

Fire & Ice Festival to feature two days of winter fun

By **Sam Odrowski**

The signature winter arts festival in the region is returning later this month with a variety of activities for attendees to enjoy.

The Alton Mill Arts Centre will host the 14th Annual Fire & Ice Festival on Saturday, January 25 and Sunday, January 26, for two days of excitement, entertainment, and warm community spirit for all ages.

There's something for everyone ? whether it's the many daytime activities geared towards families, with a Kids Zone and super snow slide, or the evening offerings aimed at adults, such as the comedy festival and late-night Bluegrass concert.

Last year's event saw around 2,500 attendees and this year, organizers are hoping to top 3,000.

Each year, Fire & Ice Festival attendees look forward to the Big Burn on Saturday, with the grand reveal of a unique fire sculpture. The fire is massive and will light up the sky as swaths of people gather to watch the blaze in all of its glory.

Brian Oates is taking the lead on the fire sculpture this year, which is kept secret until the Big Burn takes place. Paul Morin will be doing the lighting and sound for the special fire that has become a large production.

?All the dynamic and innovative lighting and sound that Paul does is all original,? said the festival's special events coordinator, Tony Fenech. ?He's a mixed multimedia artist, and he creates the atmosphere. He doesn't borrow anything. It's not stock, it's real.?

He added that everyone will have a great view of the fire, as the space surrounding it has been cleverly thought out.

The annual photo contest for the Big Burn will take place again this year. Attendees with photography skills are encouraged to participate.

Following the Big Burn, Hot Mic Comedy features up-and-coming Toronto comedians from the OK Comedy Show. The Stoney Lonesome Bluegrass Band will perform a concert after the comedy show wraps up.

?After you've been outside all day, you go inside, listen to some music, listen to some comedy, have a hot bowl of chilli with a fresh bun from Cobs bakery, and just sit back and laugh, and enjoy yourself,? said the Alton Mill's general manager Martin Kourpie.

The festival will also offer the classic Canadian pastime of skating on a pond for attendees who bring their skates.

Kourpie said he's excited about this activity as milder winters in recent years have prevented the festival from offering skating on the Millpond.

?The conditions look favourable to us right now. The snow gods are smiling, so we should have some good ice for people to skate on,? he told the Citizen.

?The activity of skating on a pond ? it's like a rite of passage for every Canadian in this country? and even with new Canadians, we found a lot of them, over the past couple of years, have embraced the idea of skating on a pond.?

Ice carvers will be creating works of art during the event, and Fenech will be carving an ice sculpture of his own.

?I get to chainsaw carve, so the creative juices are just pumping because I'm so excited,? he enthused. ?It's the only ice sculpture I do all year.?

Fire dancers will be performing as well, providing a unique spectacle to attendees.

There will be several warming areas on the festival grounds. Attendees can warm up at the Lumberjack Lounge, where authors will read their books and talented musicians such as Larry Kurtz or Ryan Masters will perform live music.

Another place to seek warmth is the Ice Lounge, located on the Pond Terrace, which will be in view of an area where attendees are invited to build their own Snölytka (snow lantern).

'We're doing our best to really turn this to an inside-outside event,' said Fenech. 'Even though it is a winter festival, there are warming areas, and there's a lot of workshops going on at the mill. Obviously, everyone benefits from seeing all the assets inside of the mill, but we want you just as comfortable outside, too.'

Around 20 artisan vendors will be set up at the Fire & Ice Festival, selling handcrafted items. There will also be food trucks for patrons to enjoy a bite to eat.

The festival grounds have selfie spots, blacksmith demonstrations, life-size games for the family and crafts for kids.

Streams Community Hub out of Shelburne will offer storytelling as part of the kids' programming at the festival.

The Alton Mill is home to 24 artists spread across 20 studios, specializing in a variety of mediums, from fine art and pottery to tattoo art and photography.

Speaking on reasons to attend, Fenech said, 'It's exhilarating, it's creative. The embodiment of this, the grounds and this festival in particular, I think is really hard to duplicate. It's a living organism that keeps changing every year and keeps getting better.'

TPC Toronto at Osprey Valley is the marquee sponsor of the event.

'As Canada's only TPC Network facility, TPC Toronto at Osprey Valley is a proud supporter of events that bring the community together, reflecting its commitment to fostering connection and celebrating the beauty of the region,' reads the Fire & Ice Festival's press release.

Volunteers are essential to the event's success, and high school students are encouraged to get involved to secure the hours they need to graduate. To sign up, fill out a form online at shorturl.at/0xNQh or email sarah@altonmill.ca for more information.

Admission to the event is pay-what-you-can, with a suggestion of \$5 for children, \$10 for adults or \$25 per family. But once inside the festival, all of the offerings are free.

Last year's event cost around \$50,000 to host, and this year's event is expected to cost \$60,000, so donations at the door are greatly appreciated. Any funds raised through the festival go towards supporting Headwaters Arts, a not-for-profit organization serving Caledon, Dufferin County and Erin.

The event runs from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Saturday (January 25) and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday (January 26).

Kourpie said he'd encourage anyone who's looking for some winter fun to attend.

'Get out of your house, put in your steps, and enjoy the season. This is Canada. You got to celebrate the cold because you will be sweltering before you know it,' he remarked.

The Alton Mill Arts Centre is located at 1402 Queen St. W, Alton.