

ART

PLACE

ARTIST

KAREN BALCOME



Karen is an Ottawa-based theatre creator, community artist and educator. She is co-creator of THUNK!theatre with Geoff McBride, and has worked with Gruppo Rubato, New Theatre of Ottawa, Salamander Theatre, Skeleton Key Theatre, STO Union and, most recently, dancer Kara Nolte. Karen has lead theatre workshops, courses and community projects for the Ottawa Children's Theatre, the City of Ottawa's Community Arts and Special Needs programs, and the Ottawa School of Speech & Drama's Our Stories outreach program. Karen has trained with Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit and London's Oily Cart Theatre and holds a BA in Collective Creation and Playwriting from York University.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Karen will be leading a storytelling and theatre creation project with 13-18 year olds from the Somerset West Community Health Centre Youth Drop-In program

PARTNER SITE

Somerset West Community Health Centre exists to help the residents of West-Central Ottawa achieve optimal health and social well-being. Special attention is given to those who have additional needs because of income, language, culture, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, family composition, disability or other factors and as a result have difficulties accessing primary health care or social services.

ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place, a 3-year professional artist-in-residence program, addresses social issues by placing artists and arts groups in community settings to co-create art projects and provide free of charge arts programming. The 2015-2016 projects enable participants from non-profit groups, in Ottawa, to take creative journeys through theatre, dance, music, storytelling and visual art. Art Place amplifies voices in various underserved communities touched by the project, to tell their stories and share their unique perspectives.

YOUTH STORYTELLING AND THEATRE CREATION AT SOMERSET WEST COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE: WEEK ONE

Blog post 1 - Jan 26, 2016

I had a great first week with the youth at Somerset West Community Health Centre. Our hosts have provided us with a space in their beautiful new Rosemount facility in Hintonburg. Six young women joined in for the first session of our Art Place storytelling and theatre creation project. We got our physical, vocal and imaginative skills warmed up and then explored ensemble exercises, getting to know you games, storytelling and improvisation. The youth were energetic and creative, taking on larger than life characters and exploring themes that were funny, meaningful and exciting to them. We talked about building a story as a group, giving everyone a chance to contribute their ideas, and filling out our stories and scenes with lots of details so our message can be clear to our audience. The participants shared their love of music, dance, reading and sports and gave me lots of ideas of places we can go with the project. I look forward to getting to know this

group throughout the sessions and seeing where their creative impulses will take us.



*Getting dramatic at Somerset West
Community Health Centre*

INTERVIEW WITH KAREN BALCOME

February 29, 2016

How would you describe yourself as an artist?

All my work is rooted in a desire to create new experiences for people, often through storytelling. I am continuously inspired by experimentation and collaboration. My ideal creative process is one that is challenging and playful.

What inspired you to pursue a career in the arts?

I grew up supported, fueled and inspired by the arts, whether it was visual art, literature, music or film and later theatre, dance, and poetry. I was drawn to theatre for the way it is based in a sense of community while also being a vehicle to explore self-expression. Now it's become the way my brain works – I can't stop thinking critically and creatively about the world around

me and the arts are my favourite vehicle to give expression to these ideas.

What are some recurring themes in your art practice?

I'm interested in how people can make connections with each other through my work. Often, this has meant connecting with an audience or community's immediate and specific concerns and finding a link to a more universal experience that can be shared. Past projects have found connections across a sense of loss, home, purpose, identity, and community. A feeling of being an outsider or having an untold story is often a starting point. I am also interested in the form my work takes – when I am creating theatre, I like to explore how its conventions can be reinvestigated and what

can be borrowed and remixed from other media and traditions to create new entry points for an audience or participant.

What are your most important influences?

My practice is constantly shaped by observations of and experiences with the people and world around me. New ideas are also sparked by art that I see and experience, whether it is theatre and storytelling or other media.

What is your experience in art projects engaging social practice?

I've led a variety of interdisciplinary arts and theatre programs either on site or in engagement with communities across the city, through the City of Ottawa's Arts Animation, Arts Leadership and Special Needs programs; the Ottawa School of Speech & Drama's *Our Stories* outreach program; and the Ottawa Children's Theatre's *DramaWeavers* program for children with autism. Though implemented in a variety of contexts and forms, all these projects have involved co-creation of an experience with a specific group of people with their own needs, strengths and goals.

What did you gain from your experience?

