

Partners of the Sampson Arts Council

Grace W. Ho
University of Florida, Masters in Art Education
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Introduction

“They just keep coming back so I keep on teaching,” the artist answered when asked why she teaches at the art center known as “The Small House”. Shared narratives contribute to the strength of communities by building on dialogues and interactions among people within the places of their everyday lives. Significant stories rely on citizens who care and work hard to support and effect individual and societal change through positive experiences. A balanced approach towards community development should keep in mind the needs and interests of individual citizens and community collectives of organizations, institutions, and businesses. I believe art and art education have centralizing power capable of balancing the needs and interests of private and public partnerships working towards community development.

The movement of arts-based community development began in the 1970s (Cleveland, 2011). Alternative art sites contribute to community development by providing, extending, and enhancing art education beyond traditional methods and locations. An appreciation of art making as an active process of living, learning, sharing, and creating contributes to the belief that art and art education bring individuals together through the stories that support immeasurable indicators of success such as positive feelings, improved self-esteem, supportive peer environments, and opportunities for making art. This descriptive case study about the Sampson Arts Council (SAC) stems from fieldwork that focuses on individuals who believe in what they do, so they keep on doing: they teach and learn, give and share, make and create as positive actions that contribute to the forward steps of individual and community growth.

Supporting Sources

Choosing the Victor R. Small House as my fieldwork site allowed my ongoing partnership with the Sampson Arts Council to contribute to investigations for this case study. Aware of overlaps and potential biases inherent in my co-existing roles as participant and researcher, I gained perspective on the outcomes that could come from shared experiences of Self and Other as explained by Tedlock (1991). The role of Self as researcher looking at Other as people and cultures provides answers to questions such as “What explains the shift in ethnography toward representing ourselves in the act of engaging with and writing about *our* selves in interaction with *other* selves?” (p. 79). Through dialogues and interactions, I connected my private and public service work as participating Self with my investigative work as Self who observes and studies Others as participants.

Cleveland’s (2011) article “Arts-based Community Development: Mapping the Terrain” provides framework from which I explored SAC as a key partner of community development in and around Clinton, North Carolina. Mapping of selected alternative earning sites and partners in Sampson County¹ illustrates how SAC partners with its community. Conversations, observations, and review of SAC’s website² reveal an art center in rural North Carolina that depends on the individual and collective strengths of its citizens for service and support. Partnerships between private (citizens and businesses) and public (organizations and institutions) sectors have the potential to connect services (paid and voluntary) for the development of community as a whole.

These partnerships exist through arts-based experiences that link SAC with alternative sources of learning.

Overview of the Sampson Arts Council

In April 2013 I wrote an Executive Summary³ to highlight the Sampson Arts Council's past, present, and future; it was published in a commemorative book for SAC's annual golf tournament fundraiser (June 2013). The Sampson Arts Council is a non-profit organization, with its office, museum, and gallery operations situated at the Victor R. Small House in Clinton, North Carolina. It earned its 501-c-3 status in 1973 and incorporated an operating Board of Directors. Today's board consists of 11 local citizens who volunteer and work with executive director, Kara Donatelli. SAC's mission is "to enrich the cultural lives of community citizens by nurturing and supporting excellence in the arts; promoting, presenting and encouraging educational activities; and otherwise enhancing the growth and appreciation of the visual, literary and performing arts" (http://sampsonarts.net/About_Us.html).

Present SAC endeavors include: promotion of local artists and their work through exhibitions and events; support of local art teachers, students, and participants through programming; encouragement of citizens in pursuit of art education with provisions to relieve financial hardships; collaboration with Clinton City, Sampson County, and community groups to extend cultural awareness and education; and others. In looking at its future, I presented and received approval from SAC to pilot "Learn and Share"⁴, a project to link art students with learning and community service. Interested art students

and I volunteer to team-teach art activities for SAC's after school program, Art Club (see description).

Today SAC relies on the caring hearts and working hands of a generous community whose citizens contribute time, efforts, and funds in sustaining the day-to-day operations and services, programs and events, materials and supplies, and participant scholarships. Two annual fundraisers, "Mystery Dinner Theatre" and "Celebrity Golf Tournament" depend on many donated hours of volunteer work. Based on the latest completed annual numbers for fiscal year 2012-2013⁵ over 12,000 people attended SAC related programs and activities, with the following ethnic demographics: white (38%), black/African American (28%), Hispanic/Latino (25%), American Indian/Alaskan (6%), Asian (3%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0%). Other background information⁵ indicates SAC's budget generally consisting of earned income (39%), contributions (30%), memberships (15%), programming (12%), sales (2%), and other sources (2%).

Description and Discussion

I focused on two types of instructional initiatives that extend visual art for participants: group art classes and after school Art Club. I documented dialogues and interactions that support endeavors happening at the Small House. Stories illustrate the immeasurable indicators of positive outcomes that support continued efforts of volunteers, instructors, and learners involved with SAC.

