

In & Around Montreal

'Graphic recordings' keep meetings interesting

By DAVID LAZARUS
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Imagine that you're seated at yet another mundane business or community meeting, conference or encounter group, struggling to make it look like you're paying attention just as you sense your eyelids lowering and your brain sinking into the REM phase of sleep.

Now imagine that at exactly the same type of event, you are gazing, transfixed as someone wielding only children's markers and chalk proceeds to transform these same soporific proceedings into a vivid and vital event, capturing everything people are saying in a visual, eye-catching artful form with imaginative drawings and bullet notes that sum up concisely and exactly what's being said, as it's being said, in real time.

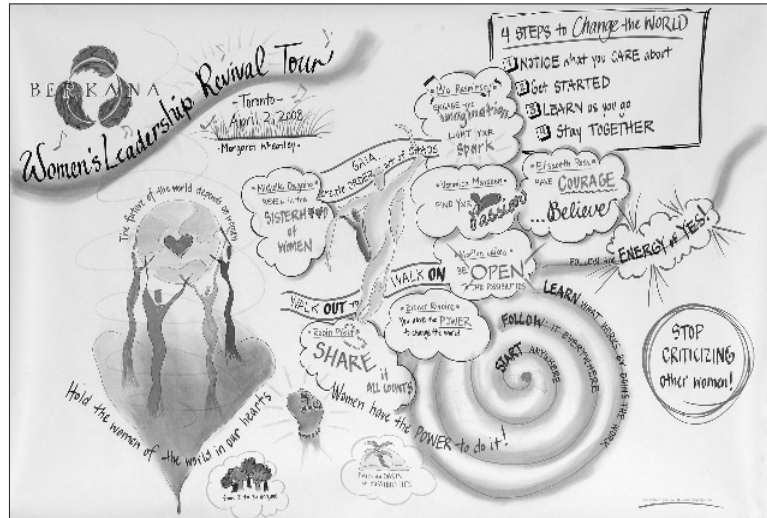
Now you're paying attention.

It's called graphic recording, and Hampstead resident Sara Heppner is among only hundreds worldwide and among a handful of Canadians – and maybe the only Montrealer – who does what she does.

Jewish community institutions such as Hope and Cope, Agence Ometz and the Jewish Rehabilitation Hospital have all made use of Heppner's unique ability to capture and transform the essential points of a meeting into a point-by-point, esthetically amazing visual display – all of it done on the fly.

And she is hoping that more Jewish community agencies call.

Depending on the length of the meeting



An example of a Sara Heppner "graphic recording."

and its complexity, Heppner uses large four-by-eight feet sheets of paper and, as the event unfolds and a facilitator leads the session, she uses words, icons and colour to transform the blank mural into a "visual map," as her sara-grafx.com website explains.

"I go into what I call 'the zone,'" she laughed, describing the complete focus she must put into her work.

When she does her work, she said, she's "in the moment, totally present."

Graphic recording "is a way to capture the collective intelligence in a room," she said.

Essentially, the technique exploits the fact that the vast majority of people are "visual learners," more likely to retain a thought or concept when they see it rather than hear it, she said.

Heppner, 47, describes what she does as "drawing clarity from dialogue," and said she came to graphic recording as an almost

inevitable result of her family's DNA.

Heppner grew up in a household in which her parents – Dodo and the late Lyonne Heppner – were community leaders, and where culture, music, art, and appreciation of all things esthetic were an everyday part of life.

Her sister, Maxine, is a dancer, and her brother, Erik, is an interior designer. Another brother, Martin, while a financier by profession, is the family's true "Renaissance man," she said.

Heppner herself spent some "15 to 20" years as a graphic designer, doing ad makeup and layouts for Pascal's Hardware,

a Montreal institution that closed with the advent of big-box stores, and as a packaging and multilingual manual designer for Bionaire, a company best known for its air purifiers.

She then worked mostly freelance, and only in spurts, while staying home to raise her and her husband Daniel's children, Dalia, Nicole and Tessa.

Once the kids were more independent, Heppner decided to go back to full-time work, but she didn't feel like doing graphic design again, "because I didn't want to spend all day sitting in front of a computer."

For a number of years, from 1996 on,

under another incarnation – "Painter-Girl" – she worked at designing unique, original wall murals for private residences and institutions.

But Heppner realized "instantly" that graphic recording was what she was meant to do as soon as she learned about it.

"I knew I just had to," she said.

And doing it right is as much an art as the art itself. Besides the complete listening focus that it requires, the work is "part intuitive, part experiential," she explained.

"You have to let go of your perfectionist tendencies and just try to capture both the information and energy you're absorbing."

Heppner has to work quickly and adeptly, following the flow of conversation and almost by instinct, drawing and writing while putting it all down in the right place as it's being said.

The finished product is a harmonious whole: colourful, vivid, and somehow looking inevitable, as if it couldn't be any other way.

People, Heppner said, are invariably impressed – not to mention stunned – by the resulting mural, which is digitally scanned and e-mailed to relevant parties and/or laminated and kept by them.

"No two charts ever

look the same," Heppner said.

"It literally puts everyone on the same page and organizes thoughts. It's great for creative thinking and for retaining what is actually being said."

Montreal woman one of few Canadian practitioners