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## October 2011. Vol. 15, No. 4. – Creative Entanglement: The Challenges and Promises of Collaboration: Laurie Dean Torrell

BY CULTUREWORK, ON OCTOBER 6TH, 2011

Welcome to the Fall 2011 issue of CultureWork!

Two and a half years ago, CultureWork published an article exploring the underpinnings of success for an administrative collaboration in Buffalo, NY. Since that time, the collaboration has navigated a number of challenges in staffing, spacing, and administrative leadership. In this issue of CultureWork, Laurie Dean Torrell, Executive Director of Just Buffalo Literary Center, updates how Just Buffalo, Big Orbit Gallery/Soundlab, and CEPA Gallery have addressed these concerns. Through a theme of "Creative Entanglement," Torrell offers recommendations for preparation and crisis management in organizations encountering challenges in their own collaborative processes.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris  
Robert Voelker-Morris  
Editors

**Creative Entanglement: The Challenges and Promises of  
Collaboration**

**Laurie Dean Torrell**

(Note: Below article links open in a separate browser window or tab)

The focus of this piece is to share the experience of Just Buffalo Literary Center, CEPA Gallery and Big Orbit Gallery/Soundlab, three cultural organizations in Buffalo, NY that have recently completed year six of an administrative collaboration, supported in large part by The John R. Oishei Foundation. You can read about the first phase of their experience in *"Concentric Concerns: The Art of Administrative Collaboration"* (CultureWork, January 2009, <http://culturework.uoregon.edu>).

These organizations undertook an ambitious administrative collaboration as a way to keep their missions strong in the midst of widespread funding cuts. The first three years of the collaboration went remarkably smooth (1). The organizations exceeded their goals for board and staff development and revenue diversification while expanding local and national visibility. A centralized downtown office and core structure of three shared staff was created, providing administrative support and access to top talent beyond what any individual organization would have been able to secure on its own. Individual contributions increased by 300%, corporate funding by 200%, and membership by 22%.

The second three years brought a series of sobering challenges. Having now successfully come through these experiences, it is possible to say that our collaboration proved resilient and strong. The focus of this second of two articles is to share the experience of navigating these challenges in the hope that it will be useful to cultural colleagues interested in exploring and implementing administrative collaborations. What follows is a discussion and description of each challenge faced, followed by the "lessons learned"/recommendations for other organizations in similar circumstances.

### ***Challenge #1: Shared Space***

Early in 2008, we became aware that a rent increase might be in the works for the city-owned, rented space that houses CEPA's galleries and the three organizations' shared administrative office. All of the organizations were feeling cramped due to the success of their programs. Not wanting to be without options, the organizations began exploring alternative spaces. Attention quickly became focused on Artspace Buffalo (2) which had just completed a number of artist apartments and was looking for a commercial tenant for a large central space. This began a nine month odyssey of talking with our boards, looking at this and other locations, meeting with the developer and architects, drawing up plans and a case for support, and preparing to do a capital campaign feasibility study.

Once into this process, the organizations found they had different needs and visions in terms of space. Securing a permanent home suitable for each organization's programming was a separate decision than simply sharing administrative office space. The boards came to the table with very different perspectives, needs, and risk tolerances. The three executive directors continued working through issues and were about to launch a capital campaign feasibility study when the financial crisis throughout the United States hit in November 2008, and the decision was made to abandon the effort. The information that had been gathered was used to negotiate an extended lease with minimal increase at the current location, and it was a relief to step back and regroup.

## Lessons Learned

- As a collaboration progresses, actively seek ways to forge connections and build trust (including awareness of and respect for differences) at the full board level. In our case, a collaboration committee consisting of the executive directors and three board members from each organization met quarterly. Organizational staff had worked closely together for several years and built up a significant reserve of trust and resilience. But when faced with a major high stakes decision, it became clear that this did not extend to the full boards which added a great deal of difficulty to the process.
- Consider carefully each individual organization's real space needs (flowing from the mission and organizational culture) before assessing whether they can be successfully meshed. This is particularly important to think through in collaborations involving different types of organizations, or organizations working in different disciplines. It is almost always possible to create a shared business/administrative office, but program and performance space needs may require customized solutions.
- If shared space is anywhere on the organization's horizon, establish a shared space task force with representatives from each organization to start working on the process, and involving key stakeholders, well in advance.

