

## **Civic Engagement Written Reflection: @ The Table Virtual Arts Feast**

By:

Michael Dayton - Saint Paul Neighborhood Network

Cait McCluskie - Film North

Nichelle Gaumont - Saint Paul Public Libraries

Aleah Gatto - Project for Pride in Living

### **The Inspiration for Our Project**

The project originated when Michael, one of our group members, observed that there weren't many people with disabilities coming to their site (SPNN). They wanted to do outreach into disability communities to start building relationships with different people and organizations, which would hopefully allow a pathway for those groups to continue using CTEP as a resource. Michael originally presented the project as a film festival for deaf and blind groups, but after the group spoke with quite a few disability organizations (such as the Minnesota Council on Disability, Avivo, Midwest Special Services, Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, and more), we realized that we wanted to include more of the disability community and more artistic media. Part of our inspiration and excitement about this project came from our work with David Fenley and Linda Gremillion at the Minnesota Council on Disability (MCD) who opened many doors for us with artists and organizations, provided accessibility information and resources and laid the groundwork for what the festival could look like.

### **What We Accomplished**

When we started this project, our group members had not had a lot of experience working in accessibility or with communities with disabilities. While our service with CTEP was focused on technology access, this project helped us to think about accessibility (and how accessibility can be practiced) from a disability lens. Through research, outreach and the development of new programming, we were able to connect folks with disabilities to a virtual art celebration and create an arts showcase that could be shared within the community as well as with the general public.

One of our main goals for this project was to build new relationships and partnerships with organizations and disabled communities that would continue to last after our event. We started with Dreamland Arts, after being introduced to their organization and owner/operator Leslye Orr through one of our Corps Days. The second organization we reached out to, who eventually became our community partner, was the Minnesota Council on Disability (MCD). We established a working relationship with two of the staff members, Linda Gremillion and David Fenley, who were crucial in the planning of our event. We also consulted with Fresh Eye Arts, Avivo, the Walker accessibility team, Springboard for the Arts, and the former Minnesota VSA. Each organization provided insights into its experience with planning virtual programs during

Covid-19, the logistics of setting up accommodations, and expanded our network of contacts. Hopefully future CTEP cohorts will be able to utilize these seven organizational connections, either during Corps Day trainings or as an accessibility resource for site programming.

Our meetings with organizations and practicing artists also helped us gain background knowledge on the history of disability rights and activism in the U.S. Given that the main mission of the MCD is to advocate for policy change, it was apparent that the struggle for equality in public spaces is on-going. We learned that access/inaccessibility is designed and implemented. It is not the default for spaces, virtual or physical, to be accessible to people with disabilities. Rather, the dominant culture of design and aesthetics prioritizes the convenience of able-bodied people over people with disabilities. Many disabled folks have removed these barriers themselves instead of waiting for policy change to take place, through DIY modifications and community media projects. As our group members are not a part of these communities, we sought to create a project that would work alongside disabled artists to facilitate an event that practiced accessibility throughout its planning and execution.

Planning the event: We applied for two grants, one with the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council and the Commission for Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing. We also set up a GoFundMe account and successfully raised \$305. In addition, we built an accessible website for our event. In order to promote our event, we presented at the Saint Paul Public Library monthly management team meeting and interviewed with Sam Jasmine on KFAI's show *Disability and Progress*. We are also coordinating a post-event interview on Disability Viewpoints at SPNN.

Executing the event: Our event took place over the weekend of July 16th through July 18th, 2021. Parts of the event were streamed from the SPNN studio, and Michael helped our other featured artists, Gabriel and Pierre, broadcast their workshops from their homes. Despite a lot of anticipation and hesitancy about whether things would run smoothly, our project was ultimately very successful! By July 16th, we had fourteen registrations for the event. Our actual turnout ended up being lower, but it still feels like a huge accomplishment to have hosted the events. We also recorded everything, which will allow more people to see it in the future.



*Video still of Alison Bergblom Johnson and Cait McCluskie standing in front of black curtains in the SPNN studio, conducting Alison's storytelling workshop.*

## The Impact of Our Project

Our project aimed to bridge the digital divide for people with disabilities that may not always have access to virtual arts events. While part of the festival included art workshops that incorporated digital skills, the focus of our event was online community celebration. Attendees were able to view art from disabled artists and learn about their process, participate in workshops and ask questions during the panel discussion. We hoped the accessibility practices of the events would bring awareness to virtual accommodation practices for those who might not have been familiar (for example, audio describing oneself as part of your introduction while speaking on Zoom).