It has been a pleasure to share the process of empowerment, creativity and fun inherent in theatre with such a diversity of people through these experiences. By working with communities who often face barriers to professional arts experiences and education opportunities, I am able to learn new stories and new ways of being creative. This spirit of exchange influences my performance practice as well, inspiring me to meet each audience member where they are at and engage in a co-creation unique to each live event.

How long have you been active in the Ottawa arts community?

Since 2009.

What interested you about working with AOE Arts Council?

I am inspired by the unique opportunity AOE Arts Council has created through Art Place. Through this relationship with the organization, I look forward to making connections and learning from a wider network of artists and arts supporters.

What made you want to participate in Art Place?

The proportion of people who get to experience professional theatre in Ottawa is extremely small. Yet the essence of the art form – expressing yourself, having your voice heard and listening to someone else's story – is something that I think many individuals crave and holds such potential value for resolving our challenges as a society. In my experience as an educator and a performer, I've witnessed firsthand the empowering, comforting, emboldening and challenging impact that an opportunity to share your story or see it reflected on stage can provide. I am interested in facilitating this experience with as many different communities in Ottawa as possible, as I think it's a key component to the diversity and health of our city at large. I was interested in the opportunity with Art Place to connect with a new community of participants and to expand my social practice. I am also excited to be part of a program that is engaging artists and the general public in the idea and value of social practice/community engaged art.

What inspired you to pursue this project with this community?

I believe storytelling and an embodied performance experience can empower a variety of individuals to articulate their challenges and gain experience and skills in working through these challenges with their community. Working with youth in particular, I have found that there are so many pressures and challenges that they can face from varying external expectations that surround them. In previous community projects, I have experienced firsthand how beginning a process with an exploration of individual voice can allow youth to tap into concerns, ideas and awareness that they would otherwise not have the space, support and confidence to address. I look forward to getting to know the group of youth at Somerset West and creating a space together where they can build on the creative impulses they already possess.

How would you describe the project you will be working on?

I will be leading a storytelling and theatre creation project with 13-18 year olds from the Somerset West Community Health Centre Youth Drop-In program. The process will be shaped by writing exercises, ensemble building and skill development and knowledge sharing in movement, rhythm and voice work. I

will support them to identify a common theme of concern or interest, explore their individual viewpoints on that theme, and tease out the contrasting elements in their perspectives, both within themselves as individuals, and between them as community members. Based on the interests of the group, we will build from exploration to incorporating elements of a dynamic theatrical presentation that can allow them to envision new possibilities and perspectives around the theme. Throughout the process, the youth will be leaders in shaping the form and content of what we create.

As an artist, what do you hope to get out of this process?

I hope to gain new inspirations for how to approach a creative process or shape a creative work. As I meet this new group of people with different artistic experiences, I hope to learn more about what it is with theatre that touches people creatively, socially and imaginatively.

What do you hope participants will gain from this process?

I hope we can create an hour each week where the participants have the opportunity to be listened to, share in each others' ideas, and have fun. Through this experience, I hope they can develop and build their self-confidence in their ideas, creativity and voice. I hope the participants can walk away with some tools to work through conflicts that might come up in their lives and create new opportunities for themselves.

How do you anticipate this work will have an impact on the community?

I hope the tools and self-confidence developed in class can be applied in their daily interactions within their community. As they develop their voices and ideas, these can become a valuable part of their community visioning and decision-making. As we share our ideas with each other and with the other Art Place projects, we will become part of each others' community and expand a network of connections and creativity in Ottawa.

How will your project give voice or expression to the social issue(s) you will be exploring?

This project can create time and space for this community of youth to explore self-confidence and self-identity, as well as practice the experience of working with respect and empathy as a group. Particular issues of concern will be determined by the participants.

How will you know your project is a success?

The youth's participation and dedication to the program and the creative process will be a strong indicator of success. I look forward to seeing the level of communication among the group at the beginning and seeing how we can develop our ability to give and take ideas from each other. Success will be tracked by the youth's own standards by giving them a chance to identify what kind of experience they want early on in the process and checking in with them about those expectations and their experience and any developments as we go along.

