

Dialogue on Organizing and Strengthening Social Fabric

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Lorrie Chang of PolicyLink spoke in February 2019 with Grant Sunoo, Director of Planning for the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) in Los Angeles, CA; Dominique Miller, Creative Strategies Producer for LTSC; and Tom Faber and Joseph Claunch, co-directors of the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP) in Zuni, NM. They discussed the ways in which strengthening the social fabric and promoting the cultural identity of their communities has advanced progress toward their goals for youth development and neighborhood preservation. Although their contexts are very different, both organizations discovered how the expression of traditions and the sharing of local history could guide the development of their communities. In Zuni, that guidance faced mainly inward, to shape and design a remarkable new park in an ancient place. In Little Tokyo, it was critically important to not only revive the community’s culture and history for its residents, but to express it for the larger city, to exercise “moral site control” over the contested terrain of a neighborhood at risk of rapid change.

Lorrie:

Welcome to our dialogue on promoting community identity and strengthening social and cultural fabric. Our discussion will focus on what’s possible in community development through the integration of arts and culture: the outcomes so far and where you see it heading.

What were your organization’s community development goals that you set out to tackle through arts and culture? How do you think you did?

Tom (ZYEP):

My goal was a personal one—to transform what it means to grow up in Zuni so kids grow up doing exciting, enriching, challenging things, and also grow up with the sense that they’re somehow very special because they’re Zuni. When I moved to Zuni—I’m a physician and a pediatrician—the thing that really bothered me was the fact that so many kids didn’t have much to do. They seemed kind of lost to me.

When I would ask, “What are you into? What are your hopes and dreams?” there really wasn’t much that I could draw out of them. That was ultimately what we wanted to change.

The thing that arts and culture, particularly this whole process, has informed and really rejuvenated my faith in is that kids grow up believing that they're special because they're Zuni. I think that's the part that Zuni art and culture—but in particular, the artists—played because it's all integrated. That's the piece that's just been amazing to see. And the more that we incorporate that into every aspect of what we do, the more positive outcomes we see. I really believe that's the foundation for everything going forward.

Joe (ZYEP):

Like Tom, this work is very personal for me. I come from a long line of trauma. I remember being a young Native American male, living on the reservation and experiencing a lot of challenges in navigating those things. I also recognize that for a lot of my family and even my ancestors, it was no easy task. I found myself lucky enough to be at Haskell Indian Nations University, an amazing tribal college, having positive Native American male role models for the very first time who are PhDs and bumping up against Native American literature and having a fuller sense of why things were the way they were, why things were so hard.

At that same time, I met my first group of Zuni kids at a football camp. I really identified with that young group of males, and it planted the seeds of what I wanted to do with my life. I was lucky enough to get a teaching and coaching job in Zuni. Early in that process, I met Tom and became familiar with what he was trying to build there for the community's youth and started working [at ZYEP].

The process of learning about arts and culture helped deepen my understanding of youth development in a tribal community. The artists we were working with helped me understand how we could do youth development on a much deeper level and more contextually, in a way that was really culturally responsive. I don't think I could've learned those things in the university [or] by reading a book. This project helped create space to just sit and listen to community, what they have to say, what they want for their youth, and how they want to go about it. That has been an invaluable process for three years to make space for that.

Grant (LTSC):

The history of Little Tokyo is one that has been shaped by [the] push and pull of a community that's fighting for its own self-determination and being acted upon by outside forces, not unlike many communities of color throughout the country. Our community development work is pointed at ending the cycle of displacement and building power within the community, so that folks can push for their vision and actualize the community's vision of what this neighborhood should and can be. Our goal with regards to the CDI work was exploring how creative strategy, arts, and culture can have an impact on that work of building power within the community.

Dominique (LTSC):

In addition, I [would add the goal of] utilizing creative strategies to create more cohesion amongst staff and to explore how we can do our work more effectively and more collaboratively across departments. We also hoped to increase our collaboration with other organizations and artists in Little Tokyo and to look at how we connect with other communities in Los Angeles that are experiencing and fighting against the same [displacement pressures].

Lorrie:

Compared with three years ago, what is different about Little Tokyo now that may be attributable to LTSC's increase in involvement with arts and cultural strategies?

