

Leading Change: Reflections from Chief Executives of CDI Organizations

Carol Gore, Cook Inlet Housing Authority

Dean Matsubayashi, Little Tokyo Service Center

Primus Wheeler, Jackson Medical Mall Foundation

Joseph Claunch, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project

Jamie Gauthier, Fairmount Parks Conservancy

Kristie Blankenship, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership

Facilitated by Jamie Bennett, ArtPlace America

In April 2019, Jamie Bennett, executive director of ArtPlace America, spoke with the current or former chief executives of the six Community Development Investments (CDI) grantee organizations to discuss what motivated them to incorporate arts and cultural strategies into their agencies, how this has changed their approach, and what differences it has made for their communities.¹ Jamie sought to draw out the deeper meaning of “why the work is important” to these organizations and how the various leaders—some of whom were in their role when the program began and others of whom joined midway—acclimated themselves and their staff to a new way of working.

Two things are very clear from this conversation. First, the CDI program offered an unprecedented opportunity to explore new ways of working by allowing the space for experimentation and growth in a sector that is often rigid in how funding can be used. Second, arts and cultural lenses and strategies have allowed these organizations to both better deliver on their organizational mandates and expand the nature of the outcomes they are able to achieve.

The participants in the dialogue included three leaders who were at the helm when the program began:

- Carol Gore, president and chief executive officer, Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA), Anchorage, AK
- Dean Matsubayashi, executive director, Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), Los Angeles, CA
- Primus Wheeler, executive director, Jackson Medical Mall Foundation (JMMF), Jackson, MS

¹ This conversation has been edited for length and clarity. The full conversation, which includes a collection of stories told by the participants, is available online at www.communitydevelopment.art.

And three leaders who joined or transitioned into their role during the program:

- Joseph Claunch, co-director, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP), Zuni, NM, who rejoined the organization partway through the CDI period
- Jamie Gauthier, former executive director, Fairmount Parks Conservancy (FPC), Philadelphia, PA
- Kristie Blankenship, interim chief operating officer, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMHP), Slayton, MN

Jamie:

The context I'd like to suggest for the time we have together is this: I think a lot about philanthropy, and whether you're applying for a grant or you're analyzing something that philanthropy invested in, we spend a lot of time dicing up the work that we're doing so that it fits into the blanks, fits into the boxes. Oftentimes, I look back at that application or that evaluation, and I start to say, "Everything in it is factually true, but does this miss the point?" It actually missed the big picture. It missed why the work's important. It missed why the work feels the way it does. And this discussion is really the chance within this Community Development Innovation Review issue for all of us to talk about what's important. What is the real point?

Let's start with your own beginnings. How did you first come to work at your organizations, and how did you first understand the relevance of arts and culture to your work?

Carol (CIHA):

We have a population of almost 40,000 Alaska Natives who live in Anchorage within a total population of about 300,000. There is no other city in the country that has that high a Native population. But we [at Cook Inlet Housing Authority, a tribally designated housing authority] serve everyone, including non-natives and all tribes, we serve Navajos and Cherokees, people from Uganda and from all over the world, so that it literally looks like the United Nations in our office. When we got the call about ArtPlace, we said, "What does this have to do with housing?" We went because a local foundation told us we needed to be in the room. The lack of a prescriptive approach to a bundle of money was very interesting to us because we were used to figuring out anything that came in our door that had a prescriptive approach. We could fill in the blanks and we generally were successful, but to give us a big doughnut hole, if you will, to wander in and try to figure out how to "win" was mind-twisting for us. I would say that's how we came to ArtPlace as a housing entity, thinking about artists and scratching our heads and not even sure that we were supposed to be in the room.

Dean (LTSC):

From the outset, LTSC has always been at the forefront of playing the community development real estate game, playing it right, and playing it on the level. I've been at LTSC since

1996, though I spent some time in New York at Asian Americans for Equality, but for the most part I've been at LTSC. One thing the CDI experience has generated for me and for LTSC is learning that there's so much more to art and creative strategies than what we thought. We had the chance to really think about how we can use these creative strategies to generate empathy and to inspire action.

One of the first things I remember hearing [about the CDI opportunity] was to be experimental and try things out. And we were like, "What? What are you talking about?" A funder had never told us that before. But really, I think it has transformed how we thought about how and what we can do and the potential of the funds, versus just using it as another transactional piece to do what we were already trying to do.

