

Celebrating winter, culture and arts for 15 years

What do you get when seven artists sit around a table with coffee and complain about winter?

The answer is: Deep Freeze: A Byzantine Winter Fête.

It was 2007 when Christy Morin and her friends were sitting at the Carrot Community Arts Coffeeshouse, wondering how they'd survive another Edmonton winter. At the table were two internationally renowned ice carvers, so perhaps that helped them come to the verdict of starting a winter festival.

"We do a fall festival, with Kaleido, maybe we should do a winter one," said Morin, executive director of Arts on the Ave. "We said wouldn't it be sort of cool if we maybe reflect the old heritage of the neighbourhood? There was a lot of Ukrainian folks who moved to the area in the 1940s and 50s so maybe we celebrate the old new year which is following the Julian calendar."

The Byzantine calendar was based on the old Julian calendar which celebrates the new year in the middle of January and is reflected in the name and timing of the festival.

"It's a very large name for a very small modest winter event," laughs Morin. "We wrote a small grant and got some money to do a one-day, small community event."

But it was too much fun, so 15 years later here we are. Morin is one of four sitting at the original coffee table that is still involved in the event. Not exactly the path this Edmontonian who double-majored in French and theatre at the Faculty St. Jean thought she'd follow.

"First of all, I never thought I'd be on 118th Avenue and seeing it as a renaissance of Alberta Avenue," said Morin, who also previously worked in real estate with her dad. "I never thought I would be one of the leads in that area and being part of an arts organization that runs a winter festival... I would've never dreamt it and I would never give it up. I love it."

It really is a festival that screams Edmonton. In their third year, a police officer in the neighbourhood suggested deep freezer races and on his own time rigged up an old deep freeze with skis. They've never looked back and it's an event that has gotten the festival attention worldwide.

Years later, former journalist and city councillor Scott McKeen threw out the idea of street hockey; while it won't be there this year because of COVID-19, it has been a part of the festival ever since.

“I think that is sorta the crazy and the whimsy and the amazing part of it being an Edmonton community winter festival,” said Morin. “Because we just say ‘yes let’s’ and we try these crazy things out.

“Often they stick, and sometimes they don’t but we say we tried.”

Things are looking different due to the pandemic; 118 Avenue won’t be shut down like normal, instead Pipon Village, which honours Indigenous cultures, will take place in parking lots at 118 Avenue and 92 Street.

For the first time, the festival will light up Borden Park, an emotional move for festival organizers. Morin along with her longtime friend and right-hand woman Allison Argy-Burgess had always dreamed of opening a second site at Borden Park. Argy-Burgess passed away in August at the age of 64.

“We never had the energy to think we could do two sites,” said Morin. “It’s unfortunate that she’s not going to be with us, but I know she is with us.

“To be able to do it at Borden Park is a dream come true. It’s one of Edmonton’s dark parks, there’s no light in the park so the illumination of trees, of lanterns, of installations - it’s stunning. It’s given us a trial run of what it would be like to be at Borden.”

The Carrot Community Arts Coffeeshouse will also host a part of the multi-site festival.

All of it, for free! Morin said corporate sponsors and community partners have been there every step of the way to help.

“We had people working until midnight carving pathways at Borden Park,” said Morin. “We have amazing corporations that sponsor us that came and set up lifts, so we were able to hang the installations, and they’re doing it all gratis as a gift to us.”

Deep Freeze: A Byzantine Winter Fête is still looking for volunteers. To get involved or for more information about the festival, please visit: www.deepfreezefest.ca