

July 2012. Vol. 16, No. 3. – The Evolution of Youth Leadership in a Mid-Sized Community Arts Organization: Reed Davaz McGowan



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By CultureWork, on July 10th, 2012

In this issue, Reed Davaz McGowan examines the change that has occurred to the Latino community-based organization Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP) since her 2010 *CultureWork* article, “[Understanding the Social Service Needs in Community Arts Organizations](#).” In the previous article, Davaz McGowan, as NSNP’s Executive Director, introduced the ways in which the organization had worked with youth to promote civic engagement through the arts in Philadelphia. Davaz McGowan now reflects on the organization’s substantial growth over the last two and a half years of what she calls “youth leadership development” within NSNP. She shares how this development has continued to evolve into a deep engagement for youth within the community, leading and informing major decisions, organizational growth, staff refinement, and innovation.

Julie and Robert Voelker-Morris
Editors

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The Evolution of Youth Leadership in a Mid-Sized Community Arts Organization

[Reed Davaz McGowan](#)

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Walking through the doors at Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP), one feels the excitement and passion of a collaborative, creative youth space. The last several years have been focused on articulating and institutionalizing what exactly makes that possible. By taking risks and expanding our programs, we were able to attract many new funders, serve

many more youth, and become more visible in Philadelphia's youth landscape. This would not have been possible without having the entire organization on board with these changes and our vision.

In the 2010 *CultureWork* article, "Understanding the Social Service Needs in Community Arts Organizations", I wrote about my work with youth in NSNP as a Philadelphia Latino community-based organization, reflecting on my arrival as the Executive Director and the challenges of building youth-driven community arts programming in a community to which I had just entered. Since the article was written, NSNP has transformed into a youth-centric, youth-driven organization with our constituency's energy and innovative nature moving the organization forward. Three primary factors contributed to this transformation and the institutionalization of youth voice in organizational decision-making: 1) program expansion, 2) a youth-centric vision for the organization, and 3) the articulation of core values and hiring practices that established youth as equal partners in decision-making throughout the organization's operations and programs.

360-Degree Program Expansion

At the beginning of my tenure in 2007, fewer than ten youth over 14 were engaged in after school programs. Now, about 65 youth, ages 14-21, participate daily during the academic year through programming including Art Factory, which places youth in hands-on roles as artists, arts administrators, and exhibitors through exhibit creation, curation, and production; the Youth Internship Program that allows youth to develop green, creative,



Art Factory and Prodigies youth presenting to YOUTHadelphia, the youth-led funding initiative of The Philadelphia Foundation

nonprofit, and childcare skills through active staff-like roles; and, the currently piloting Youth Advisory Council, all in addition to Prodigies, the silk screening, and civic engagement program described in 2010. As a result of strategic decisions at the right time, these substantial expansions took place.

Economic Changes Driving Expansion

NSNP, like many organizations, suffered from the economic downturn that was catching up to foundations, donors, and other funding streams. As a small to mid-sized organization with a budget of around \$350,000, it was difficult to compete for funding with larger organizations that were able to serve substantially more youth during a time that demanded extreme caution when doling out dollars. We experienced the loss of two major funders that prioritized larger organizations and the reduction of our City of Philadelphia youth program contract, resulting in administrative staff layoffs. At that point, we were simultaneously embarking on a strategic planning process with a lot of thought focused on where the organization would go next. This was the critical juncture that determined if we would essentially grow or die as an organization.

Timely Expansion

Embarking on a strategic plan to decipher the next steps leading from this critical juncture, NSNP explored the organization both internally through board and staff perspectives and externally from an array of stakeholders including funders, partner organizations, competing organizations, participants, parents, and other community members. During this process, the board and staff had agreed that remaining small and concentrating on our existing programs was the desired direction rather than growing the size of the organization. However, the external feedback yielded a resounding desire for NSNP to expand services so that more youth and families could participate in our high quality programs. This led to a paradigm shift that growth may in fact be desirable. Coupled with the consideration of the organization's seemingly dismal future "as is", great freedom to take risks existed. Almost immediately, we were offered temporary funding for youth workforce development programming from Philadelphia Youth Network.

Art Factory

Pulling on teaching artists Althea Baird and Manny Gonzalez, who had been involved with NSNP for several years through the City of



Picture by Monique Brand (Art Factory buttons for sale at an NSNP event in our gardens)

Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, we developed Art Factory as a summer work program to build new artists and new arts administrators. The program was wildly successful from the perspectives of the youth, funders, and City of Philadelphia's Out-of-School Time Initiative staff. With the success of the 6-week program, the City of Philadelphia opened the door to continue funding the new program in addition to the long-sought support for Prodigies. Art Factory gained its own new private funders almost immediately and paved the way for other creative job skill development programming. By establishing Art Factory and having the support of the strategic plan's stakeholder feedback, we began to set ourselves apart from other youth-serving organizations by emphasizing our innovation, willingness to adapt to a changing environment, and understanding of the importance of institutionalizing youth voice.

A Youth-Centric Vision for the Organization

During the summer months of 2010 when Art Factory was being established and we were increasing the number of youth served, our strategic planning process was coming to an end. What had begun as a last-ditch attempt to find solid financial footing had rapidly changed through the program expansions described above. At the beginning of the strategic planning process, the board of directors and staff had agreed that the mission of the organization and desire to continue engaging youth and families in the community did not need to be examined during the planning process. So, after the plan was complete, the consultant delivered the strategic plan's first draft that reflected the somber state of the organization several months earlier.

