



PROGRAM PROFILE: OVERVIEW

June 2017

Type of Program	Education, Recreation and Creative Arts Programs
Organization	Quirk-e (Host organization is Britannia Community Services Centre)
Community Served	Vancouver
Program Goal	Making art that is honest and challenging, and in doing so promote the health of participants and raise the visibility and understanding of queer elders
Services Provided	Opportunity to make art and development of skills as artists, Social support, Engaging the community through art
Target Population:	LGBTQ Elders
Staffing	1 volunteer lead artist, Staff support from community partners
Program Strengths	Blend of arts and activism, Group operates as a collective, Safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ elders

Program Description

Queer Imaging and wRiting Kollektive of Elders, or Quirk-e as it is commonly known, is a grassroots writing group for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) elders in East Vancouver. Originally conceived as a traditional writing group, Quirk-e has evolved into a collaborative collective whose activities blend art with activism. The collective meets weekly (except in the summer) and has embarked on a variety of projects beyond writing including memory boxes, digital videos, theatrical shows, a human library, scooter dancing, spoken word, and a ukulele band. Quirk-e is supported by a volunteer artist who helps to facilitate and support the group. The artist originally provided most of the leadership for the group but the collective is taking on a greater leadership role as time progresses. As part of its work, Quirk-e publishes an annual anthology of writing and puts on a showcase for the public.

Quirk-e began in 2006 as a short-term writing program offered through QMUNITY, B.C.'s LGBTQ/2S non-profit community hub based in Vancouver. When the program was set to wrap up, the members wanted to find a way to sustain the group. Fortuitously, at the same time, the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the Vancouver Coastal Health [SMART fund](#)¹ were launching their [Arts & Health \(A&H\)](#) three-year incubator (pilot) project. The aim of the A&H project was to have artists provide community-engaged arts programming to vulnerable groups within the senior population (for more information please see the [A&H Sector Profile](#)). Quirk-e was adopted as an A&H program, and provided with funding and a home at the Britannia Community Services Centre in East Vancouver.

Quirk-e was a part of the A&H three-year incubator project that was extended for an additional 2 years, until it was announced that the funding was to be phased out over the following 2-3 years. Thanks to this advance warning of the funding cut, and to the support provided by A&H during this transition, Quirk-e was able to adequately

¹ SMART Fund supports non-profit agencies to develop projects focused on helping people to remain healthy in their communities.

prepare for their future and successfully establish themselves as an independent group. Quirk-e formed a grant writing committee and was able to secure funding from the BC Arts Council and a City of Vancouver Community and Neighborhood Development Grant.

Currently, Quirk-e receives \$8,500 a year, most of which comes from the City of Vancouver and a Community Gaming Grant (via Britannia Community Services Centre). QMUNITY provides a small amount of money to Quirk-e along with advertisement and promotion support. Quirk-e is still based at Britannia Community Centre and receives staff and administrative support from them.

Impact

Quirk-e currently has 18 collective members, many of whom are longstanding and highly invested – members rarely leave the group and there is a waitlist to join the group. Quirk-e provides seniors with a safe and supportive environment for creative expression and encourages members to push boundaries and challenge themselves. Collective members are an important source of social support, and the collective tries to find ways for members to continue to participate even as their physical and/or cognitive health declines. Through their participation in Quirk-e, all of the members are now functionally comfortable using social media and technology.

“We know that we have support at Quirk-e. It is a place where we can be both Queer and Senior. It is a place where we understand each other at a deep level and through our writing we can share the joys and hurts of our past, along with our fears and hopes for the future.”

Quirk-e Participant

Quirk-e was part of a large evaluation of the first four A&H programs conducted by the University of British Columbia, which found some very positive impacts as a result of the programs (for more info see the [A&H Sector Profile](#)). It is difficult, however, to categorize and measure many of the impacts of a creative arts program. The lead artist for Quirk-e wrote an article about the group’s memory box project², using it as an example of how expression through creative arts can result in catalytic experiences for participants. The article discusses the cathartic experience one group member had while creating her memory box, and the impact the box had on her and the people who viewed it:

“...it was easier for Judy to make the box than it would be for her to talk directly about her experiences of abuse, something she has never done in the group. When the box was complete, Judy chose to show it to others, but again, she told Robson that she did so in ‘little tiny increments of putting myself out there, so I got used to it in stages’ (Interview p. 7). She revealed it at first to a friend in the group, then to Robson and finally at a public exhibition, where complete strangers came to handle it. It was only when she saw the visceral responses her box evoked (it is common that people cry as they hold the box, or become unable to speak for a while afterwards) that Judy became aware of the power of her work: ‘I did not realize how much stored up emotion I was putting into the box until I showed the finished shoebox to someone’ (Fletcher, My Shoebox, May 2013).”³

² A memory box contains a display or items which represent a particular memory.

³ Excerpt from Robson, C., & Sumara, D. (2016). In memory of all the broken ones: catalytic validity through critical arts research for social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies In Education* (QSE), 29(5), 617-639.

In addition to its impacts on individual members, the reach of Quirk-e extends to the wider community. The artwork, writing and performances of Quirk-e increase the visibility of queer individuals and the elderly, and challenge stereotypes about age, gender and sexuality.

Strengths and Challenges

One of the key factors in Quirk-e's success is the leadership of both the artist supporting the group and of collective members, and the support they receive from their community partners (QMUNITY and Britannia Community Services Centre). The initial support provided by A&H allowed Quirk-e to firmly establish themselves as a group and the fact that the funding was phased out gradually gave the group time to prepare to sustain themselves as an independent group. While Quirk-e has been able to secure funding to keep the group running, having a higher level of ongoing funding would greatly increase their capacity to support more seniors and have more long-term sustainability. Accessing adequate storage space for their supplies is another ongoing challenge they face.

While it can take time and significant investment to develop partnerships, particularly when they involve marginalized groups, the partnerships formed by Quirk-e have enriched the program. In addition to the support from community partners, Quirk-e has also formed partnerships with other groups for specific projects. Quirk-e has engaged in intergenerational projects, partnering with queer youth for writing and performances. They have also worked on various projects with several departments of Simon Fraser University. One recent project saw Quirk-e working with the Department of Gerontology to raise awareness of elder abuse issues in the LGBTQ community. Through this partnership youth and elders came together to produce three videos and five posters on elder abuse.

Quirk-e has been able to combine a unique blend of art and activism. Activism is a key theme in many of their projects, and the art provides an opportunity to increase the visibility of queer seniors and challenge stereotypes. While they have embraced their activist role, at the heart of Quirk-e remains the art.