

# **Staying Connected Across the Wall During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

*Walls to Bridges Grand Valley Institution for Women  
Collective*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Formed in 2011, the Walls to Bridges (W2B) Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) Collective is comprised of inside and outside W2B alumni and instructors. Together, we train W2B instructors and act as the steering committee for the National W2B office using shared decision making through a collaborative circle process and creative activities. In this article, we write about the impact of COVID-19 on our group, tracing our methods for persisting through restrictive pandemic and prison policies to continue to build bridges to one another. We detail our process for creating two collaborative projects that highlight the creativity of the GVI collective – *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times* and the *10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Presentation Collaboration*. We offer these as reminders of the power of a collective that chooses to reach out for each other during difficult times as lessons to take forward after the pandemic is done.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Walls to Bridges (W2B) Grand Valley Institution for Women Collective is comprised of inside and outside W2B alumni and instructors. These members act as the steering committee for the National W2B office and facilitate the development of W2B classes in correctional facilities across Canada. This group was formed in 2011 and began meeting biweekly after the first W2B class was offered at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI). The GVI collective operates through a non-hierarchical model that uses circle processes to make collective decisions, and to embody the spirit and practices of W2B in all of our work. The GVI collective alumni have also published several peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters about the process and impact of W2B classes and the work of the collective (Larson, 2013; Freitas et al., 2014; Pollack & Eldridge, 2016; Fayter, 2016, 2020; Pollack, 2016, 2019; Pollack & Edwards, 2018; Sferraza, 2018). Co-facilitated by inside and outside members, the GVI collective typically provides an annual five-day training inside of the prison for post-secondary

educators to be able to establish W2B classes in their own communities. The training in the W2B pedagogical model centres lived experience, circle work, and creative non-hierarchical learning. We have trained approximately 90 instructors since our first offering in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we had been preparing for a summer 2020 Instructor Training held in the prison. As part of our preparation for our annual training, we looked forward to a professional development workshop provided by a community arts organization, planned for March 2020. As new members join and other members leave the collective, we value learning new community building skills as we work through challenges and celebrate our shared accomplishments. Instead of attending the workshop, the country shut down. Pandemic restrictions abruptly prevented us from attending our arts workshop, meeting as a collective, and interrupted W2B classes across country. Shortly after, we made the difficult decision to cancel our annual training. The sudden cancellation of these events marked the seriousness of what was to unfold during the next few years. Despite no longer being able to meet under the pandemic restrictions and prison policies, we were committed to remaining connected. The article that follows outlines our process for creating two collaborative projects that highlight the creativity of the GVI collective and how we found ways to build bridges to one another, even under the most restrictive circumstances.

### **A BOOK OF COLLECTIVE SURVIVAL IN PANDEMIC TIMES, MARCH 2020 – MARCH 2021**

Once restrictions began, the sixteen W2B alumni collective members were unable to see each other in person. While the rest of the world quickly moved to virtual communications, the prison did not permit outside collective members to communicate with inside collective members virtually. Our regular contact was suddenly and harshly cut off. Christine, an outside member, wrote:

As soon as the meetings were cancelled and we were ordered to stay at home, I remember feeling like a hole had opened that could not be filled. I was stuck and anxious, but safe at home. However, I was deeply worried for my friends inside. With very little communication able to get out of

the prison, I was left asking – What is happening during the lockdown at GVI? How are they doing? Will everyone survive?

Meanwhile, inside members at the Medium-Security Unit at GVI were unable to leave their housing units and most programming ended. As an inside member reflected:

We lost a huge part of our network during this time because the collective for many of us was a sense of normalcy in this type of setting. We had become so accustomed to the continual connection and support of our meetings that a huge loss was experienced, and in many ways a part of our lifeline to the community felt like it was torn away.

