I said, 'Usually, if I stop to give someone change, I'll often chat them up,' and that's started me on a whole year of doing what I call my informal interviews.

"So, for a full year, every time I met someone on the street that asked me for change, I talked to them, and I would ask them all kinds of questions. I start off usually, by saying, 'Listen, I'm a school teacher and my students have been asking about this, do you mind? I never had anyone not tell me a whole lot of stuff, and then I would start asking about their education and where they came from. I realized there are so many stories out there,' Selmeczi says.

"Having these types of kind of rich conversations on social justice issues, it just came alive. It made teaching the thing that I always thought it could be, what I always realized it could be. So I started injecting a lot of that into my teaching for quite some time. Then COVID hit. The teaching went online and I tried that for a while and that was absolutely ridiculous. I thought, 'I'm not that computer savvy' but it just doesn't really matter if you're tech-savvy or not, there's not a



Photo by Luke Best

Anton Selmeczi is an outreach worker with One City Peterborough who is trying to help some of the city's most vulnerable population who are experiencing homelessness. Within the basement of their main office on Water Street, there are bags of donations waiting to be sorted by volunteers and then distributed.

lot going on there and I've been restless for two years anyways. I just said 'I'm not doing this. I want to do something else I want.' I wanted to now work with homeless people. So it's just sort of went from there," he adds.

Anton Selmeczi quit his job teaching and has been with One City since

September 2021, working between the main office and also on the streets. A large part of his role is approaching businesses and letting them know about One City and its initiatives. Letting people know there is an alternative to calling the police if you see someone in crisis.

One of the most used programs that One City has is its overnight warming room. A joint initiative with the Bridge Youth Centre, the organization has started using that space to allow all people to come in and warm up during the coldest parts of the night, 12 a.m. to 6 a.m.

With temperatures in the city dropping to -30 C some nights, it has become a crucial part of many people's lives. The organization calls it a 'Stop-Gap' because it's not going to solve homelessness, it's a band-aid solution to meet people's immediate basic needs.

Speed skating oval comes to Lakefield

By Luke Best

During the cold months of COVID-19, people are often looking for a safe, fun activity that their families can participate in. Graham Wilkins has been working on that winter solution long before the pandemic began.

Wilkins is the driving force behind the Ontario Speed Skating Oval in Lakefield, Ont. Since 2001, he has been instrumental in raising funds, acquiring land, constructing, and running southern Ontario's only natural ice 400-metre speed skating facility, which is a not-for-profit corporation. He shares how this project took form.

"My kids were speed skating at a relatively new club in Peterborough and getting ice time was always a problem. So, I thought we'll just get a place where we can put a track and just do natural ice. That as a concept was relatively easy, and then in the process of doing that, the Ontario Speed Skating Association contacted me," Wilkins says.

The Ontario Speed Skating Association informed him that while there are other outdoor long tracks in Ontario, none of them are temperature controlled, and that might be something to strive toward. While working with the organization to get the concept going, and getting to know the members of the group, Wilkins was eventually invited to the board of directors, even becoming president for 2006-2012.

In the beginning steps of the project, there was some financial help from the government, but as it stands now, they rely entirely on donations and volunteer help. The donations go into paying taxes for the 12.5-acre property and maintaining the equipment such as the snowplow, water truck to flood the ice and the Zamboni. Wilkins also has big plans in mind for the future.

"The finished facility will have a building overlooking the track. To be determined in the future what the other uses the building will be. At various times there's been a whole variety of concepts of what might work to help cover the ongoing costs when the facility is finished."

Suggestions have included an office space available for other or-



Photo by Luke Best

Graham Wilkins takes a moment before going down to the Ontario Speed Skating Oval to flood the rink.

ganizations, a banquet hall, and even the concept of opening a brewery was floated around. Wilkins and the board of volunteers are still just waiting for the right partner to pop up.

The end goal for the track itself is to pave it into a 400-metre concrete track that has pipes embedded into the ground, making it into a year-round facility. During the summer months, people can inline skate, and then during the winter, it is easier to flood the track and make ice.

