



Women on the Water brings the community of Meaford, ON together

IN EARLY MARCH 2020, THE MUNICIPALITY of Meaford, Ontario was granted funding by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA)'s Gender equity in Recreational Sports initiative to run a women's hockey program aimed to increase the retention and participation of women in sport.

Little did anyone know at the time how much of an impact COVID-19 would have on recreational programming.



Canada

This project has been made possible by the Government of Canada.



Exciting night to be up front in the big canoe

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As the pandemic evolved in Canada, the Municipality of Meaford had to revise its program twice to accommodate ever-changing public health restrictions and guidelines. In an effort to design a program that both benefited the community and complied with current restrictions, in summer 2021, Meaford launched a revised version of their program that far exceeded their expectations.

In partnership with a local nonprofit, the Big Canoe Project, the Municipality of Meaford launched the “Women on the Water” initiative – a weekly program that taught women and girls ages 8+ how to paddle a 12- person canoe, explore the Georgian Bay and engage in water and environmental observations. The program ran for 13 weeks, and reached over 100 women and girls.

The “Women on the Water” program was planned to create an accessible activity that allowed elderly, and differently abled people to participate. The program would teach the women about paddling and showcase ways to be active outside.

However, Meaford staff cultivated much more than that. They created a sense of a community among the women. Their program grew to be an intergenerational sharing circle about the waters they paddled and highlighted and reminded the community of the importance women have in storytelling and passing down traditions and knowledge.

Tom Thwaites, program facilitator and Executive Director of the Big Canoe Project explains:

“A lot of the people coming out were generations of a family. It was fairly common to have a grandmother, a mother and a daughter all out at the same time. With this being a municipal program, and because of the fact that we were drawing from the local community, the topic of the conversation would gradually come around to either the mom or grandmother talking to the younger generation about what the Bay was like when they were growing up. It ended up being like a collecting ground of the oral history of the Bay and its use.”

In addition, the programing built confidence in their participants, reminding them that they can still be active and connected to nature no matter their age, physical ability or gender.

Due to the projects raging success, the municipality of Meaford plans to run it again this year and are even considering ways to increase the number of participants.

It is hoped their excitement will return again this year, and that their introduction to paddling lead the way for them to pursue other forms of recreational sports and activities. 🍁