Just before the pandemic erupted a member of the collective, Nichy, was moved to the Minimum-Security Unit (MSU) which is separated from the Medium-Security Unit and programming. Reflecting on her experience, Nichy wrote:

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of catastrophe, uncertainty, frustration, and chaos for the world. Time stood still. Each head of government did what they felt was best for their country – isolation – which meant a period of adjusting for a world that thrives on being busy. The pandemic is continuing, and the world is still in a state of panic and adjusting – although this experience is not new for prisoners. Since we live in a world of uncertainty, chaos, isolation, and constant adjusting – that is just the way things are. Nevertheless, COVID-19 brought on a different kind of isolation; the difference was the world is experiencing what it feels like to be incarcerated – a lonely existence. COVID-19 took away all the human contact we were afforded on the inside. Being at the minimum unit where the COVID-19 cases were rampant due to the close proximity of our living units, we were on lockdown for upwards of 40 days, with minimal contact with families, friends, and even our fellow pod mates. We are used to lockdowns but this one was different, it felt indefinite, lengthy and extremely lonely. It was a frustrating, never-ending period of not knowing what will happen next.

W2B meetings were disrupted, just like everything else in the world. The W2B community was separated abruptly; one minute we were planning for future instructor trainings and the next thing we knew our planning was ruptured without notice. Not knowing when we will ever see each other again was no doubt unsettling. However, the seriousness of what the world was facing sunk in. Losing the only kind of normalcy and the connection of the W2B family seem ambiguous. How long would this last? What are we going to do? Will we ever see each other again? These were some of the questions on the minds of many.

Being unable to connect with the collective members, inside or outside, remained unsettling on the minds of inside members most especially at the MSU. We did not have the luxury of having phones to call, internet to send messages, etc. Having no way to reconnect with each other felt exasperating. It was uncertain as to what future meetings would look like.

In contrast to those inside GVI on either unit, outside members had the privilege and means to meet online to brainstorm ideas of what to do. We met virtually and engaged in a circle process to figure out how to acknowledge our separation, while collaborating to maintain relations. With limited access and resources to sustain contact, we decided to exchange letters, cards, drawings, and poetry with inside members. Our exchange began with a letter written in April 2020 from outside members to inside members at GVI, inviting those inside to engage in a writing project:

Even though we can't be together planning or sharing in circle, we do want to find a way to be in contact and let you know we are thinking about you. So as a way of trying to stay connected and creative as a full group, we've begun compiling what we're calling *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times*. The outside collective members have each created some kind of piece around the theme of survival and connection in these times. We invite you to respond with your own piece, and add to this co-created book.

A series of mail correspondence exchanges continued, as we received and sent collages, inspirational quotes, poems, expressive arts, thoughts,

and feelings. While of course not the same as meeting in person, these acts of reaching out to one another helped us try to find our circle again. As Tori, an outside member, reflects:

It felt like we had entered a void where we were suddenly tethered and unable to see clearly. I was in a constant state of anticipation, anxiety, and hope writing letters and waiting long periods of time for mail to arrive to find out how people were. Receiving the handwritten messages and images brought comfort, connection, and gratitude through the wise words and creative artforms of pandemic strategies and insights from our circle members. The imposed walls brought unsettled feelings; even the letters were quarantined for several days before distribution, which added to the extended lengths of separation between these mail exchanges. However, for a year, these threads of mail stitched a felt sense of reciprocity – of care, wellbeing and solidarity.

Similarly, Nichy, an inside member, writes about the power of these exchanges:

With some adjusting and brainstorming, ultimately, the outside members navigated and worked through the challenges of us reconnecting. We started to correspond via mail, then conference calls and eventually we had meetings via Zoom. The exchanges of letters, drawings and quotes from outside members filled a void and brought solace and the heart space/circle felt whole and complete – the family was back together again.

As the pandemic persisted, we expanded our project to include a shared reading experience. On the west coast, two founding members of the GVI collective had recently established a W2B British Columbia (BC) collective and met poets Mercedes Eng and Cecily Nicholson, who donated their books *Mercenary English* (Eng, 2013) and *Wayside Sang* (Nicholson, 2018), respectively. Both collectives began reading the same poetry books, and the GVI collective members contributed written and visual responses to the poems, which were added to our collective book. When we finalized *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times*, we printed a copy for each collective member. Below are a selection of writings, images, and poetry responses from this collaborative project (see *Figures 1-3*).