In the times before COVID, the oval was working with schools to offer skating lessons and skate days. They have 100 pairs of recreational speed skates to teach school groups about the sport and offer them a chance to experience it.

"The bus would pull up. About 30 kids at a time would come and get their skates to go for a skate. Usually, there would be a morning and an afternoon session. We were doing two school groups at a day in a normal winter," Wilkins remembers.

"Now, in COVID times, school groups aren't coming out. So we've had two seasons where our programming has been reduced, but the number of people coming for skating has gone up. Our Saturdays and Sundays, we're limited to only 100 people on the track at any one time, and we've actually had to limit sometimes how many people are out there. There are sometimes people waiting in the parking lot for other people to leave, and that's unusual for us."

In previous years, the Ontario Speed Skating Oval offered a special evening candlelight skate, drawing over a thousand visitors a night. But being limited to only 100 people on the track has made Wilkins redesign the event.

"Last year, we sold tickets. We ran three sessions over two nights. We had a total of six hundred people come out, and we sold out in 24 hours," says Wilkins.

The oval plans to rerun the candlelight skate this year on Feb. 4 and 5, which coincides with the township of Selwyn's annual PolarFest. The rink is open daily (depending on ice conditions) from noon until 5 p.m.



Photo and Video by Ron Lavoie

Zoning issues

Picton resident and activist Stephanie Bell reacts to the provincial housing summit recommendations. Among the recommendations out of the summit are to reduce zoning limitations on new construction. The response in Picton has been less than enthusiastic. To hear more about the story, click on the link: <https://vimeo.com/670697519>



Photo by Kayla Isomura

minh do, 24, stands outside a mural on 4th Ave. W. and Main Street in Edmonds, Washington. do is a member of Sóng2Sea (S2S), an organizing collective raising money for vulnerable and marginalized members of the Vietnamese community.

Fundraiser highlights need for support

Helping vulnerable members of Washington's Vietnamese community

By Kayla Isomura

Lunar New Year, or Tết Nguyên Đán in Vietnamese, is minh do's favourite holiday. For the 24-year-old living north of Seattle, WA, it brings back many memories of what it was like to grow up in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City during this time of year.

"My mom would take me out on her moped and drive me around the city and buy red envelopes and decorations and things like that," said do. "There's this palpable anticipation in the air in the weeks that lead up to it. Everyone is ready to turn over a new chapter of their life."

For many people, do said Tết is not only about a new beginning but a better beginning.

"It's just like this incredible celebration of life and wanting better for yourself and for your family," they explained.

Living in Washington, do said this outlook applies to the broader Vietnamese diaspora as well.

A member of Sóng2Sea, the group is raising money for vulnerable members of the Vietnamese community in the Puget Sound region. Selling bilingual Vietnamese/English art calendars in time for Tết, which begins Feb. 1, the fundraiser aims to provide lì xì or "lucky money" for those lacking safe and stable housing, those facing or who have faced



Photo by Kayla Isomura

Trinh Nguyen, co-owner and chef at Ba Sa Restaurant, assists Laura Clise in making bánh tét during a workshop organized by Friends of Little Sài Gòn on Jan. 22 in the International District. Considered one of many traditional meals prepared for Vietnamese New Year, or Tết Nguyên Đán, bánh tét is a glutinous rice cake made with mung bean and pork, and wrapped in a banana leaf.

deportation and those experiencing gender-based violence.

"These are the people who are affected by systemic and structural violence which affect all of us in different ways and to various degrees of severity," shared Sóng2Sea, noting non-binary people and women of colour as disproportionately impacted.

"I don't think that spirit of Tết, that celebration, that vibrancy, should be limited to people who can afford to have it," said do. "Everyone deserves to have

Tết even if they cannot afford to because they are unhoused or are facing hardships."

"We want to extend the joyful and celebratory spirit of Tết to these vulnerable people through our fundraiser, giving a portion of our proceeds back to the community."

Within the Vietnamese diaspora, do said they feel many of these individuals are ignored and lack adequate support.

