

Bringing Conversations that matter into the Classroom: MRU Broadcasting, Journalism and Digital Media students reach out to local changemakers

By Noah Laycock, 2023

During the 2022 fall semester at Mount Royal University, two sections of third year students in the Journalism and Digital Media and Broadcasting programs, partnered with the Trico Changemakers Studio and the Calgary Foundation to find examples of local changemakers. Three themes that inspired their search were Right Relations and Racial Equity, Environment and sustainability and Wellbeing and Belonging.

More specifically, students probed topics such as Poverty Reduction, Living a Creative Life and Encouraging Mental Health). Through this process, the students were exposed to how much their communities are connected, what true leadership looks like and even how they in their own way can contribute to being changemakers too. A key message: change can be made by anyone who is socially conscious, activated and responsible.

One medium the students used to translate the knowledge they obtained was podcasting. With only simple microphones and complex questions, they recorded critical conversations with those making real change on campus and off; highlighting some of the most pressing social problems and exciting social solutions facing us today.

Below is a brief summary of their journey and some samples of their work in action.

Marie-Claire O'Donoghue is a Certified Canadian Counsellor and Dance/Movement Therapist Intern. She is doing some amazing things in the Calgary community in the realm of both living a creative life and encouraging mental health. Three students interviewed her on the 'Changemakers Podcast'; have a listen!

"Hello, and welcome to the Changemakers Podcast. A podcast where we explore someone who is taking creative actions to solve a social problem in and around Calgary. We are your hosts, Julie Patton, Isabella West and Gurleen Jassel. Today we are exploring the topic of dance movement therapy and how this tool can be used to encourage people to live a creative life and improve their mental health. Marie-Claire O'Donoghue is a Canadian certified counselor and a dance movement therapist intern. This is what she had to say about dance movement therapy and its role in Calgary.

Can you explain a little bit about what a dance movement therapist does, and just kind of what it is?

For sure! Dance movement therapy is an embodied approach to mental health and so it is an approach to mental health therapy that uses the body and uses sensation and our mind-body connection to access our emotional processes to better understand our experiences in the world, and to allow movement to be a part of therapy.

And how did you come across dance movement therapy?

I think it was a friend of a friend who was doing it. I knew that I had this passion for movement and for this idea of therapeutic dance, like understanding that moving our bodies is inherently so deeply, emotionally healing. And I'm speaking with a friend and she said, 'Oh, I have a friend who's doing these courses in Vancouver for dance movement therapy.' And I was like, 'That's a thing? What?' Which is a response I get now to sometimes when I tell people about dance movement therapy. They go, 'What? That is a thing?' And so I looked into it and I signed up for an intro course, and after the first intro course I was like, 'Yeah, this is my path. This is my passion. This is like speaking to my heart. And I need to just pursue it.'

So how does movement help on that emotional level? We all have had challenging experiences; we've all had emotional experiences that, in some way, have been kept in our body in a certain way. So, when we access our body through movement or dance we can access those emotional processes, and stagnant energy can be moved and released, and re-processed, and re-understood, or even re-learned. We can relearn patterns of moving, we can relearn postures, we can relearn different ways of inhabiting the World and our bodies that are going to be beneficial.'

Thank you for listening in and taking time to learn about local changemakers in Calgary: those working to take creative action to solve a social problem. We hope you are inspired to be a changemaker too. So, take initiative, be creative, and don't be afraid to solve a problem in your local community."

Two more students spoke to Bo Jiang, Interim President of the Calgary Housing Company who is working on reducing poverty by providing affordable housing. Here is a short sample of their debut episode of 'What's New About What?'

"Hey everyone, I am Emma Griscowsky; and I'm Jessie Bach, and you are listening to the What's New About What podcast. This podcast breaks down difficult social issues and talks to changemakers working to improve them. Today, we were talking about different programs that help reduce poverty in Calgary. In this episode, we spoke with Bo Jiang, President of the Calgary Housing Company, about what he has seen in the demand for housing services.