Figure 1: Nicola's Entry and "Presentiment" Art in *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times*

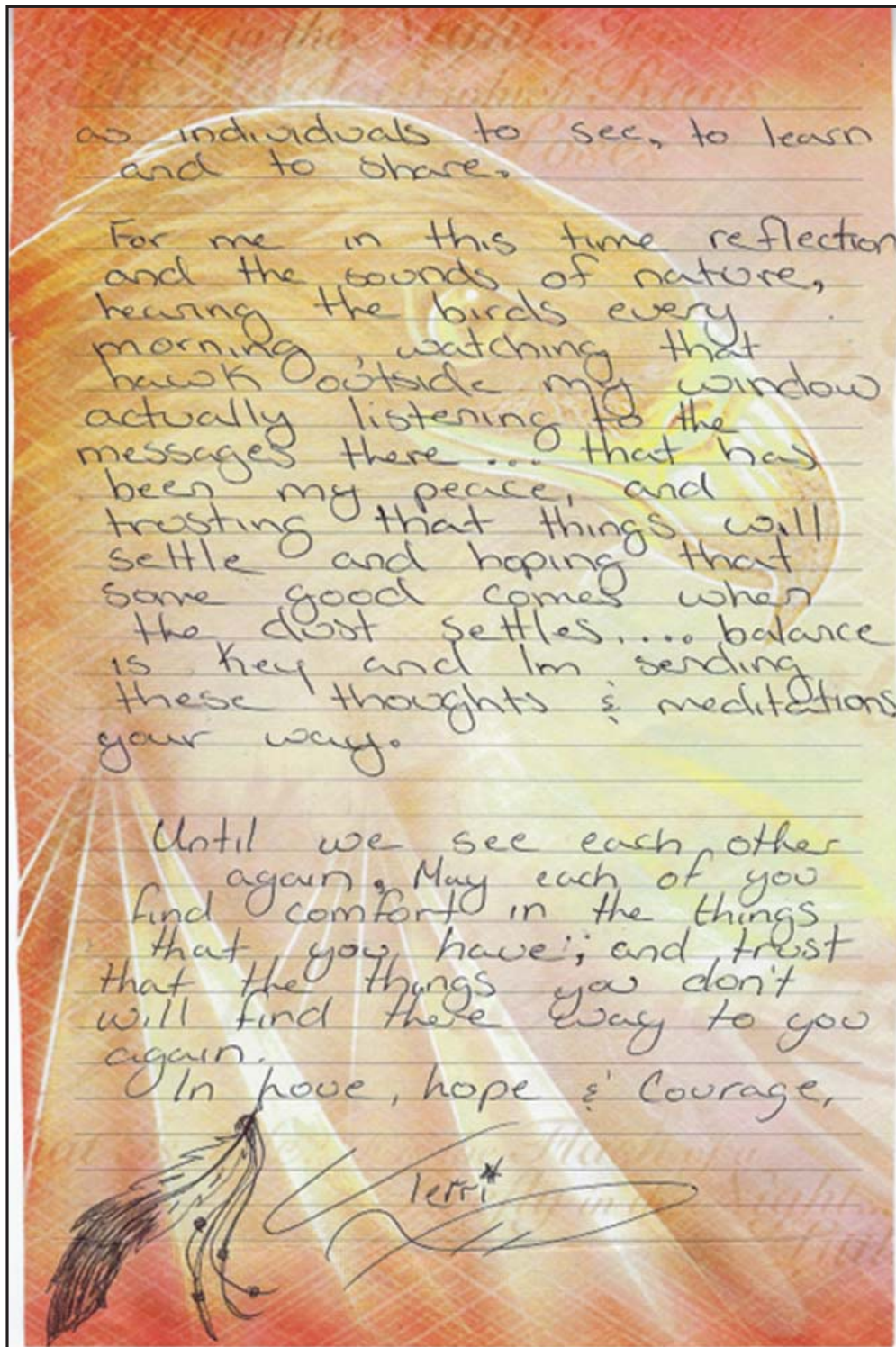


Figure 2: Terri M.'s Entry in *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times*



Figure 3: Terri M.'s "One Heartbeat" Art Entry in *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times*



As a collective we embraced integrative learning involving our whole selves, while creating a shared lived experience navigating new terrain. If the past couple of years have taught us anything, it is that we value human contact, along with the connectedness of friends and family. We are resilient and stay together through good, bad, and the pandemic. As Jen, an inside member, writes:

W2B is a collaborative space which had to change and adapt during the pandemic like most of the world. With barriers on top of barriers we tried to stay connected by collaboratively creating a ‘Survival Book’ that drew our voices together from afar. Not being able to even speak over the phone at the beginning of our time apart and relying on pen to paper mail was all that some of us were able to do to speak out to the group. It was difficult to know that there were people who wanted to see our faces, but we were unable to see those kind eyes and open hearts. Much like many other spaces throughout the world, our circle continues to change, the one constant is our heart space where we remain connected through space and time. We have not physically been in the same space, and we have also missed a lot of chairs (or virtual boxes) over this time. However, we hold space no matter where we are. We bring our whole selves (which include the lessons we take from one another) with us through our lives, and by carrying one another in our four quadrants (mind, body, spirit, soul), we keep our circles moving forward and connecting over W2B.

