

# Local Indigenous artists supported through rotary club auction

-by Brad Chandler

On Saturday, community members and the Port Hawkesbury Rotary Club gathered for a tour of the Friends United International Conference Centre and an art auction in hopes of further supporting local Indigenous artists.

The centre is located in Cleveland and was first created in 1990, where it operated as a fish hatchery. In 2010, entrepreneur Rolf Bouman turned the building into what it is today “for the purpose of honouring all Indigenous North American peoples and celebrating their culture and heritage.”

It is currently home to the largest private collection of Native art in Atlantic Canada according to its website.

“The thing about Friends United is that we work together,” said Bouman on

Saturday. “This building is not a museum, it is not an art gallery, it is a place of gathering and communication, friendship and family, and reconciliation, because we have to discuss many of the things that happened in the past and work with our Indigenous friends to try and work together going forward.”

After joining the Port Hawkesbury Rotary Club, Bouman connected the club and the Friends United Initiative. The two now work closely together and jointly support First Nations of North America.

A Rotary Club release said the art displayed on Saturday “can help eliminate misconceptions and prejudice, and promote equality, peace, and mutual respect among all peoples.”

Funds raised through the auction will be used to purchase high-quality art supplies for local Indigenous artists.

The Friends United initiative has recently completed multiple projects, including a collaboration with the Port Hawkesbury Civic Centre where over 30 canvases were placed on display throughout the building’s entrance hall.

The featured artists included Loretta Gould and Shianne Gould from We’koqma’q.

Bouman said his organization was asked to hang artwork in over 20 schools across Cape Breton after donating some of his artist’s work to schools in St. Peters and Potlotek.

This project will take place throughout the next several years.

There are approximately 30-40 Indigenous artists working as part of the Friends United Initiative, some of which were on hand at Saturday’s event to discuss their work.

Among those in attendance on Saturday was mask carver Eric Schweg. Schweg

may be better known to some through his acting career. He famously starred alongside Oscar award-winner Daniel Day-Lewis in *The Last of the Mohicans* film in 1992.

Schweg’s most recent artifact is based on Tilikum, a captive male orca who spent most of his life at SeaWorld Orlando in Florida. The piece depicts the physical abuse and cruelty shown towards Tilikum by handlers.

Since its inception, nine of Friends United’s artists have passed away. However, their art and legacy still live on within the walls of the centre.

“There is something really special about being able to display their art, even after they have passed away,” Bouman said. “We are so lucky to honour their legacy because these people were friends and family...this art is part of our culture, and we must celebrate it. We are so incredibly grateful for all of our artists and our supporters.”



We’koqma’q artist Loretta Gould poses with one of her paintings that sold during Saturday’s art auction at the Friends United International Conference Centre.



Former Hollywood actor and mask carver Eric Schweg poses next to his most recent artifact titled “Tilikum” during Saturday’s art auction at the Friends United International Conference Centre in Cleveland.

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Event auctioneer Scott Oakley and Friends United owner Rolf Bouman auction off a painting by We’koqma’q’s Loretta Gould during Saturday’s art auction at the Friends United International Conference Centre in Cleveland.

*Laura Graham*  
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