Primus (JMMF):

I've had several great opportunities, great jobs over the years, but this is absolutely the best job, the best opportunity I've ever come across. It has been a real blessing to me and my career. The Jackson Medical Mall Foundation got involved in ArtPlace because we were starting to do some community development, and one of the things we found in the community was that most of the young African American men were struggling with identity, struggling with employment, struggling with all kinds of life issues. So, we were looking for funding to help support that work we were thinking about getting into. When we first got the support from ArtPlace, we had no intention of ever doing anything to totally reclaim this organization, to really restructure this organization. We never thought that would happen. We were just going to get the Boys-to-Men program going, and since that would be totally different from what we were doing, we would give it to somebody else to run and move on. But we found that the CDI opportunity was really different than what we expected. As we went through the process, we were guided away from that original idea, and we are a much better organization because we've been involved with ArtPlace.

Joe (ZYEP):

I had worked as a coach and a teacher in Zuni for a few years, and I had met the founder and director of ZYEP, Tom Faber. I can remember him calling me when I was toward the end of my graduate degree program and telling me that he was so excited that they had just received the CDI grant. Tom asked if I was interested in coming back to Zuni and working with him to help build this park that had been a long-term vision of the organization. He described that the funding was coming from ArtPlace. I'm the farthest thing from [being] an artist that there is, so I had some apprehension to think that I would be working in the arts. I started in June of 2016 working directly on this grant in the community with artists, and that was a whole new world to me. The one advantage that I did have is that I didn't know anything about art, so I could really take a beginner's mind to it. I didn't have a lot of opinions formulated at the time, and so I was just really wide open.

Jamie (FPC):

When I first joined the Conservancy, the arts and cultural work was not very apparent to me. We were consumed by Rebuild [a half-billion-dollar renovation of about 200 parks, recreation centers, and libraries across the city]; we were consumed by the thought of our place in this huge capital program that the city was launching. As it became evident that our role in Rebuild wasn't going to be what we thought it was, it allowed us to really refocus on our existing core work, of which arts and culture had become a piece. As the executive director of the Conservancy, I started to delve much more deeply into the arts and cultural work, and that was a great opportunity. The funding and support from ArtPlace helped us to build trust with communities, to engage with community in a very different way. It added layers to our work and made it better.

Kristie (SWMHP):

I came to the Housing Partnership in 1999, hired as their asset manager. At the time I was hired, we had about five properties, 124 Low-Income Housing Tax Credit units. When I left the role as director of property and asset management in February of 2018, we had about 50 properties, over 1,700 units. I transitioned into the role of the interim chief operating officer in February of 2018 after our former COO resigned. And, we are in a leadership transition, as our founding CEO retired at the beginning of January [2019] and then subsequently passed away in early March. So, there are lots of changes here for us.

As the staff person in charge of our multifamily portfolio, when we began the discussions about this ArtPlace grant, all of us were having a difficult time wrapping our heads around what it meant. You know, "Are we putting a statue in the front lawn? Are we hanging pictures on the wall?" Like Carol said, to have an opportunity where you're not quite sure what the outcome is going to be, it's daunting in a way. But seeing where we are now versus where we were four years ago, it's like, "Oh my goodness, I never would have thought the changes we've made were even possible!" And I really appreciate the way we look at things now, whom we engage, how we engage—it's transformational.

Jamie:

That perfectly tees up where I wanted to go. I'd love for all six of you to begin thinking about the question, "So what?" We describe this program as wanting to find six organizations that have an extraordinary commitment to the community of people that you all serve. Our investment was to help you figure out ways that you could work with artists, that you could work with the arts community to help achieve your existing mission more effectively, more efficiently, or for more of your population. But it's hard to "get" what we're talking about unless you experience it. Carol, why did it matter? Why did you need to bring in artists to help develop more housing for more people in Anchorage?

Carol (CIHA):

First of all, Kristie, we share a story; I really appreciate what you've said and the transformation that has occurred for you. I would start by saying it was important to me when I first came to Cook Inlet Housing that we reflected our Alaska Native values in the work that we do. By that I mean, our lens was that everyone is essential and everyone matters. We didn't want to put a totem pole in the front yard of every single housing development, but we wanted people to know that it was an Alaska Native organization that was bringing community to Anchorage.