### ***Challenge #2: A space in which to manifest the mission***

After this, Just Buffalo planned to 'sit tight' with the space issue. However, early in 2009, Western New York Book Arts Collaborative approached Just Buffalo about sharing space in its newly renovated building in downtown Buffalo, the Western New York Book Arts Center (WNYBAC). Upon meeting at WNYBAC, Just Buffalo realized that this might be the answer to the growing dilemma of needing more room for programs which had become too numerous to be held at multiple off-site locations. Soon after, Just Buffalo made the decision to move its programmatic offices to, and develop a regular performance space in, WNYBAC's second floor (taking occupancy in July, 2009). This expansion to WNYBAC opened the door to a new mission-based strategic partnership between Just Buffalo and the WNYBAC, a non-profit 501c3 cultural organization and working print museum.

Having placed great emphasis on the benefits of proximity, the collaborative administration group now faced questions including:

- What did it mean to have one of the collaborators moving part of their offices to another location?
- What impact would it have on the collaboration to have one executive director (and two of the other Just Buffalo directors) housed at another site?
- Did this somehow signal a decreased commitment to the collaboration?

Several things helped in navigating this challenge. The decision was made to maintain the shared administrative office at Market Arcade and keep

that the administrative hub. Just Buffalo moved its Executive Director, Artistic Director, and Education Director to the new site and implemented cell phones with direct numbers. Regular meetings, constant email, and frequent trips back and forth between sites were continued. As everyone adjusted to the new configuration, it became clearer that this was yet another manifestation of organizational flexibility and creative co-location rather than an abandonment.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Think flexibly about space and put all options on the table in order to create an optimum configuration. Early in our collaboration, it made sense for Just Buffalo to give up most of its space and move in with our collaborators. This kept operating expenses to a minimum during a 2005 funding crisis, and the proximity helped establish and cement the collaboration. Later, with increased growth, more dedicated programming space was needed and found through a new strategic partnership. What works at one stage of an organization's life cycle may not work at another.
- Utilize digital technology. Portable laptops, cell phones, and especially email and Skype have made it possible to think more creatively about location as well as about how work gets done and from where. We now have one organization spread over two sites, a shared business office for the three organizations, and a shared grant writer who is based in a different city. We were also recently able to arrange for a valued staff director to work from overseas for several months while with her husband on a Fulbright Award.

### ***Challenge #3: Building Fundraising Capacity***

After successfully making progress on fundraising goals, the next capacity-building step was seen as hiring a shared development manager to the staff. To that end, a Development Associate was brought on. This first hire came through one of the organizations, someone who had a strong affinity and fit with this specific organization, but ultimately, not the others in the collaboration. It took nearly a year to work through the fact that a change in staffing was needed. This setback required the directors to step back, re-evaluate their goals, and determine exactly what they needed to support their fundraising efforts. They worked extensively to assess each group's needs, develop a new clarified job description, and hired an experienced and skilled Development Director in October 2009. The organizations received 18 months of benefit from this position before a new round of funding cuts hit, and it became impossible to continue the position to full sustainability. The executive directors and boards were now, however, much more capable of implementing the comprehensive development plans which had been put in place by the development director and optimistic about maintaining forward momentum.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Conduct a full hiring process, even (or perhaps especially) if the job candidate has already worked with one of the organizations. All members of the collaboration must be totally on board with a new

hire for it to work.

- Remain optimistic and committed to making the best hire you possibly can, getting all skills and experience needed to fill a position, until or unless it is proven impossible. Pooling resources, offering a unique collaborative opportunity, and providing flexibility, reasonable compensation for top talent, and paid time off can be great recruiting tools.
- Commit to providing timely feedback to both the staff member and your collaborators. Conduct regular evaluations of shared staff to allow plenty of time to talk through differences of opinion about needs and performance.
- Understand going into the process that it will likely take three or more years to bring a staff development position to full sustainability (generating enough revenue to cover all the expenses of the position as well as meet the organizational goals for the position) and plan accordingly. If this is not feasible, make maximum use of a skilled consultant who can work with your organization over an extended period of time.

#### ***Challenge #4: Unexpected Leadership Transition***

In late fall 2009, CEPA Gallery was thrust into unexpected leadership transition when its executive director became embroiled in a legal issue. He was extremely well liked and was the highly visible face of the organization, having led it over 11 years to national prominence. He was also strongly identified with the administrative collaboration and was considered the one most responsible for starting it and most often speaking on its behalf.

