Access Arts Studio
United States
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Access Arts Studio is a new program, supported by the Davis Foundation, that promotes peace and serves houseless youth in downtown Los Angeles with a series of creative workshops. The program empowers people through skills-learning, provides a platform for expression and storytelling, and inspires joy through uniting the community.

Growing up in Los Angeles County, I had empathy for people I saw living on the street, and since then, I’ve watched the numbers grow and grow. When I first wrote this grant proposal in 2020, Los Angeles already had the highest number of houseless individuals of any metropolitan area in America. And since the pandemic, the numbers of people living on the street and the conditions they face have only grown worse. I was inspired to start this project after volunteering at a homelessness prevention service, where laughter mixed with beat-boxing, and street art made of found objects inspired my idea to add arts classes to the programming already offered. While city leaders and local nonprofits work on building temporary shelters, permanent housing, and much-needed basic support services, the houseless lack access to basic resources for artistic expression as a means for mental wellness, empowerment through self-narration, and community building. Access Arts Studio offers often overlooked or underestimated human needs for a population that needs them the most.

My approach to addressing this lack of resources for creative production and emotional healing within the context of houselessness in downtown Los Angeles changed throughout the process in a few ways. I originally designed the program in 2019/2020, before the pandemic hit. The original proposal detailed that facilitators use a trauma-informed approach, taking into consideration the sensitivities and appropriate responses when working with this particular population, many of whom are struggling with mental health, addiction, disability, and/or other adversities. After COVID hit, this trauma-informed approach needed to be complemented with a new component to take safety precautions into account, including masks, testing, and underlining the importance of paying attention to any potential symptoms before congregating in-person.

Another change was the specific on-the-ground host site for Access Arts Studio—from the My Friend’s House Foundation location in Skid Row to The Covenant House in East Hollywood. While both longstanding nonprofit organizations address the needs of the houseless in downtown LA, MFHF is smaller in scope and internal support than Covenant House. MFHF provides life-sustaining services to anybody in Skid Row, while Covenant House houses and nurtures youth 18-24. Both address basic needs, and provide job readiness programs, but Covenant House has full housing facilities for a more specific population. The change occurred because between 2020-2022, the population which MFHF serves multiplied, while their own resources shrank, and their team was already strained maintaining their services. Covenant House, with a full team of paid staff, was more capable of hosting a new program. Their internal stability and robust network of employees and volunteers was even more important than I expected—one thing I learned during this project is to overestimate the amount of people it takes to run a program. Covenant House’s strong network of staff and volunteers helped us through unexpected challenges, such as myself getting COVID. Preparation and a strong team carried things through smoothly. Another benefit of Covenant House’s diverse team of volunteers is that they were able to contribute their own artistic skills and partnerships: for example, one volunteer stepped up to take lead on teaching pottery workshops, and another invited local comedians to perform at the culminating exhibition. The celebratory event was not only fun and hilarious, it also created a welcoming atmosphere for people
to get up in front of others and perform. An open mic ensued, and the professional comedians were followed by participant poets and musicians. Because Covenant House already had facilities and volunteers, I did not fundraise from outside sources.

A third major change and lesson was in regards to publishing the creative work. In the original proposal, the workshops culminated in a literary and arts journal publication, which would be exhibited around Los Angeles. Because Covenant House provides more comprehensive care for the people they serve – the houseless youth live there full-time, as opposed to coming in for services periodically – and because the population is young, sometimes escaping abuse or trafficking, they have strict privacy and security policies. This meant that the participants were not interested in having a public-facing publication. (You’ll also notice that none of their faces are directly photographed in my documentation). The original goal of the publication component was to promote peace through having the creative skills contribute to a potential career opportunity, and subsequently stability through economic means. My initial assumption of having this art career growth happen in a public institution or art gallery was tested and shown to be normative, because for this population it could even put them in danger. We were still able to have Access Arts Studio contribute to career goals, but through a different route - the art created complemented Wonderific, Covenant House’s program for guiding youth to internships and jobs and celebrating their career milestones. At the Wonderific monthly ceremony, artistic works such as drawings and paintings were put on display. It was more important to celebrate the artistic and professional achievements amongst the community than get it advertised widely in the public. It was incredibly rewarding to see the pride participants held when they saw the works they made exhibited, and to hear about their ideas for future projects. The valued outcome was much more rooted in the experience of the workshops and the celebratory exhibition, than in a final product and the publicity of that product. That being said, some of the youth can include what they made in professional portfolios when applying to jobs and internships. One example of how the workshops planted creative seeds would be a participant who was inspired to start his own clothing brand, and is using Polaroid photographs taken during one workshop for the brand’s development stage (taking Polaroids was one way we could have photo lessons despite the photography security policy, as the participant could own the sole copy of the image and determine individually whether to share it or not). Covenant House will also continue creative workshops and recognition exhibitions.

When writing the proposal, I outlined how the project would promote peace on three levels: on a personal level, through the emotional healing aspect of art and the benefits of being in an intimate storytelling/sharing community; on a societal level, through promoting narratives of houselessness which would combat negative prejudiced stereotypes; and on a material level, by having proceeds from the art and sales of the publication go back to the community. Theoretically, I still believe in all of these as peace-making processes. However, I realized that I was overanalyzing the project, creating more arguments for how it would promote peace than necessary – the first reason was both the inspiration and the take-away. Art as a vehicle for expressing oneself and for coming together with community creates the internal ease, joy, and human connection that is peace. I quickly realized that the second angle of promoting peace was coming from my projected assumptions: participants did not have the agenda of making art which told their personal story for the purpose of changing other people’s perceptions of houselessness. They simply wanted to make the art they felt compelled to make, not art to change strangers’ political minds. They didn’t feel the need to share it publicly, and I respected that. The third peace objective, of using art as a way to support oneself, resonated with some participants but not for others, and I realized the economic value of the art could be a plus, but wasn’t the purpose of the program in terms of promoting peace. I found that to promote peace for people experiencing harsh realities, creativity can be the key to levity, heart-to-heart connection, and facilitating a safe space emotionally and spiritually. While this type of peace cannot be measured in data points, I know the workshops had both an immediate and long-term positive impact on the participants. One could feel the
comforting effects of uninhibited expression, and it was rewarding to see the pride people took in their artwork. Both participants and staff thanked me and invited me back for future collaboration, and I felt welcomed as a member of the community. I learned I don’t need to over-complicate or over-justify a simple concept that I believe in: art is healing. Simplicity can actually increase focus, streamline a project’s goals, and make a big difference in a person’s life. I will carry that lesson forward, as I plan on continuing to bring people access to arts.

“The Davis Peace Program enabled me to take leadership by initiating arts workshops for houseless youth, which foster connection through storytelling and empowerment through creative skills. The process also humbled me, showing that planning and analyzing will only get you so far, until unexpected circumstances force you to pivot, respond to changing needs, and listen to learn from lived experiences unlike your own.” - Shea Seery