



# Impact Story:

## Saskatchewan Festival of Words

by  
**CARLE STEEL**



Saskatchewan  
Arts Alliance



*Saskatchewan Festival of Words strives to present an online program that faithful festivalgoers will recognize. The Covid crisis has given us a rare opportunity to see how important the arts really are.*

This is our Covid summer: lovely days, hot and quiet. At night, convenience store fireworks go off here and there, in small frustrated pops. Muscle cars roar up and down the main drag of every town big enough to have one. There's not much else to do; there are no music concerts, no outdoor theatre, no silly summer blockbusters in air-conditioned theatres. We wait, our faces stuck in books or glued to whatever screen that can hold our attention. We are all grasping for distraction, for entertainment, a place to escape from this very quiet crisis that is all around us but never quite here.

In Moose Jaw, that Covid-shaped absence is felt particularly hard. Normally, the city would be

preparing to host the Saskatchewan Festival of Words, a gem in Canada's literary arts scene. In a normal year, the festival brings in some of the finest minds in the country and draws about 3,000 people for the four-day event, filling hotels, restaurants, and retail stores downtown.

This year, the 24th annual Festival of Words will be presented online. The board and staff made this decision on the fly, says Sarah Simison, Executive Director of the festival. "Once it was clear that Covid was going to be here to stay, we were faced with the reality of running a program in a totally different way," she says. Quick thinking and a crash course in online event design, and the festival has been reborn with

a free program that Simison says longtime festivalgoers will recognize. From July 13-19, the festival will feature thought provoking panel talks, author readings, and a musical night where audiences will be encouraged to go outside and dance on their lawns as the Adino Suns stream live from Moose Jaw's elegant Mae Wilson Theatre.

For this year at least, audiences must forego the chance encounters with authors in the park, or teaming up with their idols at Trivia Night. With an online event, they will have a different sort of interaction. "You're getting a really intimate look into the lives of authors," Simison says. "You're in their home, looking at the art on their walls or the books on their shelves getting a peek into



(L-R) Lori Deets, Vice-Chair and Sarah Simison, Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Festival of words, January 2020 at the First Nations University of Canada.



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their world, which is interesting. In terms of intimacy, you're right there in their house."

Like most of us, Simison worries about the future of the festival, and the arts in general. "It seems that the first thing to get cut in times of crises is often the arts, yet the first thing everyone did during the Covid crisis was turn to the arts for entertainment. They were watching films, TV, participating in online music performances, author readings, taking online art classes."

If we learn anything from our long holiday from public life, it will be exactly how important the arts really are. We can't allow ourselves to forget that when the emergency funds run out and the bills come due. "Be loud," Simison says. "Let people in positions of authority know how important it is to you."

In the meantime, get ready to go dance on your lawn.



*Carle Steel is a writer, journalist, and arts administrator. She has worked for many years in the arts in the areas of publishing, writing, film, arts funding, and arts service organizations.*