



SPARK BOX STUDIO

Where art and business collide and thrive

STORY BY KELLY S. THOMPSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHNNY LAM

Welcome to our new business-innovation column, showcasing creative entrepreneurs across the region who are bringing fresh energy to the local economy

WHERE'S YOUR HEAD AT if you're finishing a BFA in printmaking at Queen's and contemplating how to make a living as an artist? Well, there's always Etsy, that'll get you groceries...maybe. Kyle Topping and Chrissy Poitras didn't want to "sell out" or move to the city, so they brainstormed and came up with a concept – Spark Box Studio – that would not only put a roof over *their* heads in Picton, but be a hub and supportive environment

for other artists: a place for multi-disciplinary art making that would include a residency, where artists could stay for a week or more and dig deeply into their practice.

"It felt selfish and unrealistic to have a studio just for our own art," says Chrissy, who knew it was a challenge for printmakers to access a press. "But if you support and foster arts in the community, then others thrive." The couple filled notebooks with research on places like Open Studio in Toronto, making a list of things they wanted to incorporate in their own business. Armed with ideas, they then visited the Prince Edward County Economic Development Office and the Prince Edward/Lennox Addington Community Futures Development Corporation.

“BEING A RESIDENT AT SPARK BOX HELPED TO RECHARGE MY CREATIVE BATTERIES.”

Both organizations offered advice on taxes, help with business planning and operating tips, and gave countless hours to bring Spark Box to fruition.

The town of Picton saw the potential in the business and applied for a grant on Spark Box’s behalf through the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Trade’s Youth Entrepreneurship Partnerships program. Kyle and Chrissy were awarded \$30,000, but had to come up with matching funds in order to receive it. They did this through fundraising and in-kind contributions from graphic designers, financial advisors, marketers, other service providers and companies that donated equipment. By executing their ideas on time and on budget, they parlayed this start-up money into a sustainable arts-based business that provides services and rich experiences to the whole community.

Spark Box began with printmaking classes in late summer 2009 at the Picton Armory – don’t ask how they got the press to the top floor! – and within two years the couple had banked enough for a down-payment on a century home they renovated themselves. Inside the farmhouse, they carved space for three simultaneous residents, offering cozy accommodations, semi-private working studios and whitewashed walls displaying their own paintings.

The house feels like a place to congregate around the wood fireplace and share stories, which was the intention. “It’s not just about creating art; it’s about that support system for other artists,” says Chrissy. Although residents can take their meals independently, many dinners are communal, and are a great

forum for trading ideas and planting the seeds of collaboration.

The young entrepreneurs are also intent on sharing their experiences to help other artists navigate the complicated nature of a career in the arts. They’ve created the Emerging Artist Guide, a downloadable booklet packed with information about grants, local organizations and taxes. And they also have a business blog, with posts on pricing, tips for framing, building a website and much more.

Chrissy and Kyle continue to build the business through the residency program – starting at just \$120 per weekend, cheaper than camping – and they also offer printmaking classes, press rentals for local artists and host creativity workshops for corporate clients like the Bay of Quinte Mutual Insurance Company and Burt’s Bees Canada. With an eye towards the future, they plan to reinvest their profits to build more private studio outbuildings, while also developing a writing award after a surge in author applications.

Integral to their original vision of offering a space for artists in early career stages, they also welcome 12 Emerging Artist award-winners every year, who stay for free for one week. And they run an annual National Residency Award, offering a free one-month residency for a single artist. The contests are advertised on various online art websites, social media channels and by old-fashioned word-of-mouth, and draw applicants from North America, Africa, New Zealand and Europe. People must submit CVs, supporting samples of work and refer-

ences, and then a jury of Spark Box artists chooses the winners.

Steve Newberry, a sculptor and mixed-media artist from Hamilton, was the first winner of the National Residency Award. He discovered the program on Akimbo, a website dedicated to visual art. “Being a resident at Spark Box helped to recharge my creative batteries,” says Steve. During his time in the County, his interest was piqued in his hosts’ work, and he began working with Kyle to create printmaking pieces outside his normal practice. “Places like Spark Box are so rare, and while a lot of art-making goes on there, I think it’s also about community, meeting new people, and seeing new things,” he says.

The nature of their business means that Kyle, now 30, and Chrissy, 31, have incorporated mentorship into their own artistic practices. “When the residents are here, Kyle and I are pretty invested in who is here, how they’re doing, what they’re working on and if they need support,” says Chrissy. The couple used to teach at Loyalist College, but found it too much on top of the management of Spark Box and working on their own art. “I want to keep the energy here,” she says.

Running Spark Box has redefined the printmakers’ own perception of what art is. “We realized that the business was part of our practice,” says Kyle. “You really want to encourage, support and promote the talent you see coming through your doors,” adds Chrissy. For inspiration, check out <http://sparkboxstudio.com/>. 

