

## Dialogue on Organizational Growth and Change

*Erica Reed and Mahalia Wright, Jackson Medical Mall Foundation  
Chelsea Alger and Ashley Hanson, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership  
Facilitated by Victor Rubin, PolicyLink*

Victor Rubin of PolicyLink spoke in February 2019 with Erica Reed and Mahalia Wright, Chief of Staff and Vice President, Arts & Culture, respectively, at the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation (JMMF), and with Chelsea Alger and Ashley Hanson of the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMHP). Until recently, Alger had been a senior manager and the coordinator of Partnership Art, the CDI-supported initiative at SWMHP, and theater artist Hanson had worked both with the staff of the agency on internal issues and with the residents of rural communities. The essays by Hanson and by Daniel Johnson, an arts-based strategic planning consultant to JMMF, in this section of the *CDIR* special issue provide accounts of their activities with the staffs of the two agencies, which complement this dialogue. The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

The subject of the dialogue was organizational growth and change, with three areas of interest, drawn from the research framework about CDI that PolicyLink generated with the site teams:

- *The internal restructuring that's required to deeply incorporate arts and cultural strategies.* Can this work thrive if it is done in just a single department? What are ways to spread involvement beyond a few staff members?
- *Changes in the overall culture and future direction of the organization.* How has working with artists materially altered how the organization sees its place in the community and the best way to advance its mission?
- *The relationships with community members, partners, and stakeholders.* Have new voices been heard as a result of the arts-based strategies, and has the organization strengthened its connection to its constituents?

### **Victor:**

Let's start with the proposition that change has to be an organization-wide phenomenon in order for it to have the intended impact. What were the challenges to arts and culture becoming a vehicle for change, growth, and improvement of the whole organization, given how new this idea was and how decentralized the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership was?

**Chelsea (SWMHP):**

I think what we found in the journey is that it started and lived initially within a handful of people, which was fine with regard to how we got going with the work and learned to understand what it meant. But for the sustainability—how it lives on in the organization—it really needed to “infect” everyone else along with us. Unfortunately, James [Arentson] and I, who were fairly involved from the very beginning, were also not physically present where most of our staff was. [Staff of the agency work in several locations in different counties across a large region.] It was a challenge to learn about this and try to share the results with our staff members when we aren’t with them every day. And we know that the power and beauty of this work is about being present in a space. We had to wrestle with what that meant in an organization that’s spread out geographically. And also, over time, many of the people, myself included, who started on this journey have moved on or are moving on. So, the fact that we were able to bring the [arts and cultural strategies] across the organization rather than keeping it in a single staff person or department is so important. We know it will be a factor in the success of it living on beyond the work that we did in this program.

Similarly, we had a lot of discussion about the framework for this effort [that we created at the beginning of CDI] called Partnership Art. We created a website and branding, and we’ve talked a lot about whether that would live on or will it just confuse people, [indicating] that creative placemaking is this “other” thing that we do. We’ve decided that the brand is going to go away, and my hope would be that it would be integrated into our mission instead. I know that our organization, prior to my coming there, and James coming there four years ago, thought about the mission differently. We don’t just do affordable housing; our services are so much broader than that. And now we’ve gained these extra skills and tools in our work. It would be great to revisit the mission again, and I hope that the organization will do that once we get a new CEO.

One of the other efforts that I think helps is internalizing the resident artist work. Ashley will be wrapping up her second residency in April, but the intent is to have an ongoing artist residency to continue to strengthen the organization and keep the work and thought process at the forefront.

**Victor:**

Ashley, as the resident artist at the organization focused primarily on augmenting the capacity of the staff to work in new arts-based ways, how did you help the organization learn how to do this over time and make sure all staff were involved?

**Ashley (SWMHP):**

I used the same creative process that I use in working with communities. I’m used to working with small communities. I’m a rural theater artist, rural practitioner, and the smallest

community before working with the housing partnership was 368 people. But what a gift and an honor it was to work with a community of 25 [the staff of the SWMHP]. I was able to go through the same interviews in the story-circle process that I do in creating plays, to discover where the organization is at, and to highlight challenges that the individuals have, or where they're feeling underutilized or that the potential isn't fully there for them to step into their creativity. And that helped me to create a process by which to use the internal creativity of the individuals to address those challenges.... We also supported each staff member to have a direct interaction with an artist to work on a project that the staff member cared about, that they identified as a challenge in the organization that they wanted to face.