Within a short time, as press coverage heated up, and his attention needed to be focused on defending the case, it became clear that the director would need to step down. The three organizations' destinies were now intertwined, so the questions extended beyond the immediate "what is going to happen with CEPA?" to include many others including:

- Would funding or programs be pulled?
- Would staff be lost, including a new development director just hired?
- Would shared staff positions be in jeopardy if grant funding or donor support fell?
- Would the reputation of one or all of the organizations be damaged?
- Could the collaboration survive this crisis?

Just Buffalo's board executive committee held weekly calls to support the staff and work through contingency planning. There was particular concern, because of the nature of the charges, of a negative impact on our joint education programs. The education directors spoke with their key contacts and found that no negative affects materialized. After a turbulent several months of board deliberations behind closed doors, CEPA's Artistic Director, Sean Donaher, stepped in and was named Interim Executive Director. Nine months after the crisis broke, he was named permanent Executive Director by the CEPA board, helping to close that difficult chapter.

## Lessons Learned

- Think through the kind of crises your organization might face: scandal, fraud, death, or illness of a leader or a program participant, extreme weather disruption, theft, or fire. This step alone led us to establish, for example, a more comprehensive off-site computer backup protocol and a master list of all passwords for every computer and program in the agency.
- An unexpected leadership succession can happen in any organization. Take the time now to do an emergency succession plan. A great example which we used to focus our thinking can be found at [http://www.theallianceny.org/nysarts/Arts%20Forward%20Archive/Emergency\\_Succession\\_Plan\\_Template.pdf](http://www.theallianceny.org/nysarts/Arts%20Forward%20Archive/Emergency_Succession_Plan_Template.pdf).
- Develop a crisis response protocol following the basic principles of crisis communication which forces you to answer questions such as these:
  - Who will act as spokesperson (one voice) in the event of a crisis?
  - Who will be part of the 'crisis response team', called together in the event of a crisis to chart a unified response?
  - How will you ensure that the organization's first priority and key focus remains those served? That essential work continues being done with minimal interruption?
  - How will communication be conducted with key stakeholders including the organization's own staff? (For example, do responses to this question include eliminating the use of email for discussing anything that could be damaging to anyone involved?).
- Bring these topics to the table for discussion with your board and collaborators, with the understanding that you hope they'll never be needed, but that the organization will be better off for having at least discussed in advance.

## Conclusion

When organizations enter into an administrative collaboration or strategic partnership, they join destinies in a significant way. This is not without its risks and is one of the many reasons why such endeavors must be rooted in mutual trust and be provided with the appropriate foundation, structure, and support to give them every chance of success. While you can never anticipate all the twists and turns in the road, it is our hope that by sharing this experience of challenges over the past three years, we can reinforce the value of collaboration as a force of stability through challenging times, and provide others starting down this road themselves with all the advantages of those who have gone before.

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1. Now having completed its sixth year, this effort, "The Art of Collaboration," has been honored with a National Certificate of Recognition

from the Kellogg and Lodestar Foundations; profiled in two national publications (see *Board Member Magazine* (2009, July/August) and *CultureWork: A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers* (2009, January, <http://culturework.uoregon.edu>); and sought out by organizations throughout New York State and across the country for advice and technical assistance. For more information about each individual organization, go to their websites: Just Buffalo Literary Center <http://www.justbuffalo.org>; CEPA Gallery <http://www.cepagallery.org>; and Big Orbit Gallery <http://www.bigorbitgallery.org>. [[back to text](#)]

2. <http://artspacebuffalo.info/info.html>

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**Laurie Dean Torrell** is the Executive Director of Just Buffalo Literary Center, Buffalo, New York. Torrell has 25 years experience in non-profit organizations spanning health care, human services, and the arts. Since becoming director nine years ago, Torrell has worked with staff and board to implement a new mission statement, strategic plan, focused operational direction, and two strategic collaborations – one focused on administrative/back office support and one focused on shared space. Under her leadership, the organization has secured competitive national, state, and local grants to double the budget and bring expanded literary programming to the local community including the Babel Literary Lecture series featuring readings and conversations with the world's foremost international authors, and Writing With Light, a joint education program developed with CEPA Gallery. She can be contacted at [Ldean@justbuffalo.org](mailto:Ldean@justbuffalo.org).

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