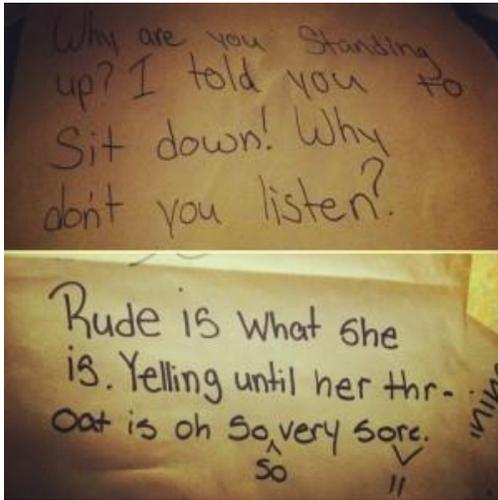
YOUTH WRITING EXPLORATIONS AT
SOMERSET WEST COMMUNITY HEALTH
CENTRE

Blog post 2 - March 16, 2016

In our early sessions at Somerset West Community Health Centre, the youth expressed their perspectives in different ways through writing explorations. During scenes and role-play scenarios in our second session, the youth became focused on the theme of relationships. I invited the participants to write a haiku – they could choose to write from the perspective of a romance that did or didn't work out. All the

young women in the group that day chose to write a 'sad ending' haiku. Through the exercise, I saw this confident, expressive group share a different side of themselves in their words of reflection and vulnerability. Each of their writings expressed their personal wishes and their unique emotional reactions to the scenario in their own language.

In our third session, we explored writing as a group. One of the youth had expressed her desire to explore alternate point of views on a



scenario. Collectively, we identified a situation of conflict that was relevant to their own lives – a teacher you don't get along with. The youth chose to take on the perspective of either a stressed student or a stressed teacher.

Building on their abilities to strongly express their own point of view, this exercise also showcased their ability to empathize with others. Writing in their teacher's shoes, the youth seemed to be able to connect to their own feelings of frustration or moments where they've wanted to be in control. They brought their writing to its feet and acted out a strong expression of conflict, which at the same time gave equal time and space for each side of the story to be heard.

PROJECT CHECK-IN WITH KAREN BALCOME

March 23, 2016

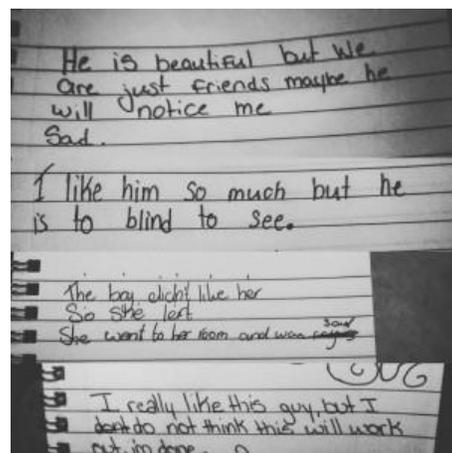
What changes did you notice in the participants through the course of your workshops?

Over the course of the time we've had together, the participants have become more open to sharing their creativity and self-expression, whether it is through their personal writing, the characters they bring to life, or the sense of humour they bring to their performances. I have seen them explore and gain confidence in their own impulses. There is a greater trust that has built; in me, as person in their community, and in their peers, who they are working with in a different context. They are most trusting that others will listen to the interests and ideas they have to express.

What issues are the participants voicing through this artistic expression in their participation in Art Place?

Many of our explorations have focused on communication and understanding in a youth's interpersonal relationships. The participants have been passionate about expressing their point of view in situations of conflict with teachers, siblings, or romantic partners. They have also been eager to role play alternate points of view and experience what it might be

like to walk in someone else's shoes. From the foundation of these day-to-day experiences, we've also explored more abstract themes like conflict, justice, peace and community. The youth brought unique ideas to life, negotiated their own perspectives with the differing perspectives from their peers and created strong messages as a group.



What does a typical session look like and how did you work together to transition from building specific skills, exploring themes and storytelling in a way that is moving towards a collective creation?

The program sits within a youth drop-in-program at Somerset West Community Health

Centre. Some youth arrive at the beginning while others come later after other programs or after finishing homework. Each session begins with a warm up that allows us to energize our voices, bodies and minds and create a sense of ensemble. Then, I introduce exercises that allow the participants to explore either their writing or performance skills, often allowing one to contribute to the other so they can experience

WHAT IS THEATRE?

Blog post 3 - March 29, 2016

Each time I facilitate a theatre workshop with a new group of students or in a new community, I encounter new expectations of what 'drama' or 'theatre' will be. Sometimes, participants expect songs and jazz hands. Other times, 10 short sessions on their way to Hollywood stardom. And often, especially with groups of teens, they expect that there will be improv games.