"The Vietnamese community in Seattle is really robust and dynamic and

the [organizations] that work here and live here kind of reflect that a little bit, but I think there are missing voices for sure," they said. "Those missing voices would be the ones who are most heavily impacted by gentrification, by the legacies of war, by lack of shelter or lack of health care and things like that."

For Sóng2Sea, which encompasses a group of multi-ethnic and multi-racial individuals with connection to the Puget Sound area and present-day Vietnam, do's comment reflects their overall interests.

Nikki Châu, another member of Sóng2Sea, said this work "means the world" to them. This is the group's first fundraiser and introduction to the community.

"This is the organization that I deeply wish existed many years earlier when I came to the U.S. as a child refugee, and in my 20s, when [I] was lost, confused, unconsciously wanting to shed myself of my connection to my homeland out of the desperation to belong and be accepted," said Châu. "It's also really meaningful to me as we are building an organization where we can study and examine our incredibly complex history without feeling like we are betraying or dismissing our parents' experiences and hardship as refugees and immigrants."

While Sóng2Sea aims to draw attention to social issues faced by vulnerable and marginalized members of the Vietnamese community, other organizations are ringing in Tết Nguyên Đán with a host of festivities as Tết is considered the largest celebration of the year.

With the ongoing pandemic, Quynh

Pham, executive director of Friends of Little Sài Gòn, said celebrating Tết is an opportunity to bring the community together after much distance due to the pandemic.

Friends of Little Sài Gòn is hosting a bánh tét workshop—teaching participants how to make a traditional dish consisting of glutinous rice cakes filled with mung bean and pork, and wrapped in a banana leaf—as well as hosting a market and art exhibition.

As a new parent, Pham said the holiday is a time to share her family's culture with her children.

"I hear this a lot from many families and youth because there are not many opportunities to practice and pass on knowledge and traditions," she said.

Angela Trương, organizer of Seattle's upcoming annual Tết Festival, agreed.

"For me, I've never been to Vietnam," said Trương, co-executive director of Tết in Seattle. "I've only heard stories from my family of how they used to celebrate [Tết]."

"I think that's one of the big significances is a space where people can show younger generations [the traditions] but also feel nostalgic about the holiday in general."

Sóng2Sea's fundraiser ends on Jan. 27. At the time of publishing, the group was "on track to raise over \$3000" and after material costs, remaining funds will be directly donated to individuals, they said.

For more information, email info.song2sea@gmail.com.

Kingston's Reelout Queer Film Festival goes virtual

By Paige White

Starting on Jan. 27, Kingston's Reelout Queer Film Festival kicks off its 23rd year of celebrating independent queer films from around the world.

This year's festival is showing 63 films over 12 days. With a mix of feature and short-length narrative films as well as documentaries, there is something for everyone at this year's festival.

Matt Salton, Reelout's executive director, often finds himself saying, "if there's ever a snowstorm, and someone needs to duck into the movie theatre to get out of the snow and ends up sitting down and buy a ticket to Reelout movie, without knowing what they're getting into. They may not even realize that they've watched a queer film."

At least for 2022, Salton's movie theatre snowstorm is only hypothetical, because the festival will take place virtually. Salton chooses to focus on the positives of this, a virtual festival means that these films can be viewed all throughout Ontario.

Salton is adamant that this festival is for everyone. There are queer films, yet the audience is not. A city the size of Kingston couldn't sustain a festival like this with a queer audience alone. He says that one of the easiest ways "for

people to gain that empathy is to literally watch films made by people who do not have the same lived experiences as you," and the Reelout Queer Film Festival is a great place to do this.

Twenty-two years ago, Salton began as a volunteer at the festival and hasn't stopped being involved ever since. He says there are two reasons why people typically volunteer with the festival: because they want to be close to the community and boredom. One year, the festival had around 50 volunteers over 10 days, whereas this year's online format doesn't require many roles.

