

# How The Heart of Riverdale Arts Based Community Centre Built a Strong Identity and Team with Kelly Wood Leadership + Life Design

## **The Stats:**

- 52 staff members developing communication skills and resilience thanks to coaching
- 5 new organizational values and an aligned and exciting strategic plan to guide the next chapter
- 5-year team and executive coaching relationship with Kelly Wood, with plans to continue

## **The Client:**

Andrea Simpson-Fowler  
Founder & Executive Director, The Heart of Riverdale

Andrea Simpson-Fowler is a force to be reckoned with on Canada's national arts scene. She's made a significant impact on both the arts and the economy in the Yukon through the creation of her vision, a not-for-profit organization called The Heart of Riverdale.

Andrea encourages, motivates, and inspires youth to celebrate and express themselves through art. Her purpose is to support artists at every point in their journey and see that they find their wings.

## **A growing arts centre in need of direction**

A passionate advocate for arts education, Andrea Simpson-Fowler's organization was growing quickly. She had a young team that was hungry to learn. However, she needed help facilitating better communication and a strategic direction for the organization.

## **Linking arms with a seasoned coach and facilitator**

Andrea hired Kelly Wood to work with The Heart of Riverdale and offer her deep expertise in the areas of positive culture building, organizational values, and executive leadership coaching. Since then, Kelly has worked with the Heart to improve leadership skills through executive coaching, and, along with collaborator Erin Woods, has helped The Heart define its core values and create a powerful strategic plan.

## **Building capacity for the future**

Working with Kelly over the past five years has enabled The Heart to build a stronger and more resilient team, as well as a more positive work culture based in self-awareness and healthy relationships. "Kelly is amazing. She knows her stuff, and I trust her," Andrea says.

"I'm not interested in the status quo. I'm interested in a workplace that fills you up, and Kelly gets that. If I could, I'd have her coach everyone on the team."

The Heart of Riverdale Community Centre is an arts-based community organization serving over 1,000 families in the Yukon, with a team of 52 staff. Since opening to the public in 2013, the centre has become a constant figure and an inspiration in the lives of countless Whitehorse children and families.

The Heart is also a significant regional employer and economic driver in its community. Not only do many of the centre's students progress to study art at the university level and perform professionally, but many come back to The Heart as teachers, administrators, and board members.

“Our goal is to make our community a richer place by developing as many artists as possible,” Andrea says. “We believe that arts education is life education, and all the skills you need to succeed in life can be taught through art.”

### **The Challenge**

A young team with communication challenges.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Heart of Riverdale was experiencing rapid growth. It had amalgamated four organizations into one, and the team had grown from three staff to 15. Andrea's employees were young and hungry to learn. However, she was finding people management a challenge.

Many of the staff at The Heart were artists who had grown up through the organization's programming. As adults learning how to be professionals in the arts sector they were experiencing a great deal of conflict.

“I thought, if we're going to grow and if I'm responsible for training this young team, I'm going to need support,” Andrea says. “Without this work, I could live in a world of perpetual turnover. And I wanted to create a really happy place to work.”

Andrea's goal was to foster an authentic workplace where people felt they could communicate directly rather than venting to others. She also wanted her staff to know they could approach her and have difficult conversations.

“A lot of team members were friends and working artists, and had worked together in the past,” she says. “I wanted to help them trust each other and communicate effectively. I was looking for support with communication, managing conflict, and building a positive workplace.”

Andrea knew she needed guidance to help her reach the next leadership level in her career as she navigated tricky waters with her young team.

### **Seeking a trustworthy facilitator with deep expertise**

Andrea met Kelly Wood during a leadership program she was taking at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, where Kelly was a facilitator. Andrea was immediately impressed and thought the strengths-based evaluation Kelly led the group through was deeply powerful.

When she decided to seek help building capacity for The Heart of Riverdale, Andrea immediately thought of Kelly, who she knew was knowledgeable and trustworthy. Andrea began working with Kelly in 2018 and is still a client today.

