

# Framework's Timeraiser Event: Promoting Volunteerism Across Canada

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There's a sign on the door of a Montreal cafe that says 'closed for private event.' Inside the cozy Mile End haunt, an eclectic group begins to trickle in. Men and women in business attire make introductions and mingle; other, younger attendees arrive wearing an entirely different style: jeans and plaid, fedoras and beanies. The groups quickly mix, gathering around the artwork being unwrapped on nearby tables and discussing the photographs and paintings being unveiled in front of them. Presently, the clink of silver on glass rings out and the lights dim. A young woman, with blonde hair and a bright, inviting smile, draws the eyes of the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming, we're so happy to have you all here for our kickoff event," she says, to the applause of the mosaic audience.

The woman is Nicole McPhail, one of the chief organizers of Timeraiser, an innovative and thought-provoking volunteer program being run across Canada. Timeraiser, run by the nonprofit organization Framework, has a dual-pronged mission: to reinvigorate the sense of civic engagement in today's younger generations and to support local artists in cities across Canada.

A Timeraiser event brings together community organizations, young professionals and artists for a collaborative celebration that promotes volunteerism within local communities. Framework has helped organize 31 Timeraisers across the country since 2003; many in Toronto and Calgary, but also in Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Edmonton among others. In total, these events have raised over 100,000 confirmed volunteer hours, invested more than \$520,000 in local artists, and have connected 400 agencies with over 6000 skilled volunteers. How have Timeraisers achieved this kind of record-breaking success? The secret lies in the organization's model, which is as simple as it is creative. Here's how it works:

A Timeraiser usually begins once a local organization contacts Framework to help host an event, initiating a partnership. Then, two calls for applicants are put out: one for community organizations looking for volunteers, and another for local artists who want to sell their work. A Timeraiser committee selects thirty or so organizations, and then a volunteer jury of art councils, gallery owners, artists and art lovers pick out around thirty pieces of artwork to be showcased at the event. Thanks in large part to the Volunteer Bureau of Montreal, Framework's local partner for the upcoming April 12 event, more than one hundred

organizations applied, and more than a hundred artists submitted work. The Volunteer Bureau of Montreal's huge commitment in publicizing and organizing the event helped break records in the city's first Timeraiser, greatly exceeding all expectations.

Once artwork has been selected, it is purchased at fair market price; for many of the young artists, it's a rare opportunity to sell their work based on submission rather than hoping someone stumbles upon their portfolio. Moreover, it's an opportunity to submit artwork to a nonprofit and be paid, rather than being asked to donate; there's no submission fee, and artists set the price of their work—up to \$1000.

This submission and selection process is just the first in a chain of events that make Timeraiser special, just as the kickoff event in Montreal's trendy Mile End neighbourhood is a prelude to the main event. On the evening of April 12, a much larger group of people will gather at the Bonsecours Market in historic Old Montreal. The thirty pieces of art will adorn the walls of the Market; attendees will silently bid on them. And tonight, everyone in the gallery can afford any of the pieces; in fact, their pocketbooks will never know the difference.

You'll never see a dollar sign on the bid sheets at a Timeraiser event, nor will the end of the night be accompanied by dozens of cheque books. Instead, bidders pledge time: 50 hours with Big Brothers and Sisters, 100 hours at Breast Cancer Action Montreal. Here, time really is money. And it's amazing how willingly people spend this kind of currency, especially when motivated by a beautiful piece of art.

Almost every piece at a Timeraiser event is auctioned off for the maximum bid: 100 hours over 12 months. When a winner emerges, they give their relevant information to Framework and begin choosing the organizations with which they want to volunteer. They will track the hours they pledge through intuitive online tools offered by Framework and the artwork will be available in 12 months once the volunteer commitment has been honoured. In the meantime, the pieces will be displayed in the offices of event sponsors. When artists submit their work to a Timeraiser event, it is enjoyed by an extraordinarily wide range of people.

Timeraiser isn't your average volunteer program, and winners, many of whom are first-time volunteers, bring skill sets that reflect this unique audience. Volunteers don't sign up for envelope-stuffing or cold calling; since Timeraiser seeks and attracts young professionals, the skills they offer reflects their work experience. Organizations have consistently found their Timeraiser volunteers to be excellent assets in their various fields. The Ontario Association of Food Banks, for example, added two event coordinators and a videographer to their list of volunteers after the 2010 Timeraiser in Toronto; the Flash Forward Photography Festival had a variety of public relations work done for them by Julie Cardoni; and the Big Brothers and Sisters of London added a new board member in Clare Tattersall after connecting with her at a Timeraiser in London, Ontario.

One of the core motivations of Timeraiser is to reinvigorate a sense of civic engagement in young professionals. In today's world, we are constantly being reminded to make our footprints smaller: reduce your carbon footprint, your water footprint and your ecological footprint. But Framework, the organization behind Timeraiser, wants to help people widen a different kind of mark: the Civic Footprint.