Salton points out how like many other marginalized communities, the LGBTQ+ community often has events that revolve around socializing, often with drugs and alcohol around. An event like Reelout is a welcome break from this and gives the community an opportunity to come together. "For the 20th anniversary, we had a couple come that were celebrating their anniversary and they met at Reelout."

From films about a teenage hockey player wrestling with two sides of their identity, to a couple who goes on a roadtrip to try and save their relationship, or what it means to be Black in the adult entertainment industry, Reelout is all about queer people telling queer stories.



Photo by Paige White

Starting Jan. 27, Kingston's Reelout Queer Film Festival kicks off its 23rd year of celebrating independent queer films from around the world. This is the festival's second year being shown virtually with 63 films over 12 days.

COVID impacts small businesses

By Ethan Cairns

The decision to shut down gyms and fitness centres in an attempt to slow the spread of the COVID-19 variant has affected many people's jobs and livelihoods. After nearly a month, provinces have started to loosen COVID-19 restrictions on some businesses and are already moving ahead with easing restrictions based on key metrics, like hospitalizations and ICU admissions that are driving reopening plans.

For Virgil Isaacs, owner of Full Function Fitness in Vancouver, B.C., the gym is his life. "There was no warning for us," he said. "We were just expected to stop working." Isaacs has been facing some challenges through the new regulations and has adapted to the changes as they come. "As a personal trainer, it is important to have that connection to my clients," he said. "At the beginning, I started outside sessions, but then it started to snow, so I started training with people online as well."

Isaac has started training in person again at a reduced capacity now that B.C. has quietly let restrictions expire for gyms and fitness centres. "I'm glad to be back in person," he said. "I love meeting people face to face."

Unfortunately, others did not face the restrictions as easily. Since gym owners were forced to shut down during this time and smaller gyms that could not afford rent had to sell their equipment and move out.

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Virgil Isaacs

Ror Alexander, a gym owner in Surrey, B.C., unfortunately was not able to cope with another lockdown.

"It was one of my dreams of owning a gym," said Alexander. "It is just not possible during COVID, if they are going to contiguously take away our clientele."

He himself is a very passionate gym enthusiast, so it was hard to make the decision to finally give up on the gym. "I fell in love with this location," Alexander said. "It's just so expensive here."

Once the public health order was announced, he knew that it wasn't possible to sustain anymore, so he decided to move out of his dream space and into his garage where he sold most of the large machines and kept equipment for himself.

It is not an unfamiliar story of COVID drastically changing lives.

Ankit Mahajan experienced a similar problem when he was not able to host his

workout classes at his studio.

"I chose to cut my losses and post all the equipment on marketplace," Mahajan said. "I had so many people asking me to buy my equipment."

Twenty-four hours later, Mahajan had an empty studio but enough money to cover rent. Mahajan worked to make his gym a community and had classes, and another closure was upsetting for him to hear about from his members.

Although it is unfortunate, Mahajan decided to sell at the right time as every gym enthusiast in Vancouver started building home gyms.

Zach Victor is a student at the University of British Columbia, and avid gym user. Victor prides himself on reaching his goal to go to the gym every day he can, and the pandemic has not made that easy for him. He was discouraged when he heard about the regulations having to shut down gyms again. During that time, he drove all over the city picking up enough equipment to do workouts at home.

After much outrage and in some cases defiance of the health order, B.C. has allowed the gradual opening of gym and fitness centres and Ontario is set to reopen them on Jan. 31. People can finally get a chance to go back to their normal health routine.

"It is the only thing that I wake up and look forward to doing," Victor said. "I'm just glad I can finally get back to my normal workouts."



(Above) Dianne Carrow, manager of Kings Cross located in the Quinte Mall, says despite restrictions, the authentic taste of the store's meat pies has kept customers coming back through the COVID-19 pandemic. "Over half of our customers are from the UK and when they try the pies, or bring it home for their parents, it's like a taste of home."

Photo by Bradley Edgley



(Right) Alex Nguyen owns Pho Viet on Dundas Street. He says that, due to the Omicron COVID-19 variant, business has been very brisk, as it was during every lockdown throughout the pandemic. "It's comfort food for people."