Art Class for Homeschooled Youth (March 6 and March 28)

On March 6, participants met in the designated second floor art room set up with the usual suspects of supplies: paints and brushes, glues, tape, and scissors, markers, crayons, and color pencils, a variety of papers, and much more. The instructor is a local artist (watercolorist and oil painter) who teaches at the Small House. She also serves as SAC's programming chair and volunteers in other capacities. Five of six students (ages 11-16, one girl and four boys) attended class that day. Students register by the semester, each consisting of six weekly lessons. The instructor walked about the room and paid close attention to each student's work. The students sketched and painted still life pears using watercolor paints. Instructor and students carried on easy conversations about how to paint, tastes in music, and other outside interests. The learning environment appeared familiar, cohesive, productive, and intimate. Before leaving, I thanked the instructor and students, and they graciously allowed a return visit.

After getting an initial feel of whom, what, and where, I hoped to uncover why and how during my second visit. Why art? How has art instruction at the Small House impacted instructor and students? On March 28, I sat with six students during their lunch break and conducted informal interviews via group conversation. Art as a discipline of study is not required curriculum for home-schooled learners in North Carolina (<http://www.ncdnpe.org/documents/HomeSchoolGuideBook.pdf>), so students had different reasons for attending art class at the Small House: to get better at art, to express feelings and thoughts, to do less math, to be with other homeschooled kids, to learn and make art, and other reasons. Further questions revealed answers about family connections and students' outside interests related to the arts: photography,

dance, music, painting, jewelry making, and others. Reflecting on their overall experiences at the Small House, students acknowledged creative inspiration stemming from the historical background and legacy of Dr. Small as physician and supporter of the arts, the gallery space that features diverse artists and works in different mediums, and the opportunity for art instruction outside of school curriculum. One student said, “The [Small] house is devoted to art...photography, paintings, sculptures. And there’s Dr. Small’s stuff...science, biology. You’re not limited to one thing. There’s a lot here, different things.”

While the instructor cleaned brushes, I asked her similar why and how questions. “They came to me,” she answered, recalling memories from four years ago when a former student and his mother asked if she would teach art. Not having taught art to younger learners, reluctance gave way to agreement to try out a six-week session. She spoke of a similar start for the adult art class and remembered comments like “You can’t quit” from students who simply kept coming back for more. “It’s actually been fun,” the instructor admitted as she explained why she continues to teach. “You hear that those who teach don’t paint...that’s not me. I still paint,” she added. The instructor provided background information about her education and practice as an artist, noting other factors that continue to shape how she incorporates art in her life.

After School Art Club for Youth (March 18)

I worked at the Small House with three volunteer art students (ages 12-15, one girl and two boys) to provide Art Club activity for five participants (ages 8-11, two girls and two boys). During Art Club, taking notes and photographs happened sporadically

while I worked as participant and investigator; I recorded most of my field notes from memory at the end of the evening.

The volunteer art students meet with me weekly for private art instruction, ongoing for 3 to 4 years now. Additional voluntary learning sessions enhance experiences outside of paid instruction. During these sessions we planned art activities to share with participants of Art Club. For a previous Art Club in February, I chose acrylic paint as the medium and the student volunteers planned the art activity for "Painting Out of the Box." Participants used a variety of found objects and repurposed surfaces to create paintings. For this Art Club the student volunteers decided on the direction for the art activity "Origami and Kirigami Out of the Box" for participants to use a variety of found papers to make projects. Afterwards the student volunteers provided reflections: from one student, "I liked that I could volunteer in a subject I enjoy with other people who feel the same way," and another noted, "I learned that when I set my mind to it, I can do many different things." In looking ahead, the third student said, "I had a great time and would like to do it again."

Art Class for Adult Learners (April 1)

On April 1st, several adult learners met with the instructor who teaches home-schooled students. Five women casually trickled into the room and chatted about all sorts of things with the ease of long-time friends. "I forgot how to get here, it's been so long..." said one student who generated further conversation and laughter from others. Without instructor directive, students naturally unpacked their bags and tote boxes and placed palettes, brushes, watercolor paints, and paper on their workspace tables: they

simply picked up where they left off from their last class with the instructor. The instructor mingled and guided her students when needed. “As long as you’re having fun, and I’m having fun, we’re ok...” and she keeps on teaching. In all, eight to nine students participate in this class and the easy-going nature allows students to attend when schedules permit: each student works at her own pace to generate work for her own purpose. “When I started four years ago, I took [art class] for six weeks and at the end, I didn’t have a thing to hang...and we made horrible clouds,” said one veteran student whose remarks sparked sharing of memories of other learning steps along the way. The same student continued her story, “and I decided to take six more weeks and thought if I still didn’t have anything [to hang], I was done...” This author knows the student and has seen her finished watercolor paintings exhibited at the Small House. Before leaving, I spoke with one quieter student, whom I knew as a school counselor in one of our schools. She recalled when there were no art teachers at L.C. Kerr School (grades K-2) thirty years ago; at that time two women volunteered to teach and coordinated a program of art lessons to share with Kerr School students. Again, I know these three women as friends in the community but did not realize their legacy as volunteer art educators.