While we were not necessarily helping artists/attendees find employment, four artists were compensated for their participation in our event. We also had a total of five outside participants join our workshops and panel over the weekend.



*Video still of our art showcase on Zoom. Artist Lynda Mullen holds up a framed, colorful abstract painting while sitting in front of another abstract painting hanging on the wall behind her.*

## Meeting Our Project Goals

We do think the project accomplished what we set out to do! We collaborated with disability organizations, we worked with (and paid) professional artists, and we were able to do it all from a virtual platform. However, with more time and resources, the festival could be greatly improved--particularly in regards to participation and digital platforming. If artists and participants were given more time to submit their work for the festival's galleries, we would have been able to show more exhibitions and host larger workshops. A fatigue associated with online events is

valid, so more time would either give us a chance to transition it into a live, in-person event or to improve and diversify our online approach.

Some of the greatest pieces of this experience were our opportunity as CTEP members to learn how disability organizations work, how to conduct an arts festival and how to coordinate an event online. While the festival has evolved from what we originally pictured, the opportunities we've been given to learn how to do something like this will be invaluable--particularly if we continue to work with non-profit organizations, in the disability community, or in a virtual setting.

## **Project Challenges and Solutions**

Our group faced a number of challenges throughout the course of this project. The main ones included: obstacles in funding, low participation, and constantly changing circumstances. This festival was very ambitious from the beginning, which also meant that it required quite a bit of planning and funding on our part. We pursued funding from the Metro Regional Arts Council, GoFundMe, and from our partner, the MCD. We were primarily concerned with funding our accessibility measures: including ASL interpreters, captioning (CART) and audio description. After having multiple meetings with a member of MRAC for help on our application, we were unfortunately deemed ineligible for the grant and did not receive the support. We were able to get a few donations on our GoFundMe and luckily, our primary funding came from MCD. Originally, the Commission of Deaf, Deafblind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans (MCDHH) was not operating for this year, and we were concerned that we would not be able to afford the accessibility measures we needed for the workshops and panels. Luckily, one of the staff members at MCD had a connection at MCDHH and was able to get the commission for the event.

One of our main challenges had been getting submissions from artists and registration from participants. Part of how we tried to increase this was to advertise the festival across multiple platforms and communicate with various art organizations (some of which helped us plan the festival in our early stages).

Another challenge throughout the process was the changes our project had undergone. The collaborative process had been a very beneficial experience overall, but it also meant that every week the festival changed a little bit and we had to adapt to new circumstances. This included changing the festival's entire scope, changing the schedule and outline, losing an artist and bringing a new one on about a week before the festival. Luckily, our team was able to roll with the punches, and we continued to adapt to how the festival changed.

## **Project Risks**

As our team began to meet regularly to discuss the possibilities of the project, we quickly identified several places where the project could fall apart. The first came from one team member who had recently partaken in the planning of an arts festival at their own site. The organizers and the artists who participated had miscommunications about how much the artists

would be compensated, which led to an abundance of unpleasantness. The team member used this anecdotal experience as an example of a great risk for our own endeavor. We determined that, to avoid the risk of insulting or disenfranchising artists, we would have to find a way to pay them sufficiently for their participation, *and* be direct from the start about how much we would be able to pay.

With the fresh understanding that there would be a financial aspect to the project, we realized another risk, which was that of hosting an event of such fiscal proportions. Would we be able to accrue enough funds to compensate the artists, publish a website, advertise and cover other contingent expenses? We created a budget early on so that we could have a better idea of what we would be able to fundraise in the coming months.

Although we took care to identify these risks from the project's early stages, and took the necessary steps of prevention, several more unforeseen risks developed as time went on. At some point, it dawned on us that we were trying to put on a festival targeted towards audiences with disabilities. Ourselves not identifying as people with disabilities, we felt grimly inauthentic; the project, itself, seemed suddenly unethical. We spoke at length with our community partners about how we felt. They were assuring and posited that, as long as we maintained the goals that we set out for--to amplify the voices of artists and provide a space for community engagement--then the project would be righteous. Still, we held this risk in our minds as a reminder to maintain these goals throughout our planning.