Then we held the artist residency talks—a total of nine of these. Many of these conversations have developed into longer-term relationships with those artists or projects that are addressing the larger mission of the organization. One of these, called “A Prairie Homeless Companion,” was intended to debunk the myth that homelessness doesn't exist in rural spaces. But the major shift I observed was in the staff retreat that we did at the end of my first phase, when the former CEO said we have to think of this “not as a thing we do but as a way we work.” It moved the work with arts and culture from this siloed project into a way of thinking about how the organization is integrating arts and culture strategies into every single aspect of the work. We're not there yet, but to have the leadership say that and then to have that language come out of other staff members' mouths, it's a great step in the right direction.

**Victor:**

Erica, since this began, I recall the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation being remarkable for how representatives of every department were sitting in on meetings with ArtPlace and technical advisors related to the grant and to arts and culture: the custodial staff, the security staff, the HR staff—not only the people who did programming. That presumably reflected a priority on the part of management and enthusiasm on the part of the staff. Please explain how that worked, why you undertook it that way, and what it has meant as it's evolved.

**Erica (JMMF):**

Through the check-in calls, the technical assistance visits, and the site visits, we had not only our CEO, Mr. Wheeler, but our whole staff involved in everything that we did. And [they learned over time that] if they didn't involve Mahalia [Wright] and the Arts & Culture Department, it wasn't [going to become] a project or an event. We have about 150 employees and various divisions of JMMF. And so [for] our staff, the community, our tenants, and the artists, everything had to have art related to every event. We still have our challenges, like any organization, where we have to remind individuals that if you don't include art in the programs, it won't be something that we will do.

**Victor:**

Mahalia, as the VP of Arts & Culture [a role created about a year into the grant], now that you've been engaged in this for a couple of years, give us some examples about getting the whole staff involved in arts and cultural strategies that have been particularly moving for you or impactful for the community.

**Mahalia (JMMF):**

We were aware that we had silos already internally. One of our first projects was to look at the community meeting rooms where our employees gather and where our tenants and visitors gather. One of the things that we realized was that some people are always going to say this [decision or this aspect of the Mall is] “mine” to control or program, so we, as an arts and culture team, had to meet them where they were. At first, when we invited artists to come and get involved, these same staff people assumed that they already knew everything that the place needed, but when the artist started making recommendations—and he was not shy at all—then staff responded like, “Oh, I haven’t thought about it that way.”

That right there, it was like an ice breaker for us to get started and to realize that we needed somebody other than our normal “A and B”; we need that “C,” too, to make our work the best it could be. It ended up where staff were not just tolerating the artists but asking for them to be involved: “Is daniel [johnson] going to be there?” and “Is Mr. Singleton gonna show up?” or “Is there anybody else that you think we can [invite]?” or “What did daniel suggest?” It became a lot easier because of breaking the ice right.

daniel [johnson, arts-based strategic planning consultant to JMMF] had a creative way of working with our employees in their particular departments. Once he spent a whole day with the Maintenance Department in his jumpsuit, working with them up on top of the building, just looking at different things. He couldn’t put on a uniform, but he also spent time with the Security [Department]. Then he spent time with Environmental Services, and they became more comfortable with him. Over time, it wasn’t just “Mahalia and Mr. Wheeler got a new project; how long is it going to last?” [The artists] didn’t just go sit in a corner; [they said]: “Look, I want to know what you’re doing because I’m going to be embedded.” I thought that was a very great way to entwine and create these new relationships.

**Ashley (SWMHP):**

I mentioned the [staff members’] body language earlier, being more closed off. This is one of those intangible soft things that’s really hard to measure, but I’m watching the body language shift in the spaces when we’re asked to participate. At the first staff meeting that I went to, a year ago this month, I asked the staff to go around and do [an improvisational exercise by stating your name and making one] movement, and everyone was totally freaked out. And then just a couple of staff meetings ago, one of the project managers in the Construction

Department [said]: “Let’s do ‘name and a movement’ to get an energizer in this space.” That is a really fun and tangible shift.