Grant (LTSC):

I think at a certain point in the journey, I started thinking about arts and culture and creative placekeeping efforts as an “ecosystem” within our community. We have been able to focus much more intently on what LTSC's role is within that ecosystem, particularly given that this is a community with a really rich history of artists and cultural institutions that are doing great work in that space.

The ecosystem includes artists who are willing to integrate a focus on community as part of their practice, and organizations that might not see community development as part of their mission. There are many organizations who have always been really great neighbors but hadn't necessarily seen their role as community developers in the way that I think they have now evolved to, through our more recent partnerships.

The long-term impact is hard to measure. It's a continuum, but if you think about the strength of that ecosystem to collectively act, people are starting to see artistic strategies and engagements as a really viable, important way to build community.

Beyond that, we've also expanded the reach of whom we're engaging through community planning and organizing activities. A lot of our work is centered around community control, particularly over this parcel. Through engaging people differently with arts and cultural strategies, we've really expanded the reach of that campaign, the people involved, and the ways in which they're involved. [The campaign focuses on the large parcel known as First Street North, a developable site adjacent to the main corridor of Little Tokyo.]

Dominique (LTSC):

Now our arts partners are actually asking for our input when it comes to arts and culture around gentrification and displacement. They'll ask us what we think or what do you think we should do? How can we work together on this? So being more woven into those discus-

sions [is progress], instead of solely being viewed as [an add-on for] community development advice or building housing has been a significant shift.

Little Tokyo has a history of pushing back against displacement for decades. I think a lot of this, even with the integration of arts and culture, is more so reminding ourselves of who we are and who we've been. I think it's reminding people who may not have been here or might be new or just might be unaware: this is what we do; this is who we are. In that way, we're certainly poised to—and have been—fighting back against displacement and gentrification.

I think now we're in a position where we understand the importance of really pulling in our residents—particularly our Latino and African American residents, who may not be as engaged—or further engaging our seniors in conversations about community change. People see what's going on, but I don't know if they understand or contextualize it as gentrification or displacement. They are experiencing some of the stress of wondering if they're going to have housing next year. That's what we were doing with this work—explaining community planning or development in a way where they understand what's going on and what role they can play or how they can be involved in combating those decisions.

Lorrie:

For ZYEP, how do you think the work you have done to incorporate arts and cultural strategies will impact future community work in Zuni? What are some of the outcomes (health-based or otherwise) that you are seeing or anticipating for Zuni youth and families?

Joe (ZYEP):

I think it's probably too soon to tell, [but] we've come a long way and we have this amazing facility [Ho'n A:w'an Community Park] that we hope will reflect the wants, desires, and identities of the community members that we're aiming to serve, to do this health-promoting type of work for youth and families. We're in a much better position today than we were three years ago to do that work. If you look at ZYEP's history, it is a history of success in learning from the community, but the community engagement processes are still evolving to put us in a better position to meet those health needs. We've made space to listen to artists and then realized that they're much more than just artists—they're parents, grandparents, teachers, cultural leaders. They have all these different roles they bring to inform our work.

Tom (ZYEP):

There are several things that come to mind. One is just a palpable sense of optimism and hope that I didn't feel a few years ago. The opening of this park and the keeping of the promise to do something great like this in Zuni is a big part of that. There's such a long history, in Zuni in particular, of projects being done TO the community based on funding

availability, whether it was a needed project or not, for which something's kind of plopped down or started and not finished. And there's obviously a long history of promises not kept. That was something we were really nervous about, honestly, while starting such a big project and making a really vocal, public promise to the community.

We really felt the moral obligation to see that through. And so, having done that in a way that was slow and consultative, where everyone had their say and artists were involved, it resulted in a product that people now come to. You can see in their eyes that the families and the kids are proud of this area. That's a really powerful momentum that I hope we can continue, and some of the things Joe mentioned are evidence of what's happened from the momentum. Now there are adults who are clearly more interested in taking part in kids' lives now, even if it's not their own kids. [Adults want to be part of] these advisory committees because they want to make a lasting impact in kids' lives. In my experience, it had been really hard to get people to come at seven o'clock at night to our advisory committee meetings years ago. But now it's easy. That's been amazing.

And then there's just the volume of activities that kids can do. [We] mentioned the goal was to transform what it meant to grow up in Zuni, [and] we [definitely] have a long way to go. But when I see kids now, they are doing things after school and play flag football, soccer, or basketball. Hopefully that's having a long-term impact, although we haven't been able to measure that yet.

