



NESTING GROUNDS PILOT REPORT 2024 - 25



Nesting Grounds: Getting Comfortable

The “Nesting Grounds” program emerged in response to participants’ requests for more sustainable, long-term arts programming that supports well-being in a non-threatening and destigmatizing way. Participants shared that arts programs supported their mental health and sense of connection, while expressing a need for ongoing opportunities beyond short-term workshops.

As one participant shared, “The [Access Alliance] art programs help me and my mental health, but what should I do after it ends?” – Newcomer Wellbeing Workshop Participant.

The “Nesting Grounds” Pilot ran from November 2024 to March 2025 and offers a welcoming, ongoing weekly space for newcomers of all ages to access consistent support, gently engage with mental health concepts, and build belonging. Sessions are led by newcomer community artists working within healthcare and settlement contexts, allowing many participants to reconnect with their cultural roots through creative expression while reducing stigma and promoting well-being.

Its flexible, ongoing format ensures sustained connection, peer support, and access to Access Alliance services. As one participant reflected, “Stay open for everyone because we share our experiences, like back and forth. In this rush of life, we must find something to enjoy. I know I'm tired, but I need that time when I attend [this program] and I enjoy the time, I feel like it's a relief.” –Nesting Ground Participant



Nesting Grounds Pilot Initiative

During the six months of the “Nesting Grounds” Pilot (October 2024 to March 2025), the program grew and evolved significantly. It began with a familiar community artist and a core group of participants, and gradually welcomed new newcomer artists each month, deepening their engagement within the community. New participants joined through referrals from service providers, clinic waiting-room pop-up workshops, outreach fairs, and, most notably, word of mouth.

Community Arts: The Starting Point of a Healthcare Journey

“People should be connected to primary care early on in the migration process, even if they are doing well. If things do fall apart, it is much easier to work with someone you already know than to seek out primary care when you are feeling ill” - Dr, Meb Rashid, Crossroads Refugee Health Clinic, Women’s College Hospital.

Nesting Grounds offers a welcoming, creative space where community members can build trust with the agency. By fostering these relationships, refugees and immigrants feel more comfortable sharing health concerns, enabling more timely and appropriate care. Each month, newcomer artists lead a range of art activities that support participants in developing self-regulation and co-regulation skills to manage stress and enhance overall well-being. Learn more about the 4 community artists we worked with.



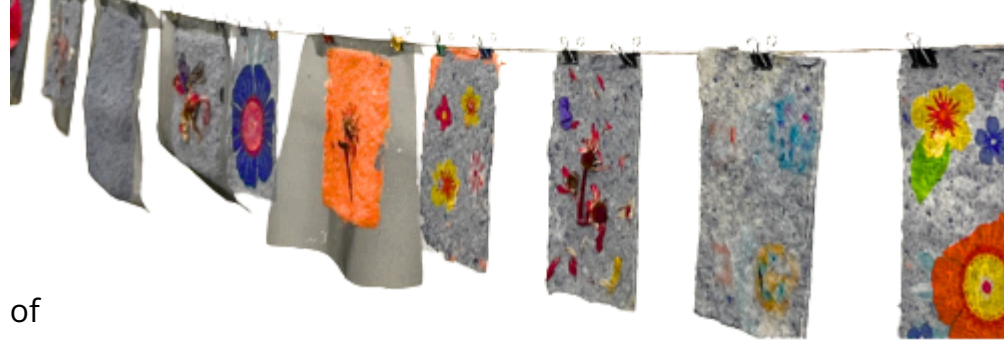
Artist (and art) may be the most important health workers of our time. They help us think differently, and they build community value differently – Arts for Everybody

“Meeting different community artists was exciting and meaningful for me. It gave me time for self-care and creative expression, especially because the sessions were led by someone who has experiences similar to my own.” - Community Participant

Community Artists 4
Participants 145
Encounters 383

COMMUNITY ARTIST MERCY VERDUGO

Mercy Verdugo is a multidisciplinary artist with over 20 years of experience as a visual artist, actress, poet, arts advocate, and community facilitator. Her artistic journey spans diverse contexts—from working in the heart of the Mexican jungle with immigrant children and families to leading workshops in Toronto for seniors and women with lived refugee experiences.



Colours of the Earth

Explored the Colours of the Earth: A Natural Dyeing Workshop. Participants learned to create vibrant paints using natural materials from the kitchen—beet scraps, spices like turmeric, and coffee. These pigments were combined with a heated cornstarch slurry to make rich, eco-friendly paints. Using these earthy colors, participants created expressive, self-reflective artworks in an exercise celebrating self-love and personal creativity.

Making a Paper Garden

Participants learned the complete process of making paper. Recycled materials, including notes and egg cartons, were transformed into new sheets of paper, which were then decorated with flowers and vibrant spices. Participants wrote what they wished to leave behind on the recycled paper before it was blended and reconstituted into a canvas for their New Year's intentions. Transformation of the old into the new through intentional reclaiming and reconstitution.

COMMUNITY ARTIST CHICO TOGNI

Chico Togni works with cardboard, fabric, wood, metal, and other found materials to create images, large sculptures, and interactive installations. He has exhibited at Kunsthaus Dresden and Museum der Bildenden Kunst (MdbK) Leipzig, and held residencies at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, Museumquartier in Vienna, and the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. A São Paulo University Sculpture graduate, Chico is now based in Toronto, experimenting with quilting and developing Bellaroché Stories, a series of quilts and collages exploring rocks, power tools, and visual paradoxes.

