

Building Bridges in Cultural Organizations - by Cristen Piatnochka

Building Bridges: Fostering Inclusion in Cultural Organizations encouraged 10 local arts and history organizations to center diversity efforts in their work. The project convened over 50 virtual meetings to learn, listen, and share. This initiative included adding paid interns to the project team through the development of the Community Engagement Assistant (CEA) program. The project launched in August 2020 and ended in February 2021. Throughout the eighteen months, the partner organizations worked to identify ways their institutions could become more inclusive. The CEA program offered students and recent graduates a paid opportunity to work in the cultural field. The CEAs served as critical team members who helped to facilitate conversations, offered project suggestions, engaged in program planning, and created digital resources.

To ensure diversity conversations would continue beyond the project meetings the CEAs developed a resource list at the end of phase I. Partner organizations benefited from professional development opportunities where they could learn from state, regional, and national colleagues. This left the organizations feeling empowered on how to create more inclusive spaces. In Phase II, the 10 partner organizations developed a project that focused on diversity, equity, and access. Building Bridges encouraged partnerships to grow and support the rich Ocean County cultural community.

Through regular dialogue, the organizations focused on how to build relationships that were centered on inclusivity. As a result, the partner organizations successfully launched 18 new initiatives that amplified diverse stories, increased access, and created community connections. The success of this project continues on as the partner organizations have created diversity committees and formed new school partnerships.

The articles that follow describe the project-programs that were developed, implemented, and executed by the partner organizations:

****

Surflight Theatre & Brick Children's Community Theatre - by Cristen Piatnochka

Theater is a wonderful way to build connections. In Phase II of Building Bridges, Surflight Theatre and Brick Children's Community Theatre worked together to develop new school partnerships. In partner meetings, the organizations highlighted the importance and benefit of arts engagement for youth. They recognized the current need of bringing live performances to young people. The hope was to inspire school-age children through the beauty of art.

Brick Children’s Community Theatre moved to a new venue in Southern Ocean County during the course of this project. As a result, Brick Children’s Theater focused on collaborating with the local school districts. They invited school drama clubs and art programs to attend a performance free of charge. Similarly, Surflight Theatre also created a grant-funded program to subsidize ticket purchase for local school districts. Both organizations were able to use Building Bridges support to diversify their audiences and create inclusive programming that allowed young people to participate in arts education.

Continued on page 21

John F. Peto Studio Museum & Toms River Artist Community - by Carly Conticchio

The Building Bridges program has inspired many organizations across the county to rethink their approach for reaching new audiences. The John F. Peto Museum and the Toms River Artist Community (TRAC) undertook projects that centered on teaching children about art and art history. While TRAC and Peto had vastly different programs their goal was the same: to encourage children to create and learn about art.

For the Peto Museum's project, they partnered with Hugh G. Boyd Elementary School in Seaside Heights. In addition to teaching the kids about renowned artist John F. Peto, they encouraged the children to express themselves through art. The Peto museum was generous enough to supply the young artists with supplies from watercolor paints, to crayons.

TRAC took a different approach when it came to expanding their audience. They decided the best way to reach new artists was through make-and-take crafts. Essentially, the volunteers at TRAC held classes for children and gave each of them an art goody bag to take home at the end of the lesson. The children were allowed to use the supplies however they wanted. TRAC encouraged them to create art on their own time as well as in the classroom. Lisa Ciferetto, the president of TRAC said the following about the classes: "We had fun, the kids had fun, and it was a great experience for all of us!" She also said that the program reached many kids and they plan to continue the classes throughout 2022.

****

Ocean County Artists' Guild and Pine Shores Art Association - by Ellie Kissell

Through the Building Bridges project, both the Ocean County Artists' Guild and Pine Shores Art Association enhanced their social media presences and garnered a larger, more diverse audience, which was especially important as pandemic recovery began in earnest.

Reaching out to the younger generation, The Ocean County Artists' Guild emphasized hosting age-inclusive activities -- from Make-and-Take crafts for families at Sailfest in September to an open-mic night for the community to share poetry in October -- spreading their joy of all things art-related with an ever-expanding audience. Sharing and creating art together across different generations added a greater depth of meaning to the pieces that members created -- whether it was at one of the summer Plein Air sessions in the community or even in response to a Facebook prompt at home. The "Passport to Art" program, beginning with a Japanese carp wind-sock project in September and continuing across different cultures as time progressed, was a clever celebration of world art styles that allowed entire families to create and learn together, hopefully increasing the levels of compassion and understanding among them. Working with members of the Ocean County Artists' Guild showed me just how much art groups would love to build connections with the younger generation, and it was definitely enjoyable to assist in drawing people from all ages together with social media posts.

Pine Shores celebrated diversity with their Artists of Color art history lecture series during Building Bridges -- beginning with a lecture detailing the accomplishments and lives of African-American artists from the early days of the nation to the present, the organization showed just how important the contributions of People of Color were and still are to the development of America's artistic landscape. By featuring these artists, the lecture series shined on figures who may have previously been overlooked time and time again, including those like Augusta Savage and Henry Ossawa Tanner, capturing the community's attention and hopefully setting an example for other art organizations in terms of inclusivity and representation. The work of Pine Shores during the series is incredibly important as it shows a turning point in the thinking of art organizations -- it was certainly fun to see the art association celebrate the differences that make us a diverse nation through art and culture.

Continued on page 22

Building Bridges from page 21

With the pandemic beginning to draw to a close as more and more members of the community receive their vaccinations, encouraging a return to public life and social interaction is as important as ever. Art is a way for those from all walks of life to communicate and befriend one another, allowing for everyone to convey their innermost thoughts and feelings to those around them. Especially after a worldwide health crisis, art can provide a pastime that draws people together after they have drifted apart -- and my experiences during the Building Bridges program show that the art organizations in Ocean County are doing their utmost to ensure that the community becomes stronger than ever.