### **W2B 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY PRESENTATION COLLABORATION, MARCH 2021 – NOVEMBER 2021**

During the second year of the pandemic, W2B classes were still suspended and the GVI collective was unable to meet in person. In addition, 2021 marked the ten-year anniversary of W2B Canada and the GVI collective. Shoshana, Director of W2B Canada, received a Social Sciences and Humanities (SSHRC) Connection Grant to fund a series of virtual symposiums to celebrate W2B’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The goal was to keep the wider national network of W2B instructors and alumni energized and motivated, and to sustain the work and mandate of the GVI collective during the pandemic. As part of these anniversary celebrations, the W2B GVI collective was scheduled to present virtually in November 2021. As an outside member Shoshana wrote:

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary felt really significant to me in terms of how much the GVI collective has accomplished since we formed in 2011. I really wanted to honour this work by celebrating nationally. Of course, the pandemic meant an in-person gathering was not possible. With the funding we received, we organized a series of four virtual symposiums that featured in large part inside and outside alumni giving presentations and facilitating conversations about the impact of W2B classes on their lives. Working with the GVI collective on our presentation was an exercise in perseverance and commitment. While we were grateful that by the second year of the pandemic the prison allowed us to meet via Zoom, limited technology made the ability to see or hear the inside members very difficult; reinforcing a sense of the cavernous distance that still remained between us. However, as has always been the case, the W2B collective was tenacious, patient, and committed.

Indeed, planning for this presentation without in person contact was no small feat. One computer screen and one microphone were allowed to be set up in the large education room at GVI to allow the inside collective members to connect with the outside collective members through Zoom to coordinate our presentation. Meeting online and on the phone meant our circle was no longer physical. Before we could even begin to plan for the presentation, the first task was navigating this new way of meeting. The process was completely different from our collective's norm and unfamiliar to many of us. The clear divide amongst a series of small screens and the power dynamic we do our best to strip away when working non-hierarchically, became ever so visible. While the outside members utilized their own computers in their own space, the inside members shared one screen in a classroom. This set up made it challenging for outside members to hear and see each of the inside members. The group went from holding meetings in a shared space to being in ten spaces at a time. Slowly, we began to find warm-up activities to help us connect and learned from the Centre for Indigegogy in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University, which fostered more meaningful methods of facilitating virtual circles. With the assistance of the prison education staff, additional conference calls were scheduled with inside members to finalize presentation details, and, by mid-fall, two outside members were allowed to enter GVI to join meetings in person.

Laura, an outside member, reflected on the process of trying to work together under these difficult conditions:

For over two years now the GVI W2B Collective has been functioning under “pandemic protocols” – no meetings, phone calls, letter correspondence, and eventually hybrid meetings. For our first eight years of existence, bodies could meet in the same room, we shared the same air, we could acknowledge each other’s full-faced selves, we could be us, in circle, together. Over the last two years we have become loosely reliant on a new way of being together – one screen in the minimum-security unit, one large screen and room in medium security, and individual screens of outside members. It was through this new and less liked way that we set up meetings, went through agenda items, and prepared for our upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary presentation. As the presentation grew closer, we knew that our walls to bridges “way” was going to be challenged. We factored-in technological glitches, lockdowns, COVID illnesses, and absences, anything we could think of but truly tried to get as close to our authentic way of being together and presenting together.

Given the unpredictability of a carceral setting, we determined that relying solely on a live presentation for the symposium anniversary event was unrealistic; the potential for a lockdown, restricted movement within the prison, denial to Zoom access, along with many other possible interferences could prevent members from participating. These factors helped us decide to create a video to ensure that each inside member’s voice was included, even if they were unable to participate on the day of the presentation.

