

A BLOSSOMING CAUSE

Festival funding on list to Santa **C3**

WEEKEND REVIEW

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2016 VANCOUVER SUN **C3**



Linda Poole, executive director of the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, is busy planning events and trying to drum up much-needed support and sponsorship money. *NICK PROCAYLO/FILES*

IN THE GARDEN

ALL SHE WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS IS CHERRY BLOSSOM FUNDING



STEVE WHYSALL

While the rest of us are shopping for Christmas presents, Linda Poole is also shopping — not for gifts for friends and loved ones but for more financial backers for her cherished cause, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, which she started 11 years ago.

As the festival's executive director, all she really wants for Christmas is more money for the event, now one of the city's defining celebrations, marking the return of spring and the rebirth of all that is beautiful in our gardens and public landscape.

Still five months away, the month-long event doesn't officially get underway until March 30. Yet behind the scenes, Poole is busy planning events and racing around trying to drum up much needed support and sponsorship money.

The first festival was held in 2006, although Poole started organizing two years before, shortly after she returned from Chicago where her husband, Christopher, was Canada's consul general and where she was a cultural attaché.

When she came back to Vancouver, she noticed the abundant "billowing pink and white" blooms of cherry trees.

"It was stunning. I stood under the canopy of one tree and commented to a woman passing by, 'Wow, look at this.' She just shrugged and kept on walking.

"It was in that moment I realized we needed to do something to celebrate the glory of the city's cherry blossoms and create more awareness of this spectacle."

Poole's idea was not simply to encourage a greater appreciation of beauty; she was also thinking about how cherry blossoms could be used as a linking factor to bring people together and create lasting neighbourhood bonds and a deeper sense of community.

She was also aware of the power of cherry blossoms to remind people of the need to stop for a moment to think about the passage of time, the ephemeral nature of our existence and the transcendent quality of beauty.

"I love the way the Japanese celebrate this time of year with their Sakura festivals and the way they love to sit under cherry trees and take time to picnic with friends and family.

"I also love the words of the Japanese poet Kobayashi who said, 'there is no stranger under the cherry tree.' It is such an inclusive statement."

In 2006, the first festival introduced an international haiku poetry competition.

Since then, hundreds of the pithy 17-syllable haiku poems have been submitted, celebrating the beauty of the short-lived cherry blossom. Last year, 696 poets submitted poems in six categories for a total of 1,384 poems.

Outdoor "plein-air" painting has also been a key feature from the start along with a vibrant website with an interactive neighbourhood map identifying key spots to see cherry blossoms at their best.

Every year, the festival is launched with a joyful "cherry jam" at Burrard SkyTrain Station with Japanese drumming, dancing and other music. Bento-box lunches are also often consumed under the glorious canopy of pink Akebono blossoms.

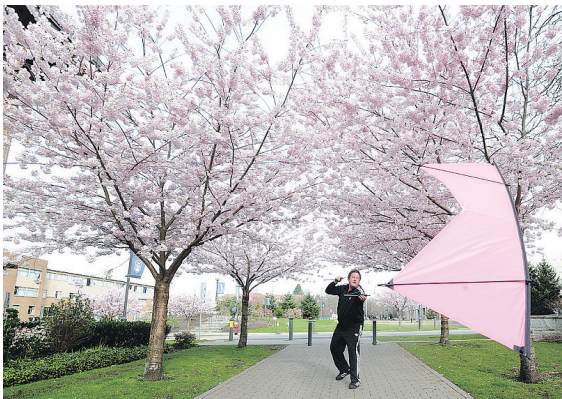
And from the start, Poole has packed as many activities and attractions into the festival as possible: guided tree walks, dragon boat regatta, origami, ikebana and calligraphy demonstrations, as well as the classic Japanese tea ceremony.

In 2007, cherry blossom trolley tours with local historian John Atkin were added.

In 2008, Sakura Days — a weekend celebration of Japanese cultural traditions — was started at VanDusen Botanical Garden. This event has since become one of the festival's core attractions.