****

Stafford Township Historical Society and Lacey Historical Society - by Ellie Kissell

The partnership of Lacey Historical Society and Stafford Historical Society was one characterized by cooperation and strong levels of communication; seeing the two historical groups work closely together and take inspiration from one another was fulfilling to be a part of, with the programs that their partnership led to hopefully leading to a more inclusive historical community in Ocean County.

The Dr. James Still program, co-hosted by both groups in coordination with the Dr. James Still Historic Office and Education Center, was a particular focus of this pairing, and for good reason; by having lectures featuring the importance of a doctor who served his community and New Jersey as a whole in the 1800s, overcoming both poverty and racial discrimination, Lacey and Stafford Historical Societies emphasized the contributions of People of Color to our history, reminding us that often-overlooked stories are just as important as well-known figures like George Washington or Benjamin Franklin.

Also of note were Lacey's preservation workshops, with the aim of showcasing local history, which encouraged residents to share material from their families and learn how to preserve documents and photographs for generations to come. Their motto, "Your family, our history," captured the essence of the Building Bridges program by reaching out to the community in order to keep history alive. History through participation is not simply past – by teaching those in the county how to interact and engage with their unique stories, it becomes a dynamic subject capable of teaching empathy and understanding among those who may otherwise never have learned from one another.

The promotional material for Stafford's 2022 Summer Concert series also reached out to the community in a beneficial way, fostering bonds by encouraging residents to support music artists in a post-pandemic world. After isolating ourselves from one another for the past few years to prevent the spread of illness, in-person events may seem daunting – and outdoor programs are a step toward restoring a sense of normalcy in the public sphere.

The discussions surrounding modernization – from building a robust online and social media presence, to digitizing newsletters and encouraging digital membership payments – were exciting to hear, as they showcased the ability of local historical groups to adapt to our ever-changing technological environment and include all age groups, no matter their current background with technology. Using Canva to design membership flyers was an enriching experience, as finding the best graphics possible to make the option of membership "pop" to the community meant learning what designs would appeal to the widest range of people and the language that would encourage active engagement in historical societies; the layouts also offered a more "modern" option for both groups to gain a wider range of members.

The Building Bridges Town Hall, held at the end of January 2022, showcased how each of the participating groups in Ocean County did their utmost to foster diversity and inclusion in their current and future programming, and the cooperation of the Stafford and Lacey Historical Societies was one that holds promise for a more equal future.

Continued on page 23

Building Bridges from page 22

Navy Lakehurst Historical Society & Ocean County Historical Society - by Victoria Scannella

For Building Bridges Phase II, I had the opportunity to work with the Ocean County Historical Society and the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society. Through the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, I was partnered with these organizations to help them develop and work on engaging their social media followers in order to strike up meaningful conversations and promote interactions with new and old followers. This project had begun with the intention of a learning experience for both the organizations and the community engagement assistants working with them, and what came of these interactions was much more. I learned how to communicate new ideas, things I was passionate about, in a way that made sense and could be constructive as needed. The organizations had the opportunity to learn more about social media from those who use it the most.

At the first meeting with both Navy Lakehurst Historical Society and the Ocean County Historical Society, they were able to communicate clearly about what they envisioned the project to look like, as well as what the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission and I were interested in exploring with both groups. After having looked through Navy Lakehurst's social media pages and website before the first meeting, I had an idea of what was working well and what could be improved on. The first meeting concluded with a plan for moving forward. Initially, the website was difficult to navigate on mobile devices. It was a quick fix and the issue was resolved after bringing it to their attention. Once those improvements were made, the website was much easier to navigate. They were incredibly excited about the designs I had sent them, the colors I'd used, and whenever I asked for photos, they were prompt with the return of many interesting photos. Together we were able to advertise the events that were upcoming and get more attention from followers, which meant the posts were reaching a wider audience. Seeing their improvements and the success that it brought them was incredible from start to finish. I can't wait to see what Navy Lakehurst accomplishes going forward!

With Ocean County Historical Society, they were also very eager to get started on the project. Though they had different changes to make and improvements than Navy Lakehurst, they were just as excited and also accomplished amazing things. Specifically, their event, History Day! I had made a flyer that was featured in an earlier publication of the Out And About, advertising their event! It was a huge success and it was so wonderful to hear them talk about how excited they were and how receptive the community was. As we moved further into the project, they made further strides with their social media. Their website was simple to navigate, but some tabs did not load or lead to dead ends. With a quick email, it was resolved quite promptly and had no further issues!

As for my personal experience, having worked both on Phase I and Phase II of the projects, I have immensely enjoyed my time working with the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission. They are all so friendly and passionate about the projects they are working on and the community they serve. I have now served as a Community Engagement Assistant for over a year and been a part of the ADA reviewer team. I have loved the time I spent working with the Commission and would absolutely do it again if there was ever a position available. Being a history major at school and passionate about outreach and communication with those in small communities, this opportunity was priceless and immensely enjoyable, since it led me down paths I had never thought to explore previously. As it turns out, I really enjoy marketing and creating social media-related content! I have enjoyed the conversations and the opportunities I was given.

The building bridges project, overall, was an amazing experience and a great opportunity for everyone involved. The organizations had the opportunity to learn and grow in terms of both outreach and their tools available for that outreach. It was a wonderful way to promote engagement with the community and an opportunity to jump at if given the chance again. Working with the team members of Ocean County Historical was such a pleasure, both they and Navy Lakehurst's teams were so kind and open to our ideas, it was so wonderful working with both organizations.