Along the way, we're also dealing with Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and other sources of capital. It's very expensive to build here, so your capital stacks are very complex. They all have a bunch of rules, and we found ourselves just dragging along, almost as an anchor, all of these rules that really depressed our ability to innovate. Just before ArtPlace came along, we developed a senior housing property that, when I walked in the front door, it was lovely, but it said absolutely nothing about who we were, what our culture was. I realized that we had bent all of our innovation, our thinking, to that stupid rule book, and we met every single rule, but we didn't create the place! We didn't honor the place. We didn't respect really who we were. We didn't reflect our community.

And so that's really where ArtPlace walked in the door for us. Maybe I would add just one more story. Our developer said, "Oh my gosh, \$3 million in the box...oh, how can I use this? I'm having trouble getting this one development idea to pencil. Maybe they would put some money in, and I could just put some artist housing in there and away we go and that would pencil." We've moved from that idea to creating a new development in downtown that's named after Elizabeth Peratrovich, who is, first of all, not Dena'ina, which is our local culture. She's Tlingit, from another region. She, as a woman and an Alaska Native, fought for voting rights in Alaska. We wanted to honor that; I know her granddaughter. We got an extra grant to reflect the history of her family, not just her, but her husband and the family. But we also hired an Alaska Native artist to work with our architect to select paint colors in the building that would reflect the flora and fauna of the place, to bring a different perspective, and education and reflection of our culture throughout the building for the residents and their visitors. Our internal developer is now so damned excited that he's got this ArtPlace thing, and it's really cool, and he loves the outcome, and it means a lot to him. I will tell you, when you can convert a "numbers person" into someone that really gets it, that art matters, I think that's a huge win.

Kristie (SWMHP):

A couple of our projects come to mind, but what the artists assisted us in doing was really connecting with those folks who live in our housing. We had an artist [Nik Nerburn]—his art is through photography and telling stories—and we embedded him in one of our projects

in Worthington. He gave all the kids in the development these disposable cameras, told them what to take pictures of or not to and really got to know the kids, and by that we got to know the families. It helped us understand the things that we were missing in connecting with those that lived in our property. Where are the services lacking? How were they having a hard time connecting? Worthington is a community that is highly, highly diverse, and in one of our projects, not this one specifically, I believe there are about 13 different languages spoken in a single 60-unit development. Maybe we hadn't been able to understand where we were falling short in providing them a home, versus a unit to live in. Being able to connect with those residents in that way was amazing, and something that we'd never done before.

Jamie:

Joe, you've got a PhD in sport and exercise psychology, and you're working in an organization that grew out of a hospital. Why should a youth development organization care about artists? Why should they even think about it?

Joe (ZYEP):

Great question. My training is in youth development and also culturally responsive teaching and research methodologies. The creative placemaking approach is really consistent with culturally responsive teaching and research methodologies—doing a lot of listening up front and letting the community lead community development. Those principles are really built in to those fields. Something that I recognized really early in having conversations with Zuni artists is that they had their own sense of what Zuni youth needed to be healthy and to develop into strong adults. Being able to just listen and tap into that and then let that inform our approach for developing a park transformed the process. Coming into it, I thought, obviously a park is good for kids because it provides them access to physical activities and positive, caring mentors. But the artists did so much more with it: having the park serve as a cultural resource that could help Zuni youth develop a positive identity by learning more about who they are and where they come from. Adding those elements into a built environment space that was intending to benefit Zuni kids was amazing.

Jamie:

Primus, Jackson is an extraordinary place, right? When I think of Jackson, I think of music, I think of amazing food, I think of multi-generations of families who know each other and all of that. Jackson is also a community that's struggling with a lot of health issues at the population level, so you have important work to do with exercise, with food education, with educating people with diabetes, with addiction recovery. Why do you need artists as part of that? What's missing if you don't have the artists working with you?

Primus (JMMF):

When we started the Medical Mall in 1996, we had the attitude that the health care climate was in such need of physicians, clinics, and nurses and all those things that folks would come in for health care. We also had the idea that if we built it, they will come, and therefore we spent about 15 years talking about having enough capacity here to do 500,000 visits per year in health care and health-related visits. However, we are only averaging about 200,000. We didn't have a mechanism to go forward from where we were currently operating. But because we got involved with artists and research folks, and did our first cultural asset map piece, we learned a lot about our business.

The cultural asset mapping was an eye-opener for me when we got more hits on the question, "What do you think needs to happen most in this community?" and they started to ask for more health care. We thought we were already providing more health care, but as we drilled down deeper, we found that they were needing access to health in general, and not necessarily health care.