Collaging Our Identities

Participants explored diverse media by selecting images that reflected and helped tell their migration stories. This process fosters meaning-making, allowing participants to interpret, understand, and assign significance to their experiences. It helps make sense of life, emotions, relationships, identities, and challenges, particularly during times of change or uncertainty.

Lino Cutting

Participants learned print making, a technique involving carving designs into linoleum sheets. Participants created prints featuring positive messages and symbols for their communities. This activity encouraged visual messaging that can be printed and replicated on fabric making patterns.



COMMUNITY ARTIST

DIANA MEJI

Diana Mejia is a Mexican designer, multidisciplinary visual artist, and theater practitioner. She holds a BA in Graphic Design and has worked across education, social design, wellness, music, fashion, and food. Diana graduated from Centennial College's Publishing – Books, Magazine, and Electronic program, where she served as Creative Director for the Spring 2023 edition of On The Danforth Magazine. She recently joined Maxeí Art Collective, exploring clowning and other theater techniques. As a visual artist, she enjoys experimenting with a variety of media—from brushes and pencils to paper and lenses—to express her creative vision.



Book Binding

Participants learned the full process of **bookbinding**. Using a specialized technique of bookbinding, it allows additional pages to be added over time. These handmade books were paired with journaling prompts designed to support reflective practice. Journaling provides a safe space to express thoughts, ideas, and experiences, particularly for newcomers who may have lost connection to their support networks and place of origin.

Mini Book Binding

Participants learned to create quick **mini-books** for a variety of purposes, from storytelling to grocery lists. Some even made wearable mini-books with DIY purse straps. This activity demonstrates how everyday materials can be transformed into functional art, encouraging creativity and practical self-expression.



COMMUNITY ARTIST JESSICA TSANG

Jessica is a multi-disciplinary community artist with over 15 years of experience in crafts, body movement, and visual arts. She has led projects internationally, including arts programs for women, rehab center participants, post-earthquake communities, and retreats using crafts, drama, and natural materials. Jessica also trains and supervises students in arts-for-wellbeing initiatives. She has recently worked with North York Senior Centre and Polycultural, supporting creative expression and community connection.

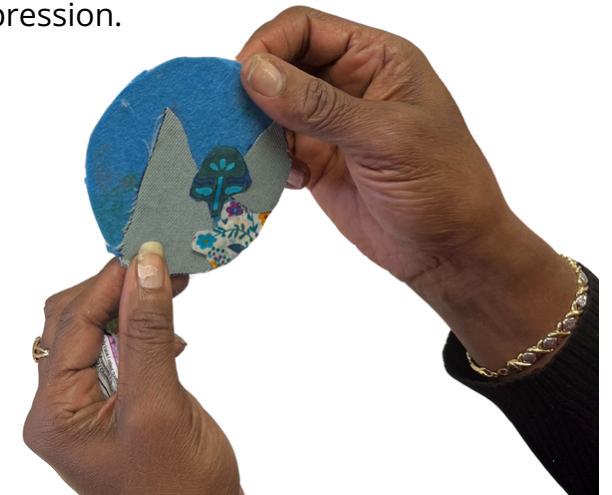


Workshop Title: Felt Badges

Participants created felt badges as personal symbols representing the messages they wish to share with their communities, emphasizing positivity, safety, and solidarity. The workshop addressed newcomers' experiences of diminished acceptance in Toronto, encouraging participants to focus on their immediate circle of control—friends, family, and self-expression. This activity fostered reflection on personal and cultural values, reinforcing participants' sense of belonging and agency.

Workshop Title: Felted Landscapes

Participants imagined a place that evokes peace and safety, then brought it to life using felt, fabric, cardboard, and embroidery thread. This hands-on process encouraged the use of art as a tool for self-regulation, engaging their senses and personal memories to create calming visual environments. Supported self-regulation through creative imagery and tactile expression.



Access Alliance Art Hive



An Art Hive is a community-based, inclusive art studio that welcomes everyone as an artist. It is a creative spaces where people gather to make art, build community, and support well-being. We invite participants to take a break from learning from newcomer artists, and explore their own artistic interests by providing access to free art materials and space.

Service providers and peer outreach workers share health resources to increase community knowledge and support proactive healthcare decisions. Programs include breast cancer screening, healthy child screening, and other wellness initiatives. Participants also have opportunities to meet health coaches for in-person guidance.



“Drawing isn’t just about art—it’s about the feeling. These sessions reconnect us with childhood memories, recharging and energizing us. The program provides opportunities to learn, connect with others, and build a community while exploring different cultures.” - Sahar



What are We hearing?



Nesting Grounds is a preventative approach. Newcomers are more likely to access health service in an acute manner, emergency room, vs. preventative manner, seeing a general practitioner (Tiagi, 2016). Nesting Grounds offers a safe entry into a healthcare and settlement setting.

Summative participant responses, participants reported,

- the program was filled with friendliness, opportunities to release stress, new learning experiences, meaningful connections with others, uplifting music, and a sense of pride.
- They shared that they learned to manage stress, create new things from recycled materials, explore unique art forms, and build confidence and curiosity to try something new.
- Meeting different community artists was described as exciting and personally meaningful, offering time for self-care and creative expression.
- Feeling more connected to the community, developing a greater interest in mental health, and experiencing increased self-expression and a deeper sense of belonging.