The youth at Somerset West Community Health Centre's drop-in program expressed an interest in improvisation early on. Often, my interest in improvisation lies in its capacity to enable role-play – how you can work with the parameters of a character or situation and play out that situation or play with that combination of characters to lead to an exploration of 'what could happen'. Often, this exploration of uncertain territory can lead to humour. Ideally, it can lead to new understanding, gained through embodiment of a different state of mind or being than the one you're used to.

Throughout the sessions at Somerset West, we've explored role play in a variety of ways. One week, we explored ideas like love, stress, conflict and community through frozen images or tableaux. One youth would take on a pose, proposing a character and situation. Another youth would add her new pose to expand the scene. Another youth would contribute a final pose, turning the three images into a story.

As the participants discovered what each idea meant to them through their bodies, presented their new understanding, then played off each other's ideas, the initial impulse was transformed into a unique group thought on the concept, that no one person could have predicted.

their own creation process. The exercises engage the youth in a scenario based around a theme. The content of these themes is based on previous week's ideas or discussions. In this way, the content of the classes has developed as I get to know the participants. The youth get to see how their interests and ideas shape the class and can take ownership of the program.

Other weeks, the youth have role played different relationships and situations through more active improvisation. Whether it was a comic scene about fighting over the remote control with a sibling, or a courtroom drama about shoplifting, the youth embodied the elements of the conflict, and got to test drive different solutions of their own suggestion. For a moment, they became business owners, police officers, judges, lawyers or the sibling who finally got the upper hand. They experienced what it was like when their character got her way, learned her lesson or got the biggest laugh of the scene. They carried the experience of this new identity or understanding into the next scene or back to the homework, cooking or socializing that awaited them in the rest of the program, now supported by a new awareness that they didn't have before.



Most recently, I was surprised by my own expectations of where and how role-play or

'theatre' would happen within the program. A casual conversation with some of the youth who attend the drop-in, but aren't typically interested in the 'theatre' exercises, lead to a surprising opportunity for each of us to try out a new state of being. As the youth told me about a situation they were passionate about and I asked them questions about what outcome they wanted and how they would communicate their needs to the other people involved, I realised we were enacting a role-play scenario. One youth practiced her 'lines' of what she would say to communicate what she wanted and

another youth articulated what her vision of success looked like, so she could know when it happened. The youth expressed gratitude for an audience that listened and were energized to keep sharing their feelings and ideas, with a renewed expectation that they deserved to be heard.

I didn't expect 'theatre' to happen around slices of pizza but this experience is also helping me shift and grow my own ideas about how the creative process works and what my role as a facilitator looks like. I look forward to learning more together in the weeks to come.

EMBRACING 'THE AWKWARD'

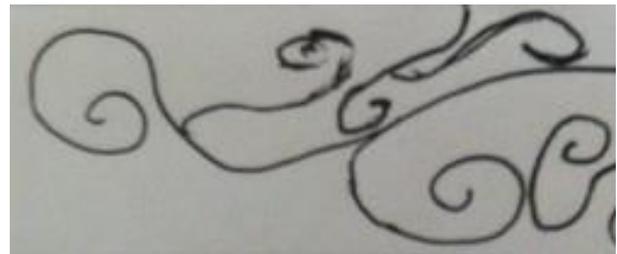
Blog post 4 – March 31, 2016

I am currently reading Amy Poehler's biography *Yes Please*. In it, the writer, actress, producer and director talks about her early days doing improv in Chicago and New York. In one chapter, she states:

"Improvisation was about not being cool (...) It was about being in the moment and listening and not being afraid." That passage took on new meaning for me during a recent session of our Art Place project.

As one of the youth told me about her week, the word 'awkward' came up almost once a sentence. It seemed to be a lingering fear, potentially lurking around every corner of her teenage life. It reminded me of the scale of the challenge I set when I invite these youth to participate in the drama sessions with me. Our lives do not often reward sitting in the realm of 'the awkward' – there is rarely the option to take the time to have a moment, to listen and let go of our fears. But that is exactly what a drama class asks us to do.

After our conversation and as we waited for other participants to gather for the program, I put myself in an improvised scene with the young woman. I instantly remembered how hard this work is – to come up with ideas quickly, to share those ideas with another person, not knowing whether they will 'get' your creative impulse, or if it will just be, well, awkward. Throughout my career, I've come to crave this challenge – but it's not for everyone.