We started to diversify our programs and started talking to artists of all kinds, and we ran into a gentleman, Daniel Johnson, who is just a tremendous communicator. He helped us with the strategic plan by interviewing employees, everybody who would sit and talk to him, to drill down to find out more about what the folks were expecting. He was telling us things that we thought we already knew, and he was telling us things that we weren't ready to accept. We found that we were not engaging the community at a level where we were talking backward and forward. We were talking to them, and [our attitude was that] we were saving the community from itself. And so, because of how he guided our civic engagement process, we're thinking now that when we come to the table, we could actually be confident that we're going to work together with the community to get something done.

Jamie:

[Jamie, were artists able to help you understand who was there in the community, what it was they needed, and what it was that the park should be doing?](#)

Jamie (FPC):

Artists were able to help us do that after a time of some pretty tense relationships between that community and the Conservancy. We were working with the community of Strawberry Mansion, which borders East Fairmount Park. Previously, we had tried to carry out a project in that neighborhood called "Meander to the River," which was about creating a trail from the neighborhood recreation center down to the Schuylkill River. Gentrification is on the minds of lots of our residents, and Strawberry Mansion is a historically black neighborhood that is squeezed between two gentrifying neighborhoods, and there are development pressures spilling over into Strawberry Mansion. The community felt as though the trail project

that we were advocating for would add to that condition, and they started to not be for the project because of that.

The CDI program allowed us to pause on the project that we had envisioned and to work with artists to find out what was truly important to the community. It also allowed us, by focusing on art, to take ourselves away from this heated discussion that we were having that was really about the way that the community was changing and gentrification. It allowed us to listen to the community's thoughts on how they wanted to express themselves and how they wanted to connect that to the park.

Eventually, as we started to work on smaller projects together, there was a lot of trust and communication built. It allowed us to take on together a larger master plan for the park and the recreation center, but we would not have gotten to that point without this year-long process of taking a step back, listening, and working together on something that was really, really fun while still being meaningful to the community.

Jamie:

Dean, how do we identify what is important in the community so we can build on it? Little Tokyo worked with artists to undertake that in a very specific way—the Takachizu project. Related to that, you also talk about how you work with artists to build what you phrased as “moral site control.” Can you talk a little bit about specifically why artists could help you do that?

Dean (LTSC):

Takachizu is a Japanese kind of modern version of treasure mapping and really using the neighborhood to identify the treasures of our neighborhood that are worth preserving, that are worth fighting for, that are worth going to the end [for]. Because we may lose it—you know, L.A. has a history of redefining itself constantly. Before it's too late, [before we lose what we] already have, being able to tap into that is really important and being very clear on what these treasures are.

It's also critical for us executive directors to stay on board to really push the issues. I really think it's important that we, as an organization, take the lead in terms of what we can do. It really is about how we build thriving communities, how we work with these diverse groups. I think engaging artists at the outset has enabled us to do that because there's no hidden agenda, and it really is trying to get to that core issue.

Jamie:

Arts and culture are tied to many things, one of those being our racial or ethnic identities. When you think about race, ethnicity, and about arts and culture, what comes to mind about artists helping you guys navigate this?

Carol (CIHA):

I would start by saying this will be an authentic conversation coming from an Alaska Native with deep roots in my mom's culture and her village. She grew up in a time when the signs on the stores said, "No Natives, No Dogs." We embraced our culture, but we didn't really beat the drum very loud because we were afraid to, and I'm going to own that. I was afraid to be too out loud about that. At the same time, there are over 110 languages spoken in our schools, and the highest representation in every poverty measure are Alaska Native people, so you have these very interesting dynamics. I think for us, we were trying to navigate: how do we still be an Alaska Native organization that meets our mission of empowering our people and building community and providing housing opportunities, while at the same time lifting other cultures and honoring and respecting them but letting them know that people and place matter to us and they have a unique meaning. Can we share that together? I think ArtPlace has helped us on the courage side, to have those conversations, to look at all other diverse cultures in the eye and say, "We're so glad you're here. Welcome to our land. We want you to be able to celebrate your culture, too."

When we first began with ArtPlace, we had just purchased a church next door to our office that we were going to tear down and turn into a parking lot. Today, that church is undergoing a \$1.4 million renovation so then it can become the cultural hub permanently that it has become over the last three years, thanks to ArtPlace. We were uncomfortable letting anyone even use the place because we were going to tear it down, and we didn't want to provide all the insurance. So, we were in this practical place. But let me tell you, the richness of the sharing of cultures in that place has taught us so many lessons, has taught us that we are not "housers." We are community developers, and taking really who I am, who we are, who our community is, and respecting all of that has been this amazing emotional journey for me personally. But it has also brought my staff, who are as diverse as our community, so that we're in this together. And even though we're in this Alaska Native entity, we can balance that better now because we are not afraid to talk about it. We're not afraid to demonstrate it and actually put things on the ground that are out loud and in your face.