### **Identifying strengths, core values, and strategic direction**

Andrea hired Kelly to provide The Heart of Riverdale with positive culture building tools (focusing on communication, conflict, and leveraging individual strengths) and a values process, as well as to provide her with executive coaching, which comes bundled with Kelly's organization packages.

Kelly walked Andrea and her team through both online and in-person experiences to learn and understand how they behave in conflict—a foundational understanding that must be in place to build a truly successful team that moves boldly toward its own good future. Each team member explored the 'why' behind the way they choose to communicate, how others communicate, what sets themselves and others into conflict, and how to leverage their individual strengths to build a strong, well-functioning team.

“When a team member is in deep conflict, I now have the tools to bring them back from the brink to where they're going to be an effective employee.”

### **Strategic Planning**

During COVID, it was time to re-imagine and re-write the Heart's strategic plan. Kelly, along with collaborator [Erin Woods](#), researched, partnered and co-created with The Heart leadership and employees to design their new strategic direction. Kelly and Erin's unique coach approach to strategic planning recognizes that the client (in this case, The Heart) is the expert, and as such, it's a highly consultative strategic planning process that leans into the wisdom of the team at every step. The benefit of this approach is whole-hearted buy-in from the team from the start, as their voices are represented throughout.

As part of the strategic plan, Kelly and Erin worked with The Heart to develop its organizational values through various sessions and working groups. The team worked through questions, and talked about who they were and what kind of dreams they all had for the organization.

“Kelly and Erin helped us find the essence of who we were as an organization in five values,” Andrea says.

Finally, Andrea continues to work with Kelly on a deeper, more personal leadership level during her executive coaching sessions. In one instance, Kelly coached Andrea through a difficult situation where she had to let a team member go.

“She reminded me of my strengths. One of the things I struggle with is self regard, and Kelly encouraged me to step into my leadership. Kelly reminds you of your ability. She has lifted me up to the next level of wanting to be the best leader I can be.”

### **A positive work culture based in self-awareness**

The robust values process Kelly and Erin led The Heart of Riverdale through provided a space for each team member to help co-design and importantly, define what the organizational values mean in action. For The Heart, each value has associated actions that allow all the staff to know what being in alignment with the organizational values really looks like.

“The values work has given us direction and a roadmap for how to build our dream organization. Because we did this as a team, the staff are all champions of living the values,” she says.

The positive culture building work has helped The Heart build a strong, sustainable, and healthy organization, in which the staff know their strengths and can practice authentic communication with ease. And, the strategic planning work done by Kelly and Erin has been invaluable for setting organizational goals.

“I have a lot of ideas and I’m a bit of a risk taker, so it was great to have a document that laid out a plan to keep us on track,” Andrea says. “When we reflect on it now, we’ve accomplished a lot of the things in the plan.”

All of the initiatives The Heart has undertaken with Kelly impact the organization's external stakeholders too, because the work of the centre trickles out into the community.

"We have a good reputation and waiting lists for our programs," Andrea says. "We have incredible staff and a diverse team, and our work with Kelly helps us to see what we already are, within each other. That gives us confidence and comes through when we interact with the community."

For Andrea personally, Kelly's executive leadership coaching has improved her confidence. Kelly also encourages Andrea to see situations for what they are.

"Kelly calls it like it is," Andrea says. "When you're the founder of an organization, you get into patterns and no one is calling you on anything. She's willing to help me through."

### **Into the future | Creating processes to level up**

Andrea continues working with Kelly in an executive leadership coaching capacity. "Kelly is bringing me to where I should be, then I feel like she's going to take me to another level," Andrea says. "Step 1 was 'know your worth'. Step 2 was 'make some changes'. Step 3 is going to be 'what's possible?'"

KELLY WOOD  
LEADERSHIP  
+ LIFE DESIGN