

CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS: A CHALLENGE WITH MULTIPLE REWARDS

By Stephanie Golden

It may seem, in tough economic times, that people keep their focus on critical social needs and don't value the arts. Not so, says **Julie Simpson**, an arts education consultant, philanthropic advisor, and former executive director of **Urban Gateways**, a large community arts education provider in Chicago. Most people consider the arts "a key factor in what they call healthy community," Simpson maintains. "But needs such as foreclosures, jobs, health, food deserts, and crime will trump the arts." Nevertheless, people welcome the arts when they're infused in other initiatives that address those needs. According to Simpson, "We're living in a new environment that demands cross-sector partnerships. There's an opportunity here that actually ratchets up the value of the arts."

That's why community arts education organizations are exploring joining forces with other sectors whose primary mission is to address those other human needs. A cross-sector approach can include the arts in all areas of community development. In the most mature partnerships, an artist sits at the table with community planners, who in discussing crime, urban agriculture, or any other initiative, have learned to ask, "What's the arts component here?"

WHY PARTNER?

The greatest benefit of cross-sector partnering, says Simpson, is the ability to leverage resources beyond what either organization could achieve on its own. Sources of financial support are available to a community development corporation, an urban agriculture organization, or a social services agency, for example, that an arts education provider cannot access directly.

Another "hard" measure of benefit is jobs. A project in which "the arts serve as catalyst to mobilize around a community issue" can create many jobs for both youth and older people, Simpson explains. In one neighborhood, where there is tension between business owners and local youth, the small business association will pay young people this summer to construct murals on the outside walls of businesses. After agreeing with the business owners on the murals' content, the teens will work with an Urban Gateways teaching artist to prepare building surfaces, construct final sketches, and transfer images onto walls. A "soft" benefit here is the opening of a dialogue between the business owners and the teens. In a different neighborhood, a group developing a litter-free zone engaged residents to create sculptures using repurposed items. This activity brought in people who wouldn't have participated if just asked to clean up the streets. It also developed a dialogue among residents who would normally never attend community meetings.

Jacqueline Samuel, Director of the South Chicago New Communities Program at **Claretian Associates** (CA), a community development organization, has been able to infuse arts into many local initiatives. Helping build tourism in one area, she enlisted a theater artist to teach teenagers to be tour guides. They learned diction and other theater skills for giving an entertaining, engaging presentation. For a playground renovation in a low-rise housing project, artists taught youth woodworking and visual arts skills to create a gazebo and benches that they painted and decorated with mosaics. Teenagers also learned painting, perspective and design

techniques to create a portrait mural of two figures, "Germano Man" and "Germano Woman" (named after the project), which they placed nearby as "protectors" of the playground.

The **Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation** (AG), like CA, is one of fourteen lead agencies for Chicago's Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), which supports comprehensive development in sixteen neighborhoods. One LISC strategy is to make the arts and open space part of neighborhood life. Looking for a partnership to help implement this strategy, AG was introduced to Urban Gateways.

Partnering with Urban Gateways not only brought in the arts but also addressed critical community issues, says **Ernest Sanders**, AG's New Communities Program Manager and Director of Communications. The prime example is Art Options, a summer youth employment program. For a mural in a community garden, an Urban Gateways teaching artist worked with girls ages 13–18 from Auburn-Gresham and other communities. After learning community history, they discussed which issues to represent, then learned drawing and painting techniques as they made thumbnail sketches and painted the mural. Another group of teenage apprentice artists, working with a different teaching artist, documented the entire process on video.

"Art Options helped us in many other areas of our quality of life plan—economic development, workforce development, even green space and recreation," says Sanders. "Partnering with Urban Gateways brought in a whole different look at the arts. They filled the void where we were lacking." Creating jobs for local youth helped reduce crime, since youth who work are less likely to get involved with gangs or drugs. The program even helped minimize the foreclosure rate, since many homeowners had refinanced in order to afford the cost of taking care of their grandchildren, whose parents were in the penal system.

“Tell us more about what you do and how you think working with artists could add value to it.”

CONSIDERING CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP: WHERE TO BEGIN
Because the return on investment is long term and the outcome unknowable in advance, it's essential to start by clarifying why your organization wants to embark on such a partnership. The primary requirements, according to Simpson, are:

- Willingness to commit the necessary time and human resources, knowing that the yield will not be immediate
- Full support from leadership (both board and staff), based on the belief that investing resources now will eventually yield something greater
- Willingness for the end product to be unknown

That product will be a fruit of the relationship," Simpson cautions, "and you can't foresee how that will evolve. Whatever you create must truly come from both parties—which means that you must be open to listening to what the other group needs and willing to not control the situation." Also essential is the belief that the partner organization will be making a huge contribution that goes beyond income.