Photo by Ron Lavoie



(Above) Charmaine Raymo touches up some flowers in Pammett's Flowers in downtown Peterborough. Raymo is a floral designer at Pammett's. "We've been lucky" she says in regards to COVID-19. While many businesses have had to close without any way of making income, Pammett's does a great deal of phone-in orders and deliveries which have not been affected by closures due to the pandemic.

Photo by Luke Best



Spiritualist Andrea Newth basks in the afternoon light beaming through stained glass windows that line her store, Angelic Serendipity. Newth says the first lockdown started people on a trend of finding themselves and looking to spirituality and crystals to heal and support them through these dark times. The trend seemingly continues as we start on yet another uncertain period and Newth says sales have been at an all-time high even despite having to reduce capacity in her store to 50 per cent.

Photo by Annie Duncan

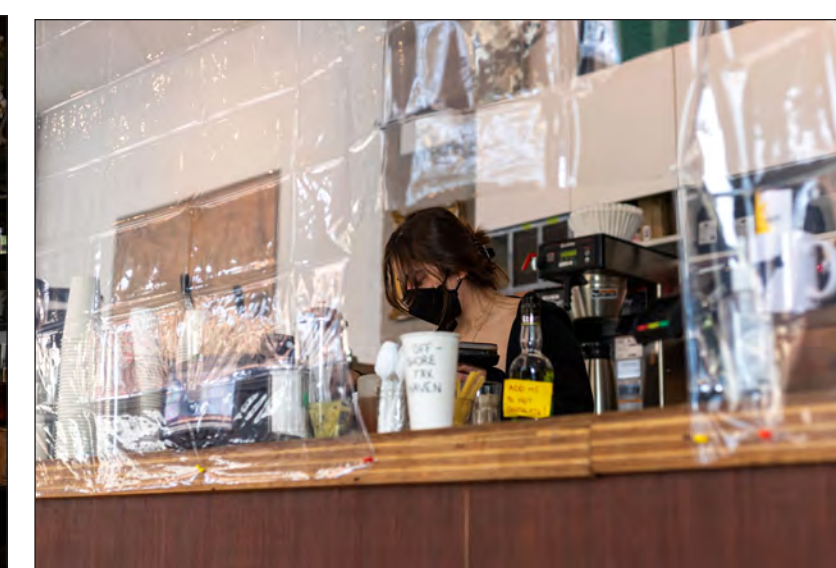


(Above) Pasquale Manduca, 74 is the owner of Colosseum Hairstyling in North York. Asked about impact COVID-19 has had on business, Manduca noted how people are scared to go out during the latest shutdown. Pointing to the empty chairs, Manduca says it has been difficult for his business with little or no customers. Manduca has owned the business in the same neighbourhood for the last 10 years.

Photo by Sabah Rahman

(Left) Guillaume Donnat, owner of Niagara Segway, is photographed on one of his segways outside of his Thorold, Ont. home. Donnat's business offers planned segway tours at various Niagara locations. "COVID has really affected our business. Usually up to 50 per cent of our customers are from overseas and 40 per cent from the U.S. So with the border being closed for the last two years, it has been really difficult for us."

Photo by Alex Lupul



(Above, left) Anne Du Bois, owner of Savon Du Bois in Picton, poses in her storefront. Du Bois says that COVID-19 has had its challenges for her business but she's fortunate to have a local community and online platform that has allowed her and her business sustainability throughout the pandemic.

Photo by Paige White

(Above) Madaline Simpson tamps freshly ground coffee behind a sheet of plastic draped between her and the rest of the Domestique coffee shop in Dundas ON. The plastic is to prevent the spread of germs as the shop has just reverted back to takeout only under Ontario's new COVID guidelines.

Photo by Dexter Klassen

(Left) Mike Loftus, owner of the Ottawa Pinball Arcade, stands alongside some of his pinball machines. The "plunger" was forced to shut down his arcade-themed bar due to the government-mandated lockdown following the new wave of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19.

Photo by Felix Chagnon