A design by one of the youth in our Art Place project at Somerset West Community Health Centre

Many of the youth at the drop-in choose not to participate in the drama programming. This is not surprising – even many of my colleagues who work in other artistic mediums and deal daily in the practice of creative expression would slink quietly away from the potential embarrassment and vulnerability of a drama class. Some of the youth at the drop-in express their discomfort with the process by teasing or interrupting the participants who do get involved. But, week by week, I see the young women who choose to participate in the sessions experience the bravery and freedom of being able to embrace 'the awkward'. They share their ideas, make mistakes, come up with new ideas, show how they feel and try to listen to each other's feelings. These are skills and experiences they can apply in their school lives, their jobs, their relationships, and their communities.

Awkwardness, like change, is inevitable. There will always be moments where you don't know what to expect and face embarrassment. The youth, like all of us, could easily let these

moments intimidate them and set them back. Instead, I think it will be their ability to embrace an 'awkward' moment, learn something new, and overcome that will clear a path for their success. To paraphrase Poehler, embracing

awkwardness 'is the smartest thing to do.' Creating even a little bit of space for nurturing that embrace over the course of this project feels like a small-yet-strong act of the social change that Art Place aims to inspire.

WRITING OUT LOUD

Blog post 5 - April 12, 2016

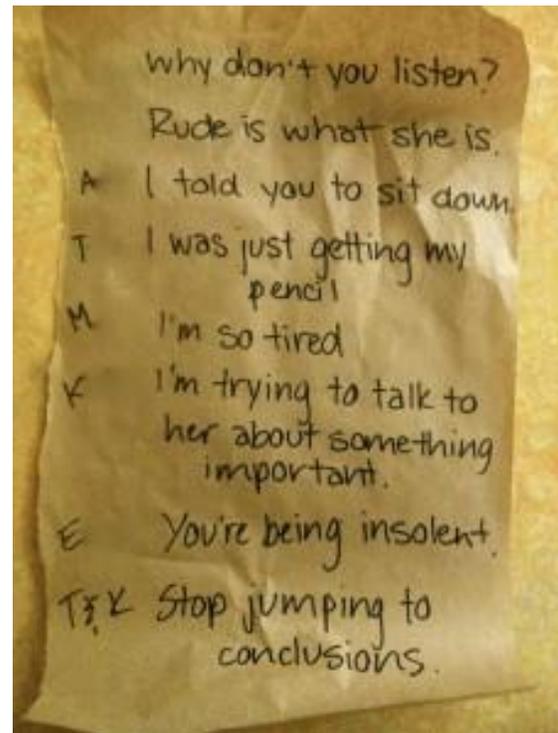
When I first began this Art Place Project, I wanted to explore writing with the youth as a way for them to

express their perspectives and to generate material that could shape a creation piece. Our early writing exercises allowed me to gain some insight into the youth's voices and interests. But overall, I discovered that it was more important for this group to 'write out loud.'

I find a unique pleasure in taking an individual moment to sit down with my pen and paper and my thoughts, but for many groups that I've worked with, the act of writing has presented too many barriers for them to access this kind of experience. For some participants, there is the barrier of language or skill. When working with children or youth, it often feels as though writing is too much like school; writing exercises feel like work as opposed to a fun experience of a drama class. With the youth at Somerset West Community Health Centre, writing through voice and physicality has proved the most fun way to harness their energy and ideas.

Throughout our process, we've explored writing out loud in different ways. Sometimes, I documented their scene work as a script that everyone could follow. In another exercise, we did the opposite and turned a story on the page into a live script, fleshed out with physical actions and facial expressions. Improvisation exercises have allowed us to try out our ideas, edit them and put forward a revised draft out loud, on our feet.

This past week, one of the youth shared a few stories she was working on. We got talking about writing and genre and she spoke about the kind of story she would love to write, but didn't think she could. We asked her about the elements of this genre: what kind of characters were involved, what kinds of storylines? She spoke about how she draws inspiration for her



characters from people she knows. Within 5 minutes, she had identified 3 character-types from her school that would be perfect for this story. A few questions later, she had created a compelling plotline. By acting as dramaturgs or editors through conversation, we were able to give her the confidence and feedback to move ahead on her idea in a way we wouldn't have been able to had she been writing privately on paper on her own.