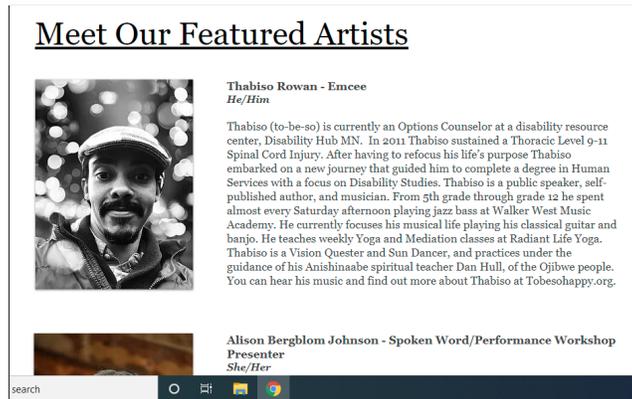
The final risk, which came out in the later stages of the project, was that of promising complete accommodation. We had pictured a fully-accessible, virtual festival equipped with ASL interpretation, CART services, audio description and any other accommodations that a registree might ask for. Fearing that we would not be able to supply these instruments, which were so vital to the project's success, we again reached out to both our community partners *and* the newly-contracted featured artists whose ideas would greatly influence our planning from that point. Again, they reassured us.

Of the several risks outlined here, most were dodged by critical group thinking: lightly challenging one another's ideas to ensure that no minor detail would slip through a crack. The risks that we did not foresee raised anxieties which were dissipated by outreach efforts: we would never have had the same confidence or success if it were not for collaborating closely with the community.

**Additional Photos!**



Screenshot of our first Zoom meeting with our to-be community partner, the Minnesota Council on Disability (MCD). Pictured from the top-left and going clockwise are Michael, Nicki, Cait, and then the two MCD representatives, Linda Gremillion and David Fenley.



Snapshots of the festival's website, [www.atthetablearts.org](http://www.atthetablearts.org), which launched in late June. The site was made using Wix and was designed by Cait with some guidance from MCD accessibility correspondent Chad Miller.

## Continuing the Project into the Future

Our partners at the MCD--who had been adamant about the project from the onset, and were instrumental in expanding its proportions--often expressed their hopes that the project's underlying sentiments would endure beyond our time as CTEPs. Some of their ideas had to do with advertising the success of the festival at their booth at the Minnesota State Fair. Other times, they shared a desire to hold the festival annually, in some capacity.

Whether or not these notions will come to fruition, we understand that our purpose in making this festival was *not* to bring something new to disability communities: we had met with so many advocates and organizations that already do exactly what we were trying to do, that is, serve artists with disabilities and form positive community connections. Our new hope is that, by simply bringing these arts organizations together, publicizing them in one space and giving their constituents-- the artists-- platforms to share their perspectives, we will raise more awareness of the plethora of resources available for individuals with disabilities and further strengthen the ties that already exist between these local organizations.

Our second hope for the endurance of the project lies in how well we can present our experience of creating an accessible, virtual festival to our fellow CTEPs. If we do it well, then current and future CTEPs may have a better understanding of how to build capacity at their sites to allow for more opportunities for engagement with individuals with disabilities. We, ourselves, have learned much from this experience that we will surely carry throughout our careers, from making an accessible Word document to recruiting accommodations for live events.

## **Takeaways**

More than a quest to build capacity, more than an entrepreneurial endeavor, this experience has shown us that civic engagement is an opportunity to build connections on a human level. These connections are positive and productive; they are formed between individuals and community organizations, as well as between the organizations, themselves, opening doors and leaving them open for future collaboration.

We began our research on the project by doing outreach, beginning with Dreamland Arts, a performance arts organization that presented at one of our Corps Days. From the skillful and well-informed leaders there, we were given the names of several other arts organizations. Meeting with representatives from those organizations introduced us to even *more*, all of them doing the work that we hoped our own project would emulate.

Generally, we learned about the structure of nonprofits on both corporate and sociopolitical levels. A nonprofit is founded by people who see a lack of something in their worlds. They come together to promote that thing: be it a human right, an environmental request or any other identified deficiency. However much sway a given movement may have over policy or culture, this particular kind of institution will be the bubbling epicenter where much of the *tangible* work is done.

In this case, the lack was (and still is, in many ways) inequity affecting every facet of the lives of people with disabilities. From physical ailments to cognitive irregularities, popular culture has always been ignorant, instilling stigmas in its own institutions that perpetuate oppression. Only when the voices of the oppressed formed a coalition and rose to such a high volume did

politicians finally feel compelled to sign human rights legislation. This was the case with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed by President H.W. Bush in 1990. Today, thirty years later, what do we have? We have stalwart organizations that perpetuate *good* practices of diversity, equity and inclusion. Love, communion and art-making! It's a beautiful thing.

We met the most amazing people and learned straight from the source the goings-on of the arts and disability community. We witnessed firsthand the support that one organization will give to another. After all: they shape their programming towards the same participants, they understand the same struggles and they align themselves towards the same outcomes. We are gratified to have gained a glimpse into such a vibrant, creative community.