Lorrie:

[How has ZYEP's overall relationship to arts and cultural values and practices changed over the past three years, and how is that affecting your approach to health?](#)

Tom (ZYEP):

Two things. One is going back to that fundamental connection between arts, culture, and health. The logic model that comes to my mind [is the] evolving field in medicine of trauma-informed care. There's some really compelling evidence that [shows] adverse childhood experiences—like abuse and neglect, exposure to substance abuse, mental illness—are a direct cause of adult disease. The connection has a lot to do with that fight-or-flight stress response that is normal and protective when you're being chased by a lion or something. But if it's there all the time throughout your childhood, it's called toxic stress and leads to a lot of adult health outcomes through biochemical changes. The way to address that is through resilience and healing from that underlying trauma. That's the piece that, at least in Zuni—that connecting kids to artists and art and their culture—provides that sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. And it really fosters that healing. From the organizational mission standpoint, that's the foundation we want to build up from.

Years ago, we would start by identifying a need in the community and recruit people to come in to provide a service and some sort of outreach. We [would] design a program that would hopefully keep the kids busy and engaged in doing meaningful work. Now because of that optimism and positive momentum I mentioned earlier, we're really seen as facilitators for artists and the community. People are [now] coming to us with ideas [like]: "We would like to put on a traditional storytelling production...But we need a space. We need funding. We need sets. We need someone who can teach all that. But we have the traditional knowledge. Can you help us with that?" There's actually a number of examples like that. That's a great long-term role for us, where we can really just facilitate, because we have organizational capacity and some funding and now a space. So hopefully we can just provide that infrastructure for the community and artists to be able to think of their own ideas for what to do with kids.

Joe (ZYEP):

With the artists' group, there was a lot more space for listening and understanding how those traditions were facilitating health. I pay attention in a different way now, having listened to artists and how they talk about youth development and what's good for families. It's more process-oriented.

The artists care about the community's youth and families. They wanted to do their very best in creating a space that would lead to these health outcomes. So for them, the art in the park had a specific purpose: to serve as a cultural resource so that kids would have a better sense of where they come from, who they are, and what makes them special. That was amazing [because] they have very creative ways [of] creating art that can provide that connection for kids.

Now we're in the park and we get to see these kids making those connections; they could be there for a play or flag football, but then they're looking at all [the symbols of] the clans in their community and they're excited. There are multiple needs that are being met all at the same time, which is incredible to witness.

When you're listening to artists talk about how they teach, bringing good intentions into any art project is the foundation. It's the starting place. If you come into an art project with bad feelings, then the tradition says that it's going to turn out bad. This whole process of being able to just make space to listen to artists and learn from them has enriched our approach 100-fold, and we're still only scratching the surface. We can go deeper and hopefully promote increased health for Zuni youth and families.

Based on the success of the artists' committee, we've formed an agricultural committee to help with our community garden projects. What we've learned from this agricultural

committee is that every prayer, every song in Zuni comes back to the seed in the ground and water. And that there's this organized process to planting that starts with these religious Kiva groups, who, when they're having their dances, bless these seeds, give them out, and do a ceremony to plant. That [kind of thing] could have real long-term impacts on health and be more culturally responsive in the course of it.

Lorrie:

Grant and Dominique, how has your use of arts and cultural strategies affected Little Tokyo's identity, either from the inside or from an outsider's perspective? And do you think that has impacted your capacity to control the land—the key sites?

Dominique (LTSC):

All the work that we do is in partnership with either another department or local organization. I would say that the arts and cultural strategies, along with those collaborations, are what's really impacted Little Tokyo's identity.

These strategies helped inform people of the fullness of our identity. Not just as a place to eat, but to engage in very significant cultural and traditional arts practices. Some outsiders don't know that people live, work, [and] have family legacies [here]—whether it be through longstanding small businesses or having parents, grandparents, great grandparents who have roots here. They don't know us as a place of activism, organizing, and historic significance—not just regionally, but nationally—as one of the only three remaining Japantowns in the country. Our work has helped renew that identity for people who may have been around for a long time by reminding us all of the various realms of significance of what exists here and what's continuing to grow. We've been able to strengthen that ecosystem and bolster each other's work to help amplify that even more. [This identity becomes] more visible to people who are maybe not coming here for that, but now can't help but see it.

