

BY DARRELL HOOKEY

Like all good ideas, this one began in a coffee shop.

Michael King, co-owner and operator of Bean North Coffee Roasting Company, had been looking for a way to promote canned coffee. “That’s the most environmentally friendly way to package coffee,” he says. “Bags are all the fad, but there’s no way to recycle.”

Joyce Majiski, a local artist, was in King’s café on the Hot Springs Road and had been telling him that she was organizing an art project involving six artists ... three Canadian and three Mexican.

The project’s themes revolved around land claims, human and indigenous rights, environmental issues, food security and women’s issues.

King’s commitment to Fair Trade coffee means he is already well-versed in the struggles of the ‘have-nots’ of the world as his business works with these groups to ensure they get a fair and livable price for the beans they sell to him.

“I loved the fact that it has a connection to Mexico in particular,” says King. “It brings indigenous groups together.

“And it brings artists together.”

So, wanting people to “Look and Listen”, and for artists to “Make Art”, they put the acronym together to dub this “Project LLAMA”.

Artwork from the artists will be placed on three sets of three coffee cans, each with a dark blend of Bean North’s fair trade, organic coffee inside. The first set of Café LLAMA came out before Christmas and is available at Bean North and the Chocolate Claim.

A portion of the sales will help Majiski’s group for travel, transportation of artwork, materials and living expenses.

Majiski says she wants Project LLAMA to become an ongoing organization “that will continue to bring artists together to do innovative and international cross-cultural projects.”



In an e-mail, sent from a hotel lobby in Mexico, Majiski says she is working on setting up a longer-term residency between Canadian and Mexican artists.

For the moment, Majiski is living off of an advanced artist grant from the Yukon Territorial Government. The other two Canadian artists – Patricia Deadman and Haruko Okano – are still waiting for word on theirs from Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council.

This first stage in the project brings the artists together in Oaxaca, where two of the Mexican artists live. They will visit the third artist in Hidalgo in March.

“There is a strong indigenous population here,” Majiski says, “and an increasingly strong voice in the political arena in the smaller communities.”

From this work, an exhibition will appear at the Yukon Arts Centre in November and it will be called Voz/Voice (the art of resilience and resistance).

Hopefully, a tour can be organized from there.

So far, there are two photographers, a painter, a ceramicist and two installation artists.

Offshoots of this project include publications, exhibitions, e-books, public forums, outreach programs, collaborations and web-based interactions.

But first, the artists will meet again in the Yukon and will be staying with Majiski and using her studio. It may not be at the same time, though.

“Maybe we can think about creative solutions to issues or maybe just make some art together,” says Majiski.

Having been to the region where Majiski is now visiting, meeting with coffee producers in the communities and learning of their challenges, King says he knows how much good this project can do.

“In a lot of communities, there is a lot of tragic happenings and poverty.

“Art is a big process of in-healing.”