Most recently, at the Art Place Showcase, I found myself writing the story of our project out loud for the attendees. As people asked me questions about our project and the participants, the narrative of our journey took on new meaning and I gained new insight into what our process could grow to become. One woman told me about her experiences with the ripple effects of this kind of programming; it opened up my imagination to see the youth thinking back to this project and using the tools they've developed at some point in their future.

Another man spoke to me about youth he knew in other communities who could benefit from this kind of process; I could envision how I could share the learnings I've gained as an artist and facilitator through this process to support another community.

As I head towards my final session with the youth and share my experience of the Showcase, I am eager to see what note we end this particular chapter on.

OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED AT THE SOMERSET WEST COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE YOUTH DROP-IN

Blog post 6 – April 20, 2016

I love making lists – in life as in my creative process. I thought there could be no better way to gather all my various thoughts on the end of our youth Art Place project at Somerset West Community Health Centre than with a list. So –

THROUGH THIS PROCESS, I LEARNED:

- To expect the unexpected
- To meet people where they are at
- To start with a conversation. To ask questions. To listen.
- To take my space
- To think on my feet
- To share myself
- To be flexible
- To honour my commitments
- To be patient
- To stay confident
- To laugh
- That if there is going to be a snowstorm, it will happen on the night of our session
- That attitude is a performance
- That it is a gift to be witness to special moments in these youth's lives
- That these youth are funny, strong, smart and sensitive

- That these youth care about this community of their peers
- That there are stories everywhere
- That performance happens all the time

I came into this process thinking I already had much of this knowledge in my back pocket. But I found I had to relearn these lessons in this context. I'm sure I will have to relearn them anew working with a different community. And I'm sure the youth at Somerset West will have to teach them anew in the next art process they participate in and in general as they continue to engage and develop as active members of their community. As I evolve as a community artist, I've come to understand that this engagement is at the core of the creative process. Together, the youth and staff at Somerset West and I co-created an experience and a relationship. It will be up to each of us to see where that experience can lead us next...



EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED:

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS WITH KAREN

BALCOME

May 11, 2016

How would you describe your overall experience with Art Place?

Working on this Art Place project was an incredible learning experience for me as an artist and facilitator. I was able to make new connections and learn about how my creative process works in a different context and how I can continue to explore and redefine that process when engaging with different communities.

What are some of the most significant things you've learned through out your project?

- expect the unexpected
- meet people where they are at
- think on your feet
- there are stories everywhere/performance happens all the time

How was your project a success?

As an artist engaging with a new community through this project, I gained new tools and perspectives for how to approach my creative process. I got to meet a group of funny, strong, smart, talented and sensitive youth who will continue to shape my idea of the strengths, skills and personalities that make up the city that I live in and inspire the work that I create. From our process together, I experienced the youth engage not only with me as a new person in their community, but also with my ideas as a new element in their space. Over a very short period of time, these youth have built a sense of trust and comfort in the drop-in program and its role in their lives. As they began to extend this trust and comfort to me and my role as an added dimension within this program, we created a valuable community building experience.

What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when learning about your project?

I would like audiences to think about their own experience of youth. If they are older, I hope that learning about this project gives them an opportunity to think about what they wish they knew as a youth that they know now, and what knowledge or outlook from their teen years they wish they could still access in their current experience. For teen audiences, I hope they can empathize with the youth's process and concerns and be inspired by their creativity and expression. In general, I would hope audiences could share in this process of different groups of people coming together; that they too can experience new learning about a community they may not have known, and new learning about themselves through this engagement.

In what ways did or will the community benefit from your project?

The drop-in program that our project sat within is a new initiative in the community and this was their first experience integrating an arts process in that programming. Through this project, the community organizers gained an in-depth knowledge of how to approach arts programming with this community of youth and how to offer alternative experiences within the drop-in program.

In your opinion, what did the participants learn from the project?

Through different exercises and experiences, the project offered the youth tools for communication and problem solving, and helped to further their self-confidence and teamwork skills. As a process made available to them and their ideas, the Art Place project reinforced that they are interesting, creative individuals worth engaging.

Did the participants feel that arts and culture offerings are physically, financially and/or geographically accessible to them? Did participating in this project change this?

The youth attend and participate in a variety of arts and culture offerings through their school

programming. On their own time, they engage in diverse pop culture experiences that play a significant role in their cultural lives. At one point during the project, I tried to connect the youth with a local cultural opportunity but schedules and geography became a challenge. I

learned that it was more accessible for them to participate in a cultural experience through the drop-in program, at a time and location that they already chose and could access as part of their daily lives.

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