In order to create the content for the video, we narrowed our focus to the following three brainstorming questions:

- 1) What does W2B mean to you and how has it influenced other parts of your life?
- 2) What is most impactful about being in a W2B learning community?
- 3) What do we want to celebrate about being a collective over the last 10 years?

Each member of the collective independently wrote responses to these questions, before one inside and one outside member was paired together. Each

duo exchanged responses and were in dialogue about these questions with one another. Over the course of the next few months, we sifted through and analyzed the written dialogues that had occurred between collective members.

Working in circle, we each selected five quotations from the conversations that we felt illustrated the impact of W2B individually and collectively. Using a circle process, we collaboratively analyzed this shorter collection of quotations and identified four main themes: 1) personal growth and connecting to our authentic selves; 2) finding our voice in a space where we feel heard; 3) the ripple effect of community; and 4) decolonizing learning and embodiment. These quotations and themes became the core structure that the presentation was built on. Inside member Terri reflected on her experience with this collaborative planning process, writing:

Some of our first conversations surrounding the symposium were about what W2B meant to us individually and as a collective. Everything bloomed from there. How would we create something that was true to the collective and represent W2B with integrity and authenticity without being able to physically connect? The process was incredible to see and experience because not only did the amount of information we started with seem impossible to present in the timeframe we had, but the virtual way of being was so unfamiliar. The task at hand seemed almost impossible at the beginning. What a gift it was to witness what we were able to create by the end. The final presentation illustrated the heart, soul, and collaborative essence of our collective.

Moving from these themes to conceptualizing and creating the video itself became an amazing example of W2B collaboration and an embodiment of our motto: “Trust the process”. There were so many unknowns, but members stretched their imaginations to conceptualize what could be done. Inside members created a foundational presentation, which was expanded upon in a movie format by outside members who had access to technology. The collective was able to review the video at virtual meetings and shape the concept. Soon the video covered not only the selected themes and quotations, but also a timeline of W2B accomplishments from the previous 10 years (see *Figure 4*). Members stretched their memories to reflect on their experiences and searched for photographs to represent our decade of work (see *Figure 5*). When the time came to record quotations, both inside

