

Cape Breton > Lifestyles

Private Indigenous art collection in Cape Breton will soon be open to the public

Ardelle Reynolds · Local Journalism Initiative Reporter · Posted: a day ago | Updated: a day ago | 8 Min Read



Senator Dan Christmas and his late wife, Dozay Christmas, with Rolf Bouman of Friends United in 2019 at the gallery's opening of her art exhibit. CONTRIBUTED - Ardelle Reynolds

Your support ensures important East Coast stories continue to be told.

Invest in trusted, local journalism.
Pay only \$5/month for your first year.

SUBSCRIBE | LOG IN

CLEVELAND — Work is underway at a privately-owned gallery in Cape Breton with the hopes that it and its extensive collection of Indigenous art from across the country will be open soon to the public.

Friends United gallery and convention centre is a 10,000-square-foot former fisheries building in Cleveland, a small village located on the county line between Richmond and Inverness counties, that houses thousands of pieces of artwork including totem poles, stone carvings, quillwork, basketry and paintings.

RIGHT NOW
Sydney

TEMPERATURE: 5°
FEELS LIKE: 5°
W 19 km/h

[7-day forecast](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

TOP STORIES

Cape Breton

[Nova Scotia boundary restrictions during COVID-19 lockdown confuse some Cape Breton residents](#)

4536 VIEWS |

[EDITORIAL: Premier Rankin must investigate disturbing misogyny allegations](#)

3012 VIEWS |

[Potential COVID-19 exposure at three Sydney River locations](#)

2328 VIEWS

[UPDATE: Cape Breton woman who nearly struck police officer with vehicle now in custody](#)

1312 VIEWS |

[Rotational worker concerned over safety in Cape Breton Regional Hospital ER](#)

1303 VIEWS |

ADVERTISEMENT

CAPE BRETON

Obituaries & Announcements



[Edward Alan MACLEOD](#)

[The MacLeod family is saddened to share the passing of Edward Alan](#)

Rolf Bouman originally purchased the building over a decade ago as a storage facility for his printing press and for the pieces of art he was quickly accumulating through his Friends United initiative.

Bouman, a land-developer who emigrated from Germany in 1986, said his respect and admiration for Indigenous cultures is what got him thinking about how he could help Indigenous people connect to their culture while also becoming self-sustaining entrepreneurs.



Revered Maliseet artist Dozay Christmas at the opening of her exhibit at the Friends United gallery in October 2019. She died just weeks later. Her series of paintings, still displayed at the gallery, tell the stories of Kluskap and are rooted in the First Nations communities of Mi'kma'ki. CONTRIBUTED - Ardelle Reynolds

He started by buying Indigenous art to support the artists and then saw a need for more opportunities for people to create art and so began supplying paint, canvasses and other materials, eventually offering the fisheries building as a place to work and store their pieces.

The Friends United initiative grew over the years and when the artists started looking for a place to show their work, the building was converted, one section at a time, into a modern gallery with several outbuildings used as studios and housing for visiting artists.

Bouman’s success with his companies Canadian Pioneer Estates Ltd. and Canec Land Developments Inc., along with other businesses he runs under the umbrella Bouman Group, has completely funded the \$4-million project.

“We felt that much of the profits of the land development should go back to the First Nations so it’s our way of reconciliation, of friendship, and of reconnecting because when I came to Canada I didn’t know what residential schools had been, I didn’t know about missing and murdered Indigenous women, so we tried to help wherever we could,” said Bouman.

(Eddy) MacLeod on May 2, 2021. Eddy, born May 10, ...



Gerald Garfield WALSH

Gerald Garfield Walsh, age 96, passed away peacefully May 7, 2021, at Harbournstone Enhanced Care Facility, Sydney, Nova ...



Thomas Wilson RALPH

Tom Ralph, age 73, passed away peacefully at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital on Saturday, May 8, 2021 with his wife Suzanne ...

See all

Place an Obituary

ADVERTISEMENT



The art of James Jacko from Northern Ontario is displayed at Friends United gallery in Cleveland, Richmond County. Jacko paints in the Anishinaabe Woodlands style popular around the Great Lakes area. ARDELLE REYNOLDS • CAPE BRETON POST - Ardelle Reynolds

Stephen Augustine, a hereditary chief of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council and associate vice-president of Unama'ki College at Cape Breton University, is originally from Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick but spent part of his youth in Germany where he learned the German language.

Despite this connection with Bouman, his first impression of the land developer and his art initiative was not positive.

He remembers being skeptical of the project and worrying that it would have a negative impact on Mi'kmaq artists, as the collection's focus at the time was on artworks in the Woodland-style founded by iconic Ojibwe artist Norval Morrisseau, rather than the traditional East Coast Indigenous style that reflects Mi'kmaq legends and incorporates renderings of petroglyphs and the eight-pointed star.