For small organizations, the most important consideration is the necessary investment of human capital. "Don't pretend you can keep doing everything you were doing before," notes

Simpson. There must be some change, such as shifting a staff member's responsibilities.

In determining where to look for a partner, Simpson suggests asking two questions.

- *Where does change happen in my city or town?*

Where must you apply pressure in order to get something done? In Chicago, change happens in the neighborhoods, through the aldermen, powerful local elected officials. In another area, it might be through city-wide officials.

- *Where has money already been spent?*

Who wants the same outcomes you do and has the money to pay for it? What existing projects are people invested in? For Urban Gateways, the answer was LISC, which was putting money into communities and already had a strategy incorporating the arts. Elsewhere, the key initiative could be a community garden, for example. Join forces with someone already spending money on a project you can contribute to.

Next, sit down together and, over regular meetings, define how each organization can infuse the other's everyday work. When Sanders and the AG executive director met with Urban Gateways staff, they discussed what they could do together that would align with AG's quality-of-life plan. "You hear what they do and envision yourself as part of it," Simpson explains.

During this planning period, Samuel suggests, you can hold specific, short-term, easy art activities, like CA's "art attacks." In one, a papermaker from the South Chicago Arts Center taught local sixth-graders to make biodegradable paper, on which they wrote their hopes and dreams for the neighborhood. They tied the papers to a dead "Wishing Tree." The project brought residents together and created a dialogue that told community developers what was important to the children.

Meanwhile, work on a plan that includes representatives of the entire community: faith-based institutions, the chamber of commerce, elected officials. "It won't be successful until everyone comes to the table to create the plan," Samuel notes.

POINTERS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

It can be tricky to work with someone who operates differently from you, so from the beginning both partners must agree on why you're working together and what you hope to achieve. Both must believe that their own contribution is valuable and that together they can achieve something greater than either could alone.

That's enough to start with, says Simpson. Your job then is to listen. You're not there to deliver your regular service, but to hear what the other group needs. Ask: "Tell us more about what you do and how you think working with artists could add value to it." During Urban Gateway's talks with the staff of an organization that ran substance-abuse programs, the partners realized that Urban Gateway's artists needed to know more about substance abuse, and the partner's staff needed to know more about the arts. They designed a training program for both sides, which fit into their professional development budgets.

Make sure you have a staff member attending community strategic planning meetings, so that you understand the community's needs, Sanders cautions. These meetings

require considerable time, Simpson notes; you may need to add personnel if you can't free up a current staff member.

Another essential, says Sanders, is sweat equity *and* financial equity. "Don't ignore the 800-pound gorilla in the room": you must deal openly with money, and the arrangement can't be one-sided. There must be an equal contribution of resources, both human and financial.

SUSTAINABILITY

Cross-sector work increases the pool of people who see the arts as an essential part of everyday life. As this happens, more community resources come your way, and your work becomes part of a larger context. "Soon people are saying: 'You can't cut the arts out!'" Simpson explains.

And remember to be patient, advises Samuel. "I just went last week to the groundbreaking of a program I consulted on seven years ago. A partnership won't happen overnight—building relationships takes time. And make sure you get the youth involved, so there's a succession. Don't leave anybody out." ■

RESOURCES

"Common Challenges in Cross-Sector Collaborations," by Beth Vogel and Bill Flood (PDF)

For each challenge, this chart lists management actions for addressing it: <http://tinyurl.com/3btgvm9>

"Creating Systemic Demand for Arts Education: Rubric for Community Partnerships" (Word)

This rubric created by Urban Gateways defines different levels of community partnership, from evolving to maturing stages. Urban Gateways measures success in terms of moving from left to right across the columns: <http://tinyurl.com/44csbs2>

Urban Gateways Impact Framework (PDF)

Created by Urban Gateways to define categories of outcomes and strategies for achieving them: <http://tinyurl.com/44vqsj9>

"Urban Gateways Program Assignments Worksheet" (Excel)

Created by Urban Gateways for evaluating programs in terms of the metrics in the impact framework: <http://tinyurl.com/44vqsj9>

Art Options Summer 2008

Youth-made video documenting the Auburn-Gresham mural project, with commentary by community leaders: <http://tinyurl.com/433x492>

The "Partnerships" section of the Community Arts Education Resource Center contains much useful information and many additional resources on developing, structuring, and sustaining various kinds of partnerships: <http://tinyurl.com/3rarye7>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Golden writes grants, reports, website content, and other copy for nonprofits, especially in the field of arts and education. She can be reached at stephanie@stephaniegolden.net