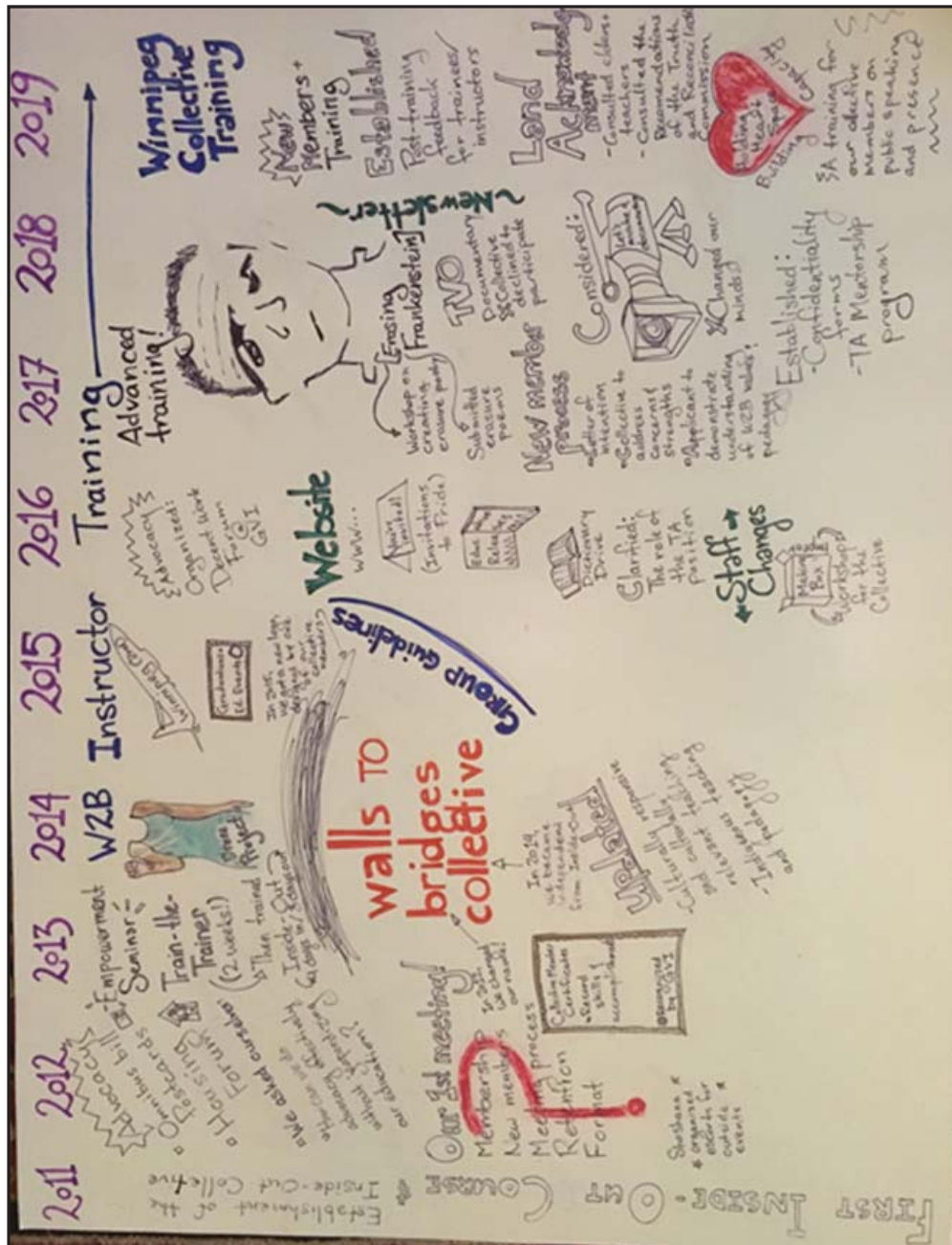
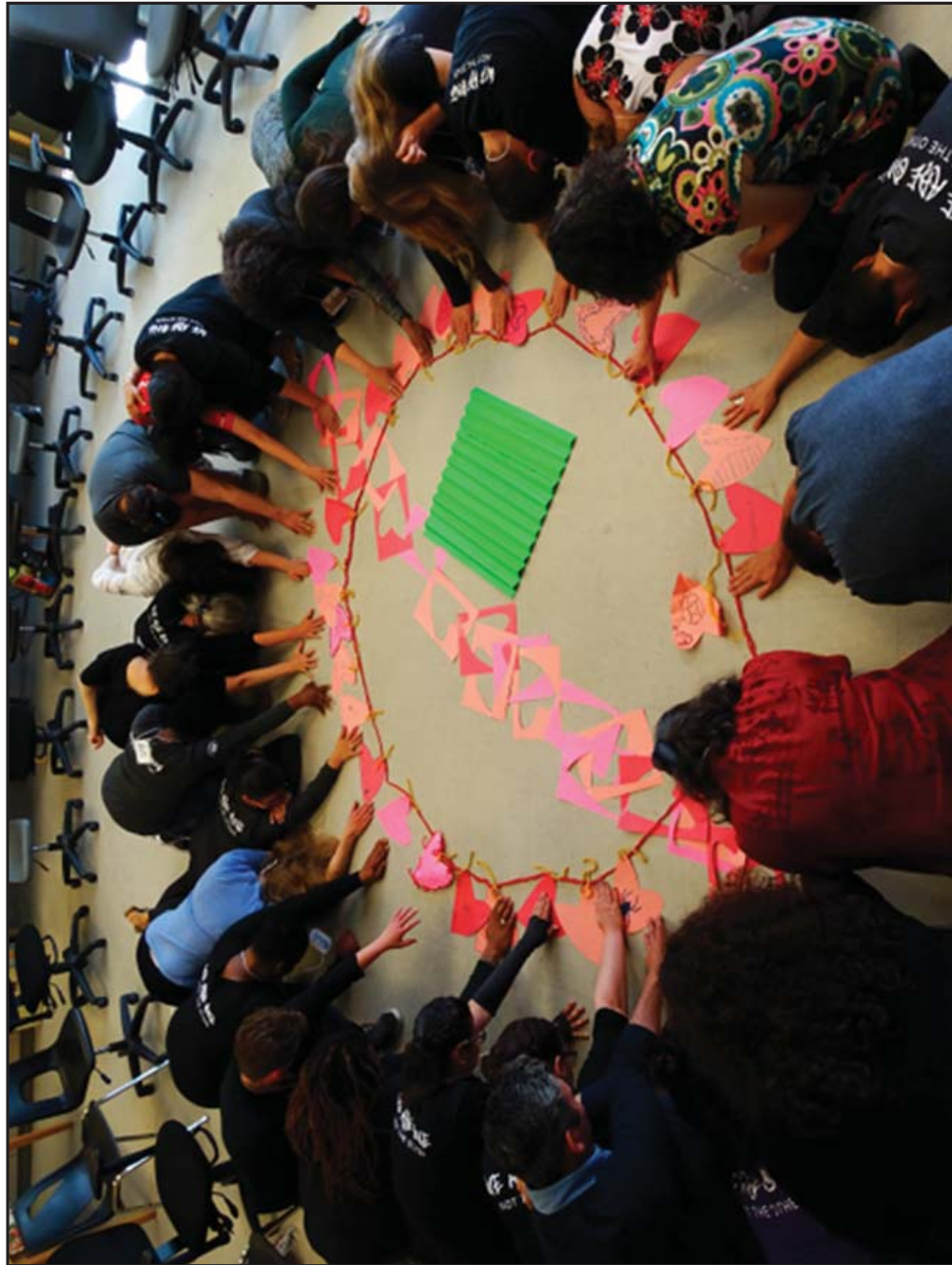