**Victor:**

Let’s move to the second part of the [research] framework: changes in the overall culture and future direction of the organization. It includes how you tell your own story, how you’ve expressed your core values. Do you take on a bigger capacity for risk or an experimentation? Do you define and measure success in different ways?

Let’s start with JMMF this time. You put out a new mission statement that is helping you move from seeing yourself as a place for medical transactions to a place where community happens. Please tell us about what that change means and how the new statement has been received.

**Erica (JMMF):**

The new statement has been very [well] received by our staff and the community. Our [prior] mission statement was just about providing health care for the underserved. Now our new mission statement talks about innovation and creativity as well. We have transformed our mission and vision so that everything that we do going forward is related to art and culture, technology, and innovation. Nobody in the community had expected that we were going to do this. They just thought, “Oh, that’s just the health care facility.” And now they see the summer camps and the programming that we have, and they’re wanting to get involved. The ArtPlace initiative has really revamped our thinking about the way that we were going versus our future plans.

**Mahalia (JMMF):**

Through all these new programs that we’ve been doing, we’ve found a way to tell our story, but we [also] have had the chance to hear new stories. We got a chance to learn [from] different people more about our history and other changes that are now happening at the Mall. We got the chance to meet aging artists, and they’re coming back. They’re now feeling like they have a purpose. We have 70-, 80-, and 90-year-old women who are driving to the Mall, walking to the Mall, using transportation to just come and share their experiences with the young people. We have college students that are coming in after five o’clock, learning how to do new artwork. We are elated by the fact that these changes are inviting people in who want to say, “Hey, I know how to do this thing” or “I know I have this story to tell” or “Why don’t you bring this person in to share what they knew about it before it was the Mall or during the time of Dr. Shirley [Aaron Shirley, MD, founder of the Medical Mall] or when Mr. Wheeler was in college himself.” We are learning all these stories, and it’s great to know that we are capturing it right now.

**Victor:**

SWMHP is a nonprofit housing provider. How did the arts and cultural work provide a way for the organization to get involved in a wider range of things? As SWMHP has evolved, what will it look like going forward to partners and community members as a result?

**Ashley (SWMHP):**

It's a challenging role to be in the artist's place, once you fully understand how overworked the staff is, to ask anybody to do anything else. It's been a great challenge to try to figure out the efficiency of integrating the work strategically into what's already happening rather than having it be an add-on. It takes time. I was only on for five months, and I just barely started to understand what the organization is going through. Then, my contract was extended for an additional seven months. I don't know how you would do the work otherwise.

In addition to doing affordable housing, a lot of these small towns are trying to figure out what to do with their main streets and vacant storefronts. We have started a project called "creative community design build." We're working on prototypes in two small towns to renovate vacant storefront buildings into creative community gathering spaces through an artist-led community engagement process. It's getting the community involved at every single level, including the building process. This is developing new skills for the local workforce and getting to see how SWMHP can use creative engagement as a contracted [approach] that they can do from now on, and as a revenue generator. So, there are tangible ways that it can impact the organization, but also the region overall, thinking differently about what we do with our vacant spaces and how we view our housing stock. What are alternative ways to address some of those challenges besides just tearing it down?

**Victor:**

This next aspect of organizational growth and change explores interactions with community. Residents, leaders in the community, clients, patients, people on the street who may not have had any previous interaction with your organizations: how they are working with you as a result of the arts and cultural strategies? How do they understand what you all are about, and what are the new ways in which your organization connects with different groups?

I want to give the SWMHP folks a chance to talk specifically about newcomers and immigrants. Because a lot of the motivation for your work came from the fact that previously homogeneous communities, mostly of longstanding Scandinavian or German descent, had been joined by large proportions of Latinx, Micronesian, or East African residents, and that the nature of civic life needed to be renegotiated and people needed to be included. How would you describe the ways in which the newcomers have become part of these communities' social fabric?