He points to the works of Millbrook artists Alan Syliboy and Teresa Marshall as examples.

As he got to know Bouman and became more involved with the Friends United project, his critical view "softened up after a while," he said with a chuckle, and he came to see the value in the project.

"What really stood out for me was how he was helping my Mi'kmaq people who were suffering from their experiences and of generational trauma from their parents who had attended residential school in Shubenacadie," Augustine said.

These traumas can sometimes result in drug and alcohol problems in Indigenous populations but Augustine said he's seen that Bouman never judges people and does what he can to help them channel their emotions through art.

"My people want to express themselves from inside of their souls and one of the best ways to do that is through art as a way to release those tender feelings and expressions and it is a great form of therapy."



Stephen Augustine is a hereditary chief of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council, Sante' Mawio'mi in Mi'kmaq, and sits on the board of directors of Friends United. He is pictured with Rolf Bouman, originally from Germany and founder of the Friends United initiative. CONTRIBUTED - Ardelle Reynolds

Augustine joined the board of directors in 2020 and now helps Bouman market reproductions of the art produced by Friends United artists in Europe and across Canada.

Senator Dan Christmas said his late wife, Maliseet artist Dozay Christmas, was well-established in her career when she met Bouman. She wanted to help with the project and advised Bouman on how to support emerging artists.

It wasn't until 2018, the year before she died, that she contacted Bouman to do an artist-in-residency at Friends United.

She was working on "the big project of her life," said Christmas, which was a series of paintings illustrating the Kluskap legends and wanted a place completely away from everything. He said Bouman supplied her with a house and a vehicle and all the supplies she needed to complete the work.

She aimed to create two pieces of the Kluskap stories from P.E.I. but only had the chance to complete one before she died.

Her last gallery opening was at Friends United in the fall of 2019 for an exhibit of the 32 finished pieces in the series.

"I've been to a lot of exhibit and gallery openings with her, she must have done about a hundred, and all over the place. But that one was the best. (Bouman) did an amazing job and her pride and joy, those 32 pieces. I think about it quite often and am forever grateful to him," Christmas said.

"I just look at the younger artists that have blossomed because of his support and Dozay developed a relationship with some of them and I could tell how much they looked up to her and she did take a number of artists under her wing during her time there," he said.

The 32 paintings are still hanging at the Friends United gallery and will stay there until they are eventually moved to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

Bouman said he’s working with the local building inspector to get the building up to code for larger crowds of visitors to the centre. Until now, groups have had to book ahead and he could only accommodate up to 40 people.

Richmond County Warden Amanda Mombourquette said she’s visited the facility in the past and hopes council can support Friends United by holding meetings there once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

“The Friends United centre is a huge asset to the county and just such a treasure. (Bouman) has done so much for the growth of our region and this beautiful facility is typical of the amazing work he does,” she said.

With the \$140,000 worth of renovations Bowman is doing now, he said the facility should be ready to welcome the public by the summer.

Ardelle Reynolds is an Indigenous Affairs reporter at the Cape Breton Post.

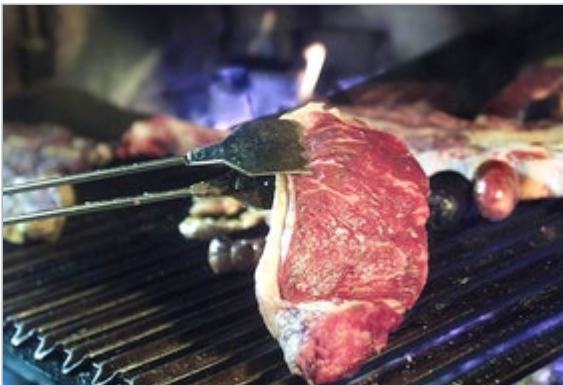
Share story:

5

Related Stories

- [Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design set to hire two Indigenous co-ordinators](#)
- [Centuries old B.C. tree to become totem pole in Cape Breton](#)
- [Cape Breton arts and culture sector asking for help](#)

More Lifestyles Stories



[Beef is still a staple, but 1 in 4 Canadians considered cutting it during COVID: survey](#)

UPDATED 3 MINUTES AGO



[Mixing COVID vaccines is safe, despite more mild-moderate symptoms, study suggests](#)

UPDATED 2 HOURS AGO



[P.E.I.'s Buddhist monks getting ready to welcome visitors to tulip field](#)

UPDATED 53 MINUTES AGO



['Buttery, creamy, sugary, delicious': a sneak peek of Harry Potter's butterbeer in NYC](#)

UPDATED 9 HOURS AGO