In 2009, a book on the city's 35 different cultivars of cherry trees, *Ornamental Cherries in Vancouver*, written by Doug Justice, curator of collections at the University of B.C. Botanical Garden, was published. It has generated much needed revenues.

There was no festival in 2010 because of a clash with the



Kite dances are among some of the additions the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival has seen over the years. Next year's festival runs from March 30 to April 23. *NICK PROCAYLO/FILES*

Winter Olympics. It turned out to be one of the best years for cherry blossoms because of mild temperatures and absence of rain. In 2012, Sakura Day event at VanDusen Garden grew in popularity, attracting more than 12,000 people. A professionally choreographed umbrella flash-mob dance was also performed on the steps of Vancouver Art Gallery.

In 2013, a novel idea to light up cherry trees with colourful LED lights and create a "magical light show" was tested in local parks.

Over the past few years, Poole has added more activities and features: yo-yo performances, bike-the-blossoms cycle routes, talks and walks, kite flying demonstration, plus a cherry blossom barge that sailed around False Creek entertaining people with music and a display of cherry blossoms.

The illumination of city trees was expanded at Sunset Beach. Special petal-mats that zip

together for group Hanami picnics were designed and sold as a revenue generator.

In 2015, a Blossom Bollywood-style dance was performed on the plaza at Queen Elizabeth Theatre and "kite dances" were demonstrated at Vanier Park.

This was also the year the festival was named Garden Festival of the Year by the Canadian Garden Tourism Council.

This past spring, 700 cherry trees were sold as "birthday blossoms" to mark the festival's 10th anniversary and the cherry tree illumination at Stanley Park's pavilion drew a record crowd of 4,500.

The Canadian Mint issued a limited edition coin featuring pink blossoms and Burrard Bridge was decked out with colourful banners designed by an Emily Carr student.

While all this was going on, the festival has upgraded its website to offer a better, more interactive cherry blossom map plus

more cherry tree groves have been planted at VanDusen and Balaclava Park by Vancouver park board.

Today, Poole says the festival has a tight operating budget of \$250,000, although "we are more like a \$500,000 festival because of an addition of \$250,000 in-kind value" through sponsors and other services.

The bulk of the festival's funding still comes from grants.

"We get only \$8,000 from the city but about \$96,000 from Canadian Heritage. They love us because of our community focus," says Poole.

"Every year, I am left with the challenge of raising upward of \$150,000 to meet our budget."

Revenues from the sale of cherry trees, cherry tree books and petal-mats don't amount to much, she says; about 15 per cent of the total budget.

"Grants account for 38 per cent, sponsorship for 25 per cent, funding generates 16 per cent and donations bring in another six per cent."

An annual fundraising gala raises about \$40,000.

Expenditures include \$315,000 (63 per cent of budget) to pay performers, such as the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra, Hfour Design (illuminations event), and the Ukulele Ensemble and Shiamak Davar Dance Company for the flash mob umbrella dance.

Administrative costs, including office expenses and salaries, account for another \$140,000.

Another \$100,000 covers advertising, printing, banner installation, program guides and various media promotions.

"What the festival really needs is to hire a development staff person to bring in sponsorship, revenue and donations to sustain the current level. I would then be able to spend more time as artistic director, creating new programming and collaborations to feature more of our amazing local artists."

Next year, there are plans to introduce Petal Picnic packages to allow people the opportunity to order lunch boxes that can be delivered to a specific park picnic sites.

"We hope to sell thousands of these picnic lunches as a fundraiser," says Poole. "We'll suggest key sites, such as the most beautiful, most romantic, best ocean view, and so on.

"We hope this gets more people, perhaps whole office groups, into hanami picnics, the way it is done in Japan."

Meanwhile, Poole is looking for new supporters, including potential board members, who can help push the festival to the next level.

"This has been such a labour of love for me. Everyone seems to know the cherry blossoms now," she says.

"I'm not running out of steam just yet, quite the opposite. But I would love to get more support to create an enduring and expanded festival."

For more information about next spring's festival go to www.vcbf.ca.
swhysall@postmedia.com
twitter.com/stevewhysall



The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival has added cruises on a barge, which sails around False Creek.