**Chelsea (SWMHP):**

Between September of 2015 and May of 2016, we spent a lot of time [asking ourselves] where we should focus this work in our region. We brainstormed about what it would look like to work in this capacity with the goals that we have around engaging New American and more marginalized communities, many of whom are utilizing our services and living in our housing. Diversity was one key, as was community readiness. By that I mean a community's willingness to acknowledge that this challenge to connect exists amongst their residents, and that they have diverse populations that they're not reaching.

Some of our communities really embraced the idea of this opportunity to see this as a creative process without predetermined outcomes, and some of our communities really just wanted to make art. Saint James is a great example. They were the first community we worked with, and their city manager sat down with us and said, "I think this is great, I understand this as an experiment, I understand you don't know how it's going to turn out, and we are on board." We had some really great outcomes with that community because they were willing to acknowledge all of that and go with us on the journey.

The example I would give is our healthy housing work, which is very intangible when it comes to art because it didn't involve art that we look at; it's art in the way that we invite people to the table—in this case, to tell us about their housing needs. The city was really challenged with housing rehab needs. They acknowledged that some of the homes in the worst condition were households that were Latinx and that they didn't have a good outreach mechanism to these households. We worked with an artist group who, through their creative engagement practice, built new relationships and established several local community Latinx leaders as partners in the design and implementation of the program. The artists involved our healthy housing assessor doing health and safety inspections, provided resources and information to households, and created this new network that helped contribute to understanding for the community and for us what the true needs were out there.

Results emerged that we could not have imagined sitting around the table as SWMHP employees and city leaders. One of the really great things that happened was that the local housing committee, which was entirely white when the effort started, now has a representative from the Latinx community who has emerged as this really great community advocate. She is now in these discussions from which she was entirely absent before.

**Ashley (SWMHP):**

Building on that, the second phase of that project in Saint James is called the Community Advocate Program. [It involves] the same group of artists and builds on the success in identifying leaders within the community who acted as language translators but also cultural translators and translators of the resources available. The artists have now created the Community Advocate Program, where the city will use this artist-led and artist-designed process to hire the



community advocates to do outreach as different projects come up. It's in brand-new prototype phase, but there's been lots of interest from other communities in our region saying, "How can we get that? How can we start our own Community Advocate Program here?" We're deeply place-based artists, so we know it's not like a framework we can just plug-and-play everywhere, but we can look at how to adapt the Community Advocate Program for different communities' needs, to make sure that there's representation at the table of new immigrant and New American communities in these traditionally pretty homogeneous places.

**Victor:**

As we wrap up, we'll ask our friends at JMMF what's changed about the relationship to the community? Are clients and patients thinking about the Mall in a new way? Are there new groups? Are there previously marginalized folks who are also becoming part of the community of JMMF?

**Erica (JMMF):**

Well, we're nothing without our community. Everything that we have is community-led: our community choir, our community meeting room space, our community kitchen, our community garden. Everything is community-related. We are very intentional about making sure that the community knows beforehand, in the planning process, before we've even started anything. We have about 5,000 people that come to the Mall per day. And with that, we are finding new partners in our relationships with the same Jackson groups. [For example], when they perform, they bring a crowd of people, their parents, friends, cousins, aunts. But again, with our community advisory board, and our art advisory board, we're always centered around the community.

**Mahalia (JMMF):**

The great thing about our community is that they share their likes and dislikes, so we really have learned to embrace that and make changes based on it. We want to hear the pros and the cons and make those cons into our strengths. One of the changes that we've been looking at is the fence around our property; it hasn't been physically torn down, but we ourselves, as staff, we're going outside the fence; we are building outside the fence; we are extending that hand outside the fence. We have intentionally gone out into our own neighborhoods so that the neighbors realize, "This is yours. You are here. We are here for you. What do you need?" And they are, in return, asking us, "What do you need?" When we bring the children to perform, they feel not only motivated, but most of them are getting self-motivated. We're mentally tearing that fence down even before it physically comes down.

**Victor:**

I want to thank all four of you for saying things that are going to stand [the] test of time [and] that are really heartfelt and insightful reflections of the work you've been doing.