Joe (ZYEP):

Zuni is one of the most continuously inhabited places in all of the Americas. There's been a village there of people for thousands of years. And they've found a way to coalesce and coexist and thrive in a desert climate that's been dry and harsh in a lot of ways environmentally. More recently, there's been a lot of development, and that development typically happens from the government, like the hospitals and the schools. Meanwhile, 80 percent of the adults in Zuni self-identify as artists. These artists have been completely left out of the conversation of how to develop and what to lift up, what to celebrate.

Part of the early work was just to work through a lot of people's uncertainty and suspicions about whether this was real, that we were actually asking for the artist's voice and that it was important to us. Over time, through consistency, we were able to work through those challenges. And the thing that we really learned, that came up again and again, was that this was one of the community's greatest strengths. Their art and their cultural knowledge was one of the community's greatest assets, and there were very few opportunities to use that knowledge and wisdom in community development in a way that would benefit everybody.

Jamie:

In Southwest Minnesota, how does arts and culture work when you're thinking about demographic change, serving both the fifth generation of a family that's been in a place and a family that arrived yesterday? What is the role of arts and culture within that?

Kristie (SWMHP):

I think the role of arts and culture in that respect is in bringing the people together for common ground. I think about one of the projects that we did in Milan, an extremely small community that had a large influx of Micronesians. And there was really a divide between the Scandinavian Norwegian culture and the Micronesians. We did a project there that ended up being a play [produced by PlaceBase Productions] called "This Land is Milan." It brought together the population to really talk about what was common between their cultures.

Jamie:

Jamie, in many of the neighborhoods that Fairmount Park Conservancy serves, and certainly Strawberry Mansion, there are some racial and ethnic shifts that are happening. And there were also some socioeconomic ones, right? You talked about gentrification before. As we're thinking about equitable development and demographic shifts, is there a secret sauce that artists bring that helps make that work better, easier, more effective?

Jamie (FPC):

Yes. Absolutely, the artists helped us to have better conversations and to engage with the community around these demographic shifts. But the artists also helped us to address historic and long-standing tensions in Philadelphia that are not about gentrification or demographic shifts at all. For a long time, there's been this thought that Fairmount Park is for white people, and that improvement in Fairmount Park is for white people and not really for black people in the city. Part of the reason why our work was important was that we were working with the community to reflect what they wanted to see and what they found relevant in the Park, which had been thought of as this thing that's not for them.

Jamie:

As each of you think back over the journey of the past three years in a sentence, what is it that happened? You went from what to what? What is the thing that happened on the highest level that was able to happen [because of] working with ArtPlace? This overwhelming question is intentionally large. If it's easier, think about it as: what is the sentence you want to leave us with as we're coming out of this?

Kristie (SWMHP):

You know, it's been a great journey. I'm glad I was here for the ride, and I can't wait to see what comes next. But, so fortunate to have had the opportunity.

Joe (ZYEP):

The CDI project has changed the nature of our work; we have always strived to connect Zuni kids back to their traditions. And we've helped to facilitate that. What this project has taught us is how to let the community and the community's artists lead those initiatives to bring about better health outcomes for Zuni youth.

Jamie (FPC):

Our arts and culture work and the ArtPlace grant helped us to go from a parks organization—a great parks organization—to an organization that is a trusted community partner. That's how I see our journey over these past several years.

Carol (CIHA):

I would say this: we don't know what we know. We turned assumption to knowledge, and we've redefined what community engagement really means, and our primary plan is now focused on people and place, and we're so immensely grateful. I would add one sentence, which is: Tyler Robinson, who was our co-lead on ArtPlace, now is the VP of our Community Development Department, which did not exist before ArtPlace.

Primus (JMMF):

I can say with all confidence that we are much better positioned now to improve the health and wealth outcomes of the folks who live in our communities.

Dean (LTSC):

I think for us, the sentence has been that it has challenged us to be a better organization, to be a better community development corporation and not just an affordable-housing developer. And that it really has pushed us. Through arts and culture, we really think about what our communities need at this moment, rather than taking the easier route, the more efficient route.