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CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers
January 2010. Vol. 14, No. 1.

Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy
Arts & Administration Program, University of
Oregon ISSN 1541-938X

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Understanding Social Service and Community Needs in an Urban Community Arts Center

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In September 2007, I started as the Executive Director of Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP; <http://www.myneighborhoodproject.org>), a nonprofit Latino community arts center in North Philadelphia focusing on youth education and Latino culture. Since 1973, NSNP has distinguished itself as an innovative cultural learning center and followed its mission to nurture and actively involve neighborhood children and their families in learning responsibility for self, culture, community and the environment. The community-based organization serves the predominately Puerto Rican Norris Square section of North Philadelphia. Although rich in cultural heritage, it is an area that has historically (and currently) struggled with poverty, crime, lack of resources, poor education attainment, and cultural and linguistic barriers. Current program demographics for the arts-based after school program reflect the immediate surrounding community. Approximately 96% of youth program participants, ages 5-19, self-identify as Latino/a and 90% of families are below the federal poverty level guidelines.

Natalie Kempner, a local 5th grade Social Studies teacher, and Helen Loeb, Ph.D., a professor at Eastern University of Pennsylvania, founded the organization in response to the need for relevant, engaging educational experiences for local youth that were not otherwise accessible to the community. By gathering

volunteers, artists, school teachers, higher education institutions, nonprofit agencies and participant families, NSNP built comprehensive programs celebrating Latino culture through arts and environmental project-based learning. Over the last 4 decades, the organization developed more programs in response to community interest and now has a Puerto Rican women's collective, world-renowned community gardens, community education classes in technology/digital arts, and English as a second language classes in addition to the after school and summer youth programs. The majority of the organization's \$390,000 annual budget and 10-person staff fall within the youth programs, which consisting of the Mural Arts Big Picture Program, youth-driven Theatre Exile theater classes, artist residencies from Taller Puertorriqueño and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bomba dance lessons (traditional Puerto Rican dance), gardening, cooking, digital arts, silk screening, and entrepreneurship classes.

With my prior community arts experiences, my initial attraction to the organization was the amazing art that was being created by community members of all ages in a colorful and nurturing space. As I got to know the full scope of the organization, I began interacting more with program youth and families. Through building relationships, I was able to understand more of the needs of the individuals and the disparities that the community as a whole faces as a cultural subset of a large, urban metropolis. The concept of community arts has changed for me over the last two years; I believe that one is not able to administer a community arts organization from a standpoint that does not first examine the social service needs of the community.

Initially, I believed that participation in community arts organizations created individual change through hands-on arts activities. Through my work with NSNP, I have discovered that the concept of "space" that is created around community-based arts is the true change agent. Youth and their families are able to participate in collaborative arts and cultural learning together in a safe space and are connected to other services through our arts-based programming. We refer many of our families to education specialists, low-income housing programs, and other social service supports. For NSNP's families, the organization is a resource for referrals to other agencies.

Community arts programming is the method and lens through which we serve the community. NSNP considers constituency social service needs to be the primary focus of our programming. Through the arts, youth are able to express many needs such as hunger, poverty, cultural barriers, teen pregnancy, or lack of many other resources. Program staff both seeks out and develops programs relating to other disparities like illiteracy and domestic violence. In fact, the majority of funding for NSNP is from health and human services sources.

To provide an example of how social service needs come first, I reflect on a conversation with NSNP's Gardener, Iris Brown, a long time community resident and proud Puertorriqueña. Several years ago, she sought funding for NSNP from an agency that collaborated with NSNP's garden program. She asked the agency to provide stipends and other supports for local community gardeners. When the agency said that they would not be able to act as a social service agency, Brown stated that there would be no gardens without the gardeners. Brown was able to secure a small amount of funding for the project by maintaining NSNP's stance that the gardens' needs would not be met without first meeting those of the gardeners.

The North Philadelphia Latino community has different needs than other communities with high numbers of Latino immigrants due to the permanence of Puerto Ricans in the area since the early 1970s. While there is an increasing number of Mexicans and Dominicans in the last five years, the Puerto Rican community does not face the same issues with undocumented immigration and difficulty traveling between the United States and nations of origin. Issues that have more urgency among NSNP youth program participants are the rising dropout rate in middle and high schools and extremely low income levels. To address these concerns, NSNP older youth programs, targeting ages 14-19, have focused on entrepreneurship through silk screening and graphic design as a means of engaging high school aged youth and putting money into their pockets through the business that they develop and operate as a sustainable means of preparing a young, creative workforce.