The plan, although well written, did not explore where we wanted to go programmatically, but

only how to build a more sound organization based on nonprofit best practices and resource development efforts. It did not reflect the risk-taking, programmatic growth and the vibrancy and enthusiasm of young energy that now filled up the organization. NSNP had new life. It had new staff and new program participants. It had new recognition and financial supports. It needed a new vision to lead us and working with the board, staff, and consultant, a vision statement was created:

NSNP will serve as a vehicle for youth voice and youth-led activity in the Norris Square neighborhood and the larger Philadelphia community.

This vision has been the foundation for NSNP's ongoing work since late 2010 and is the framework for decision-making around existing programs and new programs, as well as how we consider our role within our immediate community and throughout Philadelphia.

The Articulation of Core Values

With the recently revamped strategic plan and vision for NSNP, the staff contemplated how youth leadership and youth-adult partnership should be institutionalized. A group of staff, including youth who had informally been in leadership roles, collaboratively developed a list of values that would subsequently inform our work. The following list is comprised of those collaborative values:

- We, people of all ages, work together as equal partners.
- We facilitate youth being the leaders, drivers and decision-makers of our programs and activities.
- We celebrate and welcome the differences between us and see them as opportunities.
- We communicate openly, positively, and constructively.
- We use what we learn at Norris Square Neighborhood Project to be role models and change makers in our community.
- We are a positive and supportive family.
- We encourage innovation, creativity, and group problem-solving.
- We respect each other.
- We love what we do here!



Juan Delgado from Art Factory (NSNP photo credit)

Putting the Core Values and Vision to Work

Working from this list of core values, the staff explored challenges that surfaced during the hiring processes of new staff positions. Although NSNP has been dedicated to hiring from within its community, there have not always been local skilled applicants for leadership positions, such as the Director of Development. Frustrated by the lack of available talent, the staff brainstormed how to train Latino/a youth to enter fields related to nonprofit administration and the creative economy. We began to apply for funding for a new type of youth program, an internship program, to place youth in staff-like roles throughout the organization such as in publicity, resource development, classroom instruction, volunteer coordination, and several other key positions. Receiving funding from BNY Mellon's Mid-

Atlantic Charitable Trusts, the Youth Internship Program was implemented in September 2011.

There were other areas for youth to be engaged in meaningful leadership roles as well. NSNP experienced the transition of three key youth program staff positions and because youth leadership had been developed over the last several years, former youth program participants “graduated” into these positions. Saul Zayas, mentioned in the 2010 *CultureWork* article, was hired as the Prodigies Director in the summer of 2011 after Cathryn Carkhuff left to pursue a graduate degree. Two other alumni were selected as teachers for the elementary and middle school after school program, bringing invaluable experience as program participants, community members, and young leaders to the table.

Youth Advisory Council Established

With the transformation of NSNP from a youth-serving organization to a youth-driven organization in 2010-2011, it was time to test the waters again for developing a youth advisory council in late 2011. This time, instead of fewer than 10 youth, we had over 60 from which to select. Youth applicants reflected a broad diversity of backgrounds, ages, interests, and ways that they had been involved with NSNP. In 2012, the Youth Advisory Council created a constitution with its founding five members and participated in the selection and hiring of our Director of Youth Programs and Director of Garden Programs. It continues to be a challenge to institutionalize the Youth Advisory Council because not very many models exist in Philadelphia. In the years that come, the group of youth will take on more roles as leaders in NSNP’s programs, in their community, and with NSNP’s governance.

Lingering Questions

My greatest hope for NSNP had been to harness youth talent and energy throughout the organization so that youth would become stewards alongside the staff and board of directors. We have come a long way since my first failed attempt at a Youth Advisory Council in 2007. By having both internal and external stakeholders understanding and articulating the need for youth leaders throughout NSNP, there is new clarity of the organization’s purpose and path. The institutionalization of the vision has been an ongoing process that continues to unfold.

Many challenges have arisen throughout the ride. While our growth made NSNP’s future brighter, there is natural tension with growth from a \$350,000 budget to nearly \$840,000 over 3 years as we strive to maintain our grassroots feel. How does this growth affect our ability to have young people as decision-makers? And most recently, I have discovered a significant challenge that emerged from hiring promising young leaders as staff members. In



NSNP's Youth Advisory Council on stage at their Youth Arts Showcase that they planned and produced

corporate environments, people can enter at the ground and work their way up; however, nonprofit ladders do not similarly exist due to the small sizes and lack of funds available for promotion. As we are building more youth leaders, where do they go once they have finished our programs? Now, my work is in navigating these challenging questions.

Reed Davaz McGowan joined Philadelphia-based Norris Square Neighborhood Project as the Executive Director in 2007. Norris Square Neighborhood Project



Executive Director Reed Davaz McGowan and Saul Zayas prepare to present to Impact100 Foundation

(www.myneighborhoodproject.org) is a youth-driven community organization that explores Latino culture through the arts and gardening. At age 17, she experienced her defining moment as an arts administrator, realizing her role in presenting the arts to young audiences. Since then, her career and education have focused on youth leadership development in the arts and making the arts more accessible to community. Reed is a current participant in National Guild for Community Arts Education's Community Arts Education Leadership Institute (CAELI) and was a 2010 fellow in Bryn Mawr's Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute (NELI). She received her Master of Arts degree in Community Arts administration from the University of Oregon in 2007, earning the Walton Research Scholarship for her research on youth involvement in arts administration. In 2002, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish Language and Literature from the University of Oregon. Reed and her husband, Nat, live nearby Norris Square Neighborhood Project with their dog Pork Chop and two cats, where she enjoys her graphic design work and newly found joy in sculpting small animals out of clay.

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