And over the last couple of years, has Calgary housing seen a change in the demand for its services?

Absolutely. There has been a substantial increase in demand for affordable housing. Overall housing affordability in the city of Calgary has been difficult to achieve for a lot of individuals. I think the pandemic had a significant contribution to that in terms of individuals who would have had different types of service jobs that would have been eliminated or significantly reduced during the COVID times. Overall inflation; I think that's a conversation that's been on top of mind for a lot of folks across Canada. With record Inflation in the 9-10% range in some circumstances, that would significantly impact housing affordability. That would especially impact mortgages. Even the very low-rate mortgages have gone up substantially. So, a lot of those economic contributions to the state of the city, along with COVID hitting right as we took a big economic downturn in the oil and gas sector. These are all contributing factors that can put families in a difficult position, such that they would be in need of affordable housing. And the estimates are that up to 100,000 people will need some sort of affordable housing by 2026. So, this is a very short time frame away and we just do not have that capacity in the system right now.

One of the things I would love to expand is our ability to create more affordable housing. I think that's the biggest thing on my mind. Not only to create more, but to create more quality affordable housing

that in many ways promotes the long-term betterment of our citizens. So, for our residents, that comes in the area of utilities. How do we provide, and design, and build energy efficient buildings so that energy poverty is something that our residents do not have to be as concerned about?”

Hearing that a changemaker was tackling poverty by promoting sustainable architecture reminded me that in the fall of 2022 I interviewed a green architect, Dr. Henry Tsang! Here are some moments from our conversation about what he is doing to reduce our impact on the environment.

“My name is Henry Tsang and I am an Assistant Professor at the RAIC (Royal Architectural Institute of Canada) Centre for Architecture at Athabasca University. I am also the principal architect of Henry Tsang Architect: a consultation firm that focuses on sustainable and accessible design for architecture. We are involved in trying to make things better for the environment. So we talk about sustainability because we know that if we don’t do so, we will have very serious climatic implications. We know that climate change is happening and global warming is happening, and all of that is happening because of many different factors that contribute to the deterioration of the environment. One of those being poor construction that uses up a lot of energy and that comes from fossil fuels, and that comes from the greenhouse gasses that are emitted. The energy component is the most important because that’s the one that relates to greenhouse gasses which are emitted from fossil fuels. So I think if there was only one that we were to target first, it would have to be energy.”

Fascinating how two change makers can be tackling the same social issue through entirely different disciplines. Another critical component of social change that the Trico Changemakers Studio and the Calgary Foundation are committed to is strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as part of the overarching theme of Right Relations and Racial Equity. James Windler found Tori Mcmillan, a Changemaker working hard at MRU to help Indigenous students be successful at university. Here is a short clip of James’ podcast!

“The Indigenous University Bridging Program is on the verge of celebrating 30 years of success at Mount Royal University. The program is for students of Indigenous ancestry and is designed to meet the needs of students preparing to pursue a post secondary education.

Some of the objectives of this program include: to help meet the educational needs of Indigenous people, to enhance cross-cultural understanding in an institutional setting, and to provide a positive learning environment that promotes success. Recently, I had the chance to sit down with Tori McMillan to discuss the program’s long success and his history with it.

I mean, yes, I’m obviously biased but I’ve met so many people, so many parents of students, so many leaders in the community who have told me they got their start at MRU in what was called the AEP (the Aboriginal Education Program). So there’s a complexity to university and we were guided by those before us. Now it’s our turn to open the door and make that path a little wider for the next generation, and what I ask my students is very simply, two things: if you like what you are learning, and you like how you are being treated to share your story with other people. And I know that might sound funny. What do you mean the way you are treated? Well, that does matter. Are you being treated respectfully? Are your ways of knowing being honored? Are you finding that people are receptive to you? That’s the welcoming experience that we want our students to have. And again, because our elders and our knowledge keepers created this program, they have endorsed it. They have endorsed Mount Royal and said if you are going to

pick a post-secondary to go to, you probably will pick Mount Royal because that's where we went and we know that there is welcome that there is space for us there. The statistics today show our six-year graduation rate, so within six years, a student completing their Mount Royal degree for Indigenous students: 67%. For non-Indigenous students: 67%. It's exactly the same. And I'm so heartened by that because to me that's what education does: it levels that playing field.'

