



Building Peaceful Communities through the Arts 2007 Conference - October 18-19, 2007 Summary Report

CONFERENCE EXPLORED CONNECTIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITY BUILDING AND THE ARTS

Thank you to all who attended Building Peaceful Communities Through the Arts, a conference that explored the power of the arts in building diverse, collaborative and healthy communities which exemplify non-violence and inclusion, while working toward a culture of peace. More than 150 people participated in the two-day event that took place October 18 and 19, 2007. Thank you to the Jane Addams-Hull House Museum which hosted the kick-off panel discussion on Thursday, and to the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, which co-presented the full day of speakers and workshops at the Chicago Cultural Center on Friday, October 19. Business leaders, funders, a police officer, students, artists, teachers and more came together to enjoy national and local speakers and hands-on workshops to guide the discussion around the parallels and connections between community building and arts processes.

Nearly 70 guests packed the dining hall at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum on Thursday for the panel discussion on "The Values and Ethics of Community Art." Indira Johnson, Executive Director at Shanti opened the evening and introduced Sunny Fischer, Executive Director of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, the originating sponsor for the conference. Sunny "is a powerful voice for community-based institutions, has championed funding, and served as an advocate for bringing the arts to under-resourced communities," said Johnson by way of introduction. Fischer, in turn, introduced the evening's moderator, Lisa Yun Lee, Executive Director at Hull-House, and commended Lee for her passion and energy. "You don't meet Lisa," said Fischer, "she happens to you!" And, true to form, Lee kept the questions flying and the discussion jumping. Panelists were Arlene Goldbard, Juana Guzman, and Andres Hernandez. Goldbard framed the ethical question from the point of view of "cultural citizenship." "Inherent in the idea of cultural citizenship," said Goldbard, "is diversity, equality of cultures, culture as a crucible of societal transformation, and a means of emancipation...the process is as important as product." Hernandez, an artist who also teaches at the School of the Art Institute, talked about art as a social force, and the power of the process as equally important to the product. Guzman, Vice President, National Museum of Mexican Art, talked about the balance between being "top down" or "bottom up" and the importance of talking "with" community as opposed to "to" community when creating community art. Participant Linda Doyle said, "I really liked (Andres Hernandez') concepts of social public art." Thanks to Paul Teruel from the Center for Community Arts Partnerships at Columbia College, the session was filmed by CAN-TV and will be running on channel 23 beginning on November 25, 2007.

More than 150 conference attendees convened early on Friday, to check in and sign-up for a workshop, before heading into the Claudia Cassidy Theater for the morning opening session. Shanti Board member Wendy Colby got the morning session started by re-introducing Indira Johnson, who talked about the Shanti process of community building through the arts. "Peace is an action verb," said Johnson. "Using hands, imagination and creativity to make art allows us to break down barriers and promote a world of tolerance and peace." Johnson then introduced Arlene Goldbard, back from the previous night's panel discussion, to lead the morning opening session on the value and impact of community building through the arts. "Intellectually superb," is how Pat Allen from the School of the Art Institute, described Goldbard.

Conference attendees then headed off to the hands-on workshops, for theater games, singing, painting and more, with projects that showcased the Shanti method of teaching non-violence and consensus building via the lens of the arts, using projects from six communities: Lead artists for the workshops included theatre artist Jasmin Cardenas whose workshop “Dividing Lines” took its inspiration from North Lawndale and Little Village; hip hop, spoken word and percussion artist Mars Caulton led the workshop “It Takes a Village,” based on a school project in Evanston; Monika Kimrey, worked with mixed media, collage, ceramics and found objects to focus on Englewood, with “The Lead Poisoning Blues”; visual artist and muralist Diana Solis led a workshop entitled “Community Blessings” based on a project in Back of the Yards; theatre artist Tiffany Bullard worked on the topic of “How Do YOU Reduce Youth Gang Violence”, bouncing off ideas from a youth led project in Uptown, and visual and batik artist Alpha Bruton led “Joining Hands: Our School, Our Community, Our World”, rooted in a school project in Albany Park. Students and community leaders who have worked jointly with the artists on the projects also came to provide insight into the process in community.

Everyone reconvened in the Claudia Cassidy Theater just before lunch as Janet Carl Smith, Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Cultural Affairs introduced Keynote speaker Lily Yeh. “I am thankful for the blessing of the abandoned lot” said Yeh, in describing the work that she did to turn abandoned lots in North Philadelphia into community gardens, arts centers, and parks. Yeh’s presentation, driven by slides and images from her projects from around the world, was universally enjoyed by all who attended. “Fabulous, inspiring, mobilizing, passionate, funky,” was one participant’s evaluation, while another said, “Words fail me! She is amazing.”

The afternoon sessions featured an Open Space Technology format led by William Cleveland, a writer, musician and founder/Director of the Center for the Study of Art and Community. Anyone at the conference could establish a topic for a session—you had to attend your own session, and lead the discussion with others who might join you. In all, 10 topics were proposed, and formed the basis for the afternoon discussions:

Session A: How can we provoke leadership in today’s youth?

Session B: How might we establish a formal consortium of neighborhood representatives to create a membership organization focused on resolving gang-related activities, including arts and sports activities for the community at large?

Session C: How can I find the resources I need for a community arts center?

Session D: How can artists effectively collaborate with social change activists to share and leverage our strengths in successful ventures?

Session E: “If you believe you can change your community, does that make you a dreamer?”

Session F: How to create projects from personal inspiration and not get overrun by ego so focus is on community.

Session G: How can deconstructing identity – both how you identify and how others identify you – be used to promote understanding and peace?

Session H: What are community centers and how can schools serve as community centers?

Session I: Can you develop an innovative experience/exhibit about acceptance for children.

Session J: How can instructors of higher education better serve the community?

Bill Cleveland ended the day by spontaneously yet eloquently summarizing the topics of the day with an original poem during the closing session, and, Jayve Montgomery from the Chicago Park District made an audio recording of the 'report backs.'

The positive feedback from the conference (97% who responded agreed that the conference fulfilled their expectations, and 97% also picked up at least one idea to implement in the future) is encouraging for this field of work, and to Shanti, who will host a follow up workshop in April 2008. In the meantime, conference participants can catch up or continue the flow of ideas on the post-conference forum by going to **<http://forum.shantifoundationforpeace.org>**

The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation was a founding supporter for this conference, which was co-presented by the Shanti Foundation for Peace and the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. Additional sponsors and supporters include State Farm Insurance, LISC, The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum at UIC, Polk Bros Foundation, Catholic Relief Services, Midwest, the Illinois Arts Council: A State Agency, Shore Bank, numerous individual donors and volunteers.

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