The Civic Footprint refers to how one's actions reverberate through their immediate community, and beyond; it's also the name of the online tool that helps Timeraiser art winners track their volunteer progress. Technology helps the web of connections between each person, community and society grow. At the same time, the need for local social involvement is at an all-time high: in becoming more globally connected, many have forgotten the benefits, both personal and collective, of helping out near one's home. This kind of social involvement has never been easier, thanks to the Internet, which greatly increases how far a person's actions reverberate in the web of society. A modest volunteer commitment can have an effect that is felt for kilometers. Growing a Civic Footprint is now a simple task, and Timeraiser strives to stoke the desire to do so across Canada.

Each Timeraiser plays three roles in making these chain reactions possible: it connects people, motivates volunteers, and invests in local artists.

As a **connector**, a Timeraiser offers organizations the means to access skilled volunteers who become strong assets to their company, and whom they may not have previously been able to entice to volunteer. It connects young professionals to these organizations by showing that balancing a busy schedule with volunteer involvement is completely attainable; while an annual 100-hour commitment may seem daunting, compartmentalizing it into two hours a week or ten hours a month shows how manageable volunteering is.

Each Timeraiser fills its role as a **motivator** by drawing new community members into the lifestyle of getting involved. Charlene Humphrey always wanted to volunteer, but had never acted upon this desire. After winning art at a Timeraiser event in 2007, she donated her time to the Jimmie Sampson Centre for Gymnastics and to Literature for Life.

"I feel it's important to become a part of your community and found that the easiest way to contribute is through volunteering your time to those in need," she told Timeraiser. "[This] was the incentive I needed to give back in anyway I could. [D]onating my time was never so easy. A great way to meet new people, make a difference and have fun doing so. Since the Timeraiser, volunteering has had a much bigger impact on my life. I look forward to more volunteer work now and for years to come."

Timeraiser's technology-centric approach amplifies this motivation, offering volunteers the ability to track each hour of their commitment through Civic Footprint. As the hours pile up, art

winner can start to count down to when their Timeraiser bid will be fulfilled. And for all volunteers—with or without a winning bid—logging hours starts to make their Civic Footprint a perceptible concept.

Finally, Timeraiser **invests** in young artists by offering fair market value for their work. The organization's focus on local artists still making their way in the art world helps open doors for painters and photographers who might otherwise not have many opportunities to sell their work. And instead of just being displayed in a home or office, the art is shown off to hundreds at the event and in the corporate sponsors' offices over the course of the year. Young artists covet this kind of exposure, especially when it comes with a social consciousness they respect.

"One of my goals has been to maintain playfulness in my work and at the same time create a place where I could make mistakes, a mess and hopefully a difference as well," said Drew Khan, whose work was featured at the 2007 and 2008 Timeraisers in Toronto. "With work that is both interactive and playful, I focus on making the viewer an active participant in the telling of a story. To me, the Timeraiser echoes these concepts and makes the statement that getting involved in one's community can be worthwhile, easy and fun.... This is unlike any regular art show, with the focus on creating partnerships and making vital contributions to the community."

Then, as a bonus, Timeraiser offers people the chance to attend a memorable event for a good cause, and an opportunity to acquire art they might otherwise be unable to.

Back in Montreal, the kickoff event is wrapping up. Artists were only required to attend to pick up their cheques, yet most of them stayed for the entire night. Many were interested in speaking with each other about the work displayed upon the walls, but there was an equal desire to mingle with the Timeraiser staff and its Montreal partners. Whether it was a photographer in a button down shirt and glasses, a painter in a toque and a vintage sweater, or a Deloitte employee in a well-tailored suit, the spirit of the night was the same: excitement and intrigue at the work Timeraiser does and the effect it has on communities.

"It's the best of both worlds," said Tess Roby, a first year photography student at Concordia University whose work was accepted to the Montreal event. "When I tell people about this, that's what I say, and they always agree."

Perhaps the best description of the way people feel about Timeraiser once they get involved comes from Lindsay Mattick Davis. The recent addition to Timeraiser's Board of Directors has been volunteering with Framework for years. She has been involved in multiple Timeraisers, and manages to balance this with her full-time position as Director of Public Relations & Lead Creative Strategist for Narrative Advocacy Media.

“Every so often we all come across an idea that changes the way we think or feel about some aspect of life,” she said. “[And] every so often, it’s through an action—something that someone isn’t just talking about or writing about—it’s something they’re actually doing. Timeraiser is that kind of idea. It’s the kind of idea that is so innovative and powerful and yet, so simple and just plain cool, that you want to tell someone about it. And you want that person to tell someone else about it.... And for that person to tell their cubicle neighbour about it and... well, you get the picture. Fortunately, that is just what is happening with the Timeraiser.”