It also has reminded some about Little Tokyo's identity as multicultural. We partnered with [Visual Communications] on a project that recreated the [Bronzeville] period during World War II. After Japanese and Japanese Americans were interned, there was a huge influx of African Americans and Latinos. One of our artists-in-residence, Tina Takemoto, did a research project that showed that once the war ended, a significant overlap of African Americans, Japanese, and Japanese Americans had businesses and were living amongst each other for quite a period of time. I think this enables us to garner support by reminding people of the significance of this community for other communities of color as well. Increasing that link, that cohesion, will help so that whatever we need to do to secure control of the land, we have that base of support established and ready to go.

Grant (LTSC):

We were also starting to shift toward thinking about what our vision for that [First Street North] site is and sharpening [it]. We've seen a new generation of artists that identify with that site and envision the potential. We've seen a new generation of entrepreneurs who see Little Tokyo as a viable place to do business, but also understand the importance of being a community-engaged business. As a community, the change in how we are identifying with that site and what we see as its identity in the future has also been an important outcome.

Lorrie:

Many community development organizations struggle with how to meaningfully engage residents in processes of change. How have these new ways of working helped you create pathways to bring more people into critical conversations for community change?

Joe (ZYEP):

I go back to this artists' committee that helped lead our CDI project. They frequent the park, have other organizations that they belong to, are part of this Art Walk group that has created a pathway for visitors to come see them work. They have their meetings at the park, so we get to interact with them a lot. Plus, we have our regular meetings with that artists' committee, and they have a lot of visitors, funders, and people that are really interested in the work that they do. They bring those visitors by the park to show the success of the CDI project and how artists can work together to create spaces that can promote health and can be good for kids and families. To listen to the visitors talk about how amazing this space is and how they need to bring their friends to show them this space has indicated to us that, absolutely, there are new pathways that are emerging.

Tom (ZYEP):

I totally agree. I think that if every community development project [in Zuni] could be planned by artists, it would be a good, successful project. There are so many examples of projects that were clearly not done that way. When we were first starting, someone had said, "You know, we really want this to be a model for how development can happen in indigenous communities—that is, listening first and engaging the arts and engaging religious and cultural leaders and just making sure that everyone's had input [on all that's agreed upon] before anything is done." We've worked with the Tribal Council pretty closely through this, and we're planning to meet with them again. Now that the project's been completed and there's a new Council, we would love to try to push that idea. Ultimately, it's going to be up to them, but we would really try to encourage them to make that a standard way of doing community development.

Grant (LTSC):

I think that so much of successful community development relates to language. I went to planning school, and I know that planners have a tradition of using really inaccessible language. In thinking about our arts and culture strategies, one of the things I think that we've been really successful at, I hope, is translating that and making that process accessible to more people within the neighborhood and community. And similar to what Joe and Tom were sharing, engagement and that level of authenticity lends itself to more successful projects and community development.

Dominique (LTSC):

Another thing, as far as pathways between our work and communities, is being clear about whom we're inviting to [participate]; if we're trying to engage seniors, then we have to be cognizant of where they're at, because they're going to be walking. If we're going to do something, being cognizant that every culture's languages are represented so anybody who comes can understand what we're sharing so that they can actually engage.

As far as creating pathways, particularly if we're trying to engage multiple demographics, what are some commonalities that we can use to create that foundation so that it is accessible to anyone and isn't inadvertently just geared toward a specific group? Using these strategies [enables us] to be that much more thoughtful and to be considerate about what we know about our communities. We understand that their time and their schedules are totally different. How do we design the strategy so that they can engage as well? Those are all the things that we're now really thinking about as we plan our work.

Lorrie:

It sounds as though you all would share three general reflections about how promoting identity can impact community development outcomes:

- Arts and culture-centered processes have helped your organizations ground their work in the richness and fullness of community identity.
- By centering arts and culture in a way that strengthens the social fabric, your organizations have improved the process of community development, even if many of the long-term outcomes for people and places have yet to emerge.
- This grounded approach has catalyzed residents and stakeholders so that they can be more cohesive, engaged, and empowered as they seek to influence community development.

Thank you for thinking about this with us today!