While there is still so much more to do, having programs like this in place across Canada is extremely important to rectifying a lot of the wrongs that have been done in the past. Mount Royal has set the standard for what you can expect for a successful bridging program. In 2023, they will celebrate 30 successful years for the bridging program, and here's to 30 more."

In the new year, I had the chance to sit down with James Windler to reflect on our experience learning about the changemakers in our community through podcasting. I asked James if the experience had changed how he defined what a changemaker is, and if he saw himself as a potential changemaker. Here is what he had to say:

"I never really considered myself to be much of anybody important to be honest. Do you know what I mean? I've always just kind of considered myself a regular old person. But you know you could see things on TV about celebrities and doing Make-A-Wish and stuff and the change that they have on people's lives. I never really related to that too much because, you know, I see them on TV and I think 'oh, they're a celebrity so obviously, they have a built-in audience, and there's no way that me, regular old James, could have an impact on someone's life.' But to see how Tori, who also just considers himself regular old Tori, dedicated his work to this kind of stuff, it really does show that if you work hard and if you really care about something, you can make a change and not just in one person's life, but in multiple people's lives. So, just being around him has really shown me that you know what? It is actually possible for me to make a change in someone's life if I truly care and truly put the work in. The impact of that work is not going to get lost. To even just have an impact on one person's life and one person's family's lives, or etc. it shows that it is in reach, and learning from Tori, it has definitely shown me that it is possible for anybody to have an impact on anybody's lives."

I couldn't agree more with James; we are all potential changemakers, capable of radical social innovation. As students we had the great privilege of exploring key social issues and talking to local changemakers using the powerful medium of podcasting. We learned about how Tori McMillan is improving relationships with Indigenous communities by destigmatizing education. We learned about how Henry Tsang is pursuing a sustainable future by rethinking green architecture, and how this would also help changemakers like Bo Jiang provide affordable housing by reducing energy poverty. We also heard Marie-Claire O'Donoghue's new idea for fostering a sense of well-being and belonging through the promotion of healthy creativity: Dance movement therapy!

These are just a few of the Changemakers the students met. Others include Chantal Chagnon who is working to improve Indigenous representation in media, Linda Manyguns, who is advancing Indigenous women's entrepreneurship as an ecosystem, Joshua Hill, who is decolonizing university research practices and Disa Crow Chief who is promoting food sovereignty. Students also talked to Jocelyn Adamo and Kim Ledene, program directors of Trellis, about the factors that lead to poverty in youth, and Noel Keough, Co-founder of both Civic Camp and Sustainable Calgary. Other Changemakers students found were Katrina

Shaw, Fabian Warner, and Derek Hill who run MenzLeague, a group promoting men's mental health. Additionally, an interview with Neil Zeller revealed how "*porchtraits*" photography promotes healthy creativity. Finally, AnneMarie Dorland talked about how reframing failure as a positive component to creativity can create big changes, in and out of the classroom.

Despite the wide range in disciplines, backgrounds, and concerns, all these changemakers have a few things in common: they are all socially conscious and they are dedicating their careers to advancing their causes. They show us that even though it isn't easy, one person can make a difference in their communities, inspiring students and listeners alike to remember the courage it takes to be a changemaker and the incredible rewards it can bring.

The Changemaker Conversations Project is brought to you by the Trico Changemakers Studio in partnership with the Calgary Foundation. Join the virtual conversations biweekly via Zoom to listen and engage with local changemakers. Learn more at [https://www.tricochangemakersstudio.ca/changemakerconversations.](https://www.tricochangemakersstudio.ca/changemakerconversations)"