

Building Bridges: Fostering Inclusion in Cultural Organizations

By: Victoria Ford

The Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission, with the help of consultant Cristen Piatnochka of Barnegat, has created a program called "Building Bridges: Fostering Inclusion in Cultural Organizations," as a framework for organizations of all sizes to have difficult but important conversations about diversity and inclusion; to identify areas within their organizations that could use a fresh approach.

The county is working with partner organizations and providing to each, with state funding, a community engagement assistant, who serves as a paid intern in a mutually beneficially arrangement: Community Engagement Assistants gain valuable firsthand experience and knowledge while helping organizations reach underrepresented audiences and emerging professionals thanks to their youthful perspective and technology/social media savvy.

Piatnochka outlined the program's four underlying principles: encouraging dialogue, building capacity, developing strong relationships, and professional development. It's a case study, she said, from which key themes, inspiration and ideas can be drawn.

To shed light on what the program is, Commission Director Tim Hart clarified what it's not: theBuilding Bridges program is not a curriculum-based diversity/sensitivity training; it's a conversation. It provides a dedicated safe space in which to discuss needs/wants and how to implement changes – to think and talk about diversity and inclusion in the broadest possible sense, i.e. a shared humanity. It's also not tool-driven, Piatnochka added. Rather, it's a thoughtful examination of an organization's culture and history, in order to identify audiences they haven't yet served.

"It's not 'one size fits all,'" Hart continued. Organizations may feel threatened or shamed by the idea of having to be taught about diversity and inclusion; but program facilitators want to help them open and broaden their minds and to provide whatever resources might help them achieve their specific goals. Effective change, he said, calls for adaptability and creativity.

The pandemic has prompted some organizations to reevaluate their operations, both for their own betterment and for that of the communities they serve, Piatnochka pointed out. COVID has also given some organizations a helpful nudge toward a digital world and they find they are warming to the convenience and building confidence with it, she said.

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Central are the ideas of reaching out, strengthening ties, and leveraging relationships, Piatnochka said. Organizations' connection to their audiences is key to providing the best programming; so, they're being encouraged to take advantage of social media platforms, and listen and look to find gaps where needs might be better met.

While the program won't necessarily yield a tangible "deliverable" at the end, Piatnochka said the purpose is to grease the wheels of dialogue as a function of change and progress, particularly in the topic areas of inclusion and accessibility. "Just because conversations are difficult doesn't mean we shouldn't have them," she noted. To have an inclusive space, to have a sense of equity, everyone must value each other's perspectives and embrace diverse opinions, she said. Hart acknowledged some resistance is to be expected. Building Bridges is an effort not to force diversity on anyone, but to encourage.

The results of the program so far have shown promise. The participating cultural organizations are leaning on each other in unexpected ways – sharing ideas that have worked for them, pitching suggestions.

Steps toward success might look like hiring high school or college kids to give history programs; putting history talks online; investing in technology upgrades; building a virtual library to give public access to research materials; offering virtual programming for children (which also expands an organization's geographical reach).

"In a virtual world, we're able to connect with international audiences," Piatnochka said.

Piatnochka said the county is looking to expand the program in the summer and fall. Anyone with feedback or questions is urged to contact her at: cristen.piatnochka@gmail.com.