Responding to the needs of the community, especially those that the youth program participants self-articulate (such as the need for earning money), built both trust and youth voice within the organization. The youth brought more to the programs that they helped to develop, although the solicitation and cultivation of youth voice was not an easy process. The first programmatic change that I wanted to achieve after I arrived at NSNP was to develop a youth advisory council within the after school program in order to have youth involved in the infrastructure of the organization. In my personal experience, as well as my graduate research on youth leadership development through volunteer service in the arts, youth easily stepped into leadership roles when given the opportunity and some guidance.

During my first week at NSNP, I met with a group of high school students, fully prepared to engage them in program planning and administration. I brought to the meeting what I had thought was a vast amount of personal and academic expertise to the task, but as soon as I opened my mouth there were 18 eyes staring blankly back at me. I realized that I needed to take a few dozen steps back. My strategy for engagement and my West Coast deals were holding me back. How had the methods I knew for engagement worked in Eugene, Oregon and Seattle but

not in Philadelphia? It became clear that the youth did not understand the concepts of youth-adult partnership or youth-led decision-making because they had not been given the opportunity to put forth an idea with a positive and corresponding adult response. Traditional, hierarchical structures are evident in schools, homes, and most organizations in Philadelphia, and the youth were wary of challenges to those structures. They neither trusted me, nor my encouragement for youth-led initiatives within their programming. I had failed.

Over the next 6 months, I worked with Cathryn Carkhuff, a staff member that I had hired to work with the high school-aged youth, and I explained my vision for the youth participants running their own program. Taking an advisory role to the program, I encouraged Cathryn to create a program in which the youth had space to build leadership, and we brainstormed how to meaningfully engage youth. We partnered with The Empowerment Group and the North Philadelphia Weed and Seed Program to have silk screening, business, and graphic design classes for the youth based on their interests. The youth began to develop leadership skills within these program components organically. In April 2008, Saul Zayas, 17, now the Prodigies Youth Coordinator, named the program. He talked to Cathryn after school one day and said that he had learned a new word, “prodigy.” Saul suggested that the group take on the name “Prodigies” to demonstrate to the community that they are talented and gifted children. The program took off from its humble beginnings as a failed attempt at rapid youth leadership development to the now youth-driven program that incorporates youth leadership, academic enrichment, college preparation, literacy programming, technology, multi-media arts, theater, self-expression, and an entrepreneurial silk-screening business.

Prodigies participants describe their group and work as the following:

Prodigies is a group of youth ages 14-18 that have a business silk screening t-shirts in North Philly, Pa at Norris Square Neighborhood Project. We design, silk screen and sell shirts. We do business with organizations, schools and businesses. We are not rich, but we are not poor. We are like many others in this world who get just enough to get by. We take classes to gain experience for our future careers. We do this because...

- we want to grow our business and become successful, inspiring adults;
- we want everyone to see the prodigy in themselves;
- we want to be role models for kids, because they are the future;

- we want to show other youth that they can make money making a difference;
- and we want to show adults that youth care about positive work (Prodigies, 2009).

This new high school age creative workforce has comprehensive arts and entrepreneurship skills at the time when several Prodigies participants have described the draw of money hustling on the streets as the downfall of many of the other kids in the neighborhood. Responding to these pressures, Prodigies participants have created their own strategic plan for both leadership development and sustainable, lucrative creative skills development. These are tangible program outcomes. These youth will be more competitive when entering the workforce and higher education institutions. They have worked hard to tackle from within many problems that they have articulated: poverty, lack of positivity, and poor education attainment. For me, as a community arts administrator, the process for achieving the end result of a youth leadership development program, and the overwhelming youth engagement in the program, almost overshadow the arts education program components. Perhaps the success of this program demonstrates the responsibility of community arts administrators to assess and address constituency social service needs with arts programming as the instrument of achievement.

I urge other community arts administrators stepping into a new role to consider that we may always be an outsider to a new community. Although it is often times difficult to be in that position, one is able to take advantage and act as an observer. Before implementing new programs and strategies, survey constituents and staff to better understand the needs of the youth and the larger community. Develop programs through conversations with these key stake holders and there will be significantly more buy-in and ownership. In all of the programs that have been developed at NSNP since 2007, I have guided staff to use this approach and our youth programs are considered models for urban youth in the city.

References

Prodigies (2009). Mission statement.

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In 2007, **Reed Davaz McGowan** earned a Master of Arts in Community Arts from the University of Oregon and in 2002, a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish also from the University of Oregon. With her interest in youth involvement in organizational infrastructure, McGowan will begin a Ph.D. Program at Eastern University in Nonprofit Leadership this fall. Above her office door, she scrawled on a small piece of chalkboard paint, “the best parts of my education were amid rock n’ roll and flying paint.” While that’s been true for the most part, McGowan has learned how to be an Executive Director by sitting on the floor of Home Depot sorting through bolts and screws for an art project and by fixing a leaky faucet in a suit before a meeting with our City Councilwoman among other tasks that could not be delegated. Those things cannot be taught with formal education.

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