Figure 4: W2B's Visual Timeline



**Figure 5: Photograph from a W2B Instructor Training**

and outside members were able to speak to events that meant the most to them and select quotations that resonated, often words written by another member that represented our collective experience. Nicola, an inside member, reflected on the barriers and beauty of this work, writing:

I remember feeling very frustrated at the limitations that were enforced because of COVID and my inability to express what W2B has meant to me over the past 10 years. I spent hours poring over images (through our outdated Word program) and taught myself how to make a slide-show presentation, yet I felt I was not doing the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary justice. As an inside collective member, I often feel tethered by the lack of resources available and I was so anxious that the weight of all we've accomplished seemed lost. However, after I saw our anniversary presentation, I was in awe of us and the work that we do.

Similarly, Shoshana, an outside member, wrote: "Despite the many barriers, the group produced a fabulous, creative, and informative video showcasing the decade of accomplishments, and detailing the impact of both W2B classes and our work as a collective".

On the day of the presentation, we brought together our best selves, our pre-recorded material, our live contributions, our masked faces, our screens, and leaned into the clumsy beauty of our pivoted creativity. We invite you to view the full anniversary video (see W2B, 2022). During the symposium, our presentation was graphically recorded by Tanya Gadsby from Fuselight Creative, which illustrates many of the core themes of our work together (see *Figure 6*). Laura, an outside collective member, reflects on the initiative:

Having been part of the circle for 8 of the 10 years, I have seen us be flexible before, but never have I felt our group dig so deeply for the greatest acrobatic moves we could muster. With the technological distance, we had to trust our co-facilitator more than ever before. We had to work in new ways to open and close our circle. There was fatigue and frustration, there were indeed frozen screens and delayed recall, but there were walls to bridges – we were there in presence, in body, in voice, in pedagogy. We were there in grit and grace, energy and drain, closeness and distance.





## CONCLUSION

As we collaboratively write this article, our circle remains hybrid; inside members are allowed to gather together with two outside members, while the rest join online. While we miss the “before” times and look forward to a time when we can all be together in person again, these past two years have reinforced for us the power of a collective that chooses to reach out for each other during difficult times. We have affirmed the importance of our relationships and our capacity to create together, no matter what challenges arise. We have also been reminded of the ways in which our work together extends far beyond the classroom or the collective. As this quotation from our anniversary video written by outside member Laura reminds us:

The circle, created more circles, and those circles are creating ripples in universities and prisons, and when those ripples become waves, the next 10 years will take us to places we didn’t even know possible. Walls that felt so impossible to break down, turn into bridges, and those bridges remind us over and over again that “We are One, Not the *Other*”.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For more information on Walls to Bridges and the work of the collective, please see: <http://wallstobridges.ca/>

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

The *Walls to Bridges Grand Valley Institution for Women Collective* was formed in 2011 after the first W2B class – Diversity, Marginalization and Oppression – was offered by Shoshana Pollack in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. The class’s final project was the establishment of a ‘collective’ comprised of W2B alumni and instructors. The GVI collective functions as the steering committee for the W2B Canada office and the trainers for the annual five-day W2B instructor training.