

Oct. 9–15, 2008

## Art in the shadow of Parliament



photo by Amanda Misko

***The Encampment* is an innovative exhibit that shatters expectations for outdoor art**

by Jaclyn Lytle  
Fulcrum Staff

A HANDFUL OF volunteers were busy in the heart of Major's Hill Park on the afternoon of Oct. 2 setting up 70 canvas tents. At 7 p.m. the park lit up with the glow from 70 lanterns placed inside those tents, marking the opening of the travelling participatory art installation *The Encampment* in Ottawa.

The piece was created by Canadian artist Thom Sokoloski, with help from fellow artist Jenny McCowan. The two artists worked in partnership with the National Capital Commission and the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) to bring an illumination of Canadian history to the capital. The aim of the large-scale outdoor exhibit

was to create a metaphorical exploration of the history of those with intellectual disabilities. No details were spared in the planning of the Ottawa exhibit, which features exactly 70 tents in order to represent the cut-off IQ point for persons with intellectual disabilities.

*The Encampment* made its first appearance at Toronto's *Nuit Blanche* in 2006. It originated as a large-scale expression of the hidden stories of those who were treated for addiction and for problems related to mental health in the Toronto area. There were 68 tents in the original showing. The piece then moved to New York's Roosevelt Island, where it grew to 100 tents. There the piece became a representation of the persons that suffered in the various institutions that formerly stood on the island. Now, in Ottawa, *The Encamp-*

*ment* has become an illustration of the diverse history of intellectual disability in Canada.

From 7 p.m. to midnight on October 2–4, the cluster of tents created a massive, brilliant visual experience. The Alexandria Bridge offered an idyllic view of the installation as a whole. Up close, the purpose of the piece is revealed to participants as they make their way into each tent and are shown its individual story on a small slip of paper.

The installation, which was free to visit, allowed observers to physically enter the tents, each of which contained an account of an individual or a group of people dealing with intellectual disabilities. The stories were strung up on the outside of the tent in both French and English, with an attached flashlight, for visitors to read. The interior of each

tent housed an artist's expression in response to the story. The participatory concept of *The Encampment* allows the audience to experience and consider what each tent reveals in a personal way.

The exhibit features the work of over 50 artists from across the country, each of whom contributed to the contents of at least one tent. The inclusion of such a large variety of artists creates a sense of diversity within the piece. This particular production of *The Encampment* was intended to be the central event of the CACL's *Diversity Includes* campaign in celebration of the organization's 50th anniversary. It now heads back to its city of origin, Toronto, where it will be placed on display by Community Living Toronto in the summer of 2009.