Implications for Art Education

My ongoing private and public service work with SAC contributed to fieldwork investigations for this case study; previous knowledge overlapped with the information gained through recent dialogues, observed interactions, and gathered documents. By looking at two private practicing artists who provide art instruction at the Small House,

stories of private-public partnerships illustrate how art and art education contribute to the development of Sampson County.

My work with SAC continues with monthly Golf Tournament fundraising committee meetings and scheduled event (June 12-13). Projected conversations with Kara about summer art camps, workshops, and Art Club for 2014-2015 will look at how interested art students might continue to volunteer as service-learners. As I look at the possibility of connecting "Learn and Share"⁴ with interested high school art teachers and their students, I base my pursuit in the belief that volunteerism contributes to success stories for our community. Volunteerism isn't for everyone and sometimes I wonder why I do it. I recently bought *Between Grace and Fear*, written by William Cleveland and Patricia Shifferd (2010): "In beauty, people find dignity" (p. 31) begins Cleveland's interview with artist/advocate Lily Yeh. As the founding director of Barefoot Artists, Inc. Yeh has established a nonprofit organization that operates on "almost no maintenance" (p. 35) through the work of volunteers. Along with my own experiences, Yeh's story is one of many that support and ignite ideas for why I continue to do it. As I look at future possibilities, I believe in the potential of caring people who choose to bring about change, perhaps in small steps as volunteers in rural communities that may impact the future in bigger ways.

The bigger picture of art programming and activities at the Small House would benefit from investigations to look at logistics and impact of SAC as a nonprofit organization. With an interest in after-school art programming such as Art Club and summer art camps, dialogues with SAC might address issues of program design

and implementation. Wright (2007) outlines the benefits of community-based after-school art programs and highlights key components such as conceptualization, development, operation, and evaluation when looking at the framework for an effective arts program. To conceptualize, Wright points to the beneficial aspects of art for youths. If the benefits support the notion of cultural democracy, with social goals of building confidence and skills in learners, then assessment of outcomes may not be reflected in the evaluative methodologies that currently exist. Regarding development, programs need a clear “mission that actively embraces youth development and focuses on building individual and community assets and strengths” (p. 126). For operation, funding must be strong, supportive, and obtained from a variety of sources. Other necessary components include knowledgeable staff, safe and accessible environment, and parental involvement. The program content should address skill development, age-appropriate and diverse on-going activities, and the specific needs of participants.

As sole proprietor of Ho Yang Fine Art (HYFA) since 2010 (<http://www.hoyangfineart.com>), I continue to reflect on the value and meaning behind what I do as a professional artist, art educator, and advocate. Why art? I say, “...because art matters” and realize that this motto comes from years of exposure, education, and experimentation. HYFA is the culmination of a life-long internship in acquiring education through arts-based experiences. I hope to build and expand on existing stories, and perhaps generate new ones that could lead to private-public partnerships between interested citizens such as other artists, art educators, and community collectives.

References

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- Wright, R. (2007). A Conceptual and Methodological Framework for Designing and Evaluating Community- Based After-School Art Programs. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 13(1), 123-131.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Map of Alternative Learning Sites and Partners in Clinton, Sampson County, NC" (March 2014) retrieved from <http://becauseartmatters.weebly.com/alternative-sites---related-works.html>.
- ² Sampson County Arts Council website retrieved from http://sampsonarts.net/About_Us.html.

³ “Executive Summary” (April 2013) for UF course ARE 6933 Globalization and Art

Education retrieved from <http://becauseartmatters.weebly.com/community-research.html>.

⁴ “Learn and Share” (February 2013) for UF course ARE Contemporary Issues in Art

Education retrieved from

http://becauseartmatters.weebly.com/uploads/1/6/5/2/16529980/ho_indiepaper.pdf.

⁵ SAC 2012-2013 report and related background information were provided by executive

director during conversations on March 6, 2013 and March 21, 2013 and from

review of information related to SAC’s Fundraising Committee.

Author’s Note

On April 1, 2014 I submitted a draft copy of this written case study to Kara Donatelli and SAC Programming Chair for review and approval (approved April 3, 2014). YouTube presentation version is available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDx0B5tV3iM>.

Kara Donatelli - Executive Director of SAC

- E-mail: director@sampsonarts.org
- Phone: (910) 596-2533
- Address: 709 College Street, Clinton, NC 28328
- Website: <http://sampsonarts.net>

FMI please contact Grace W. Ho:

SAC member and volunteer (2008-present)

- Celebrity Golf Tournament Committee member (2012, 2013, 2014)
- Program Committee Chair (2008-2009)

Ho Yang Fine Art-Owner: Artist and Art Educator (2010-present)

- E-mail: gracehyfa@gmail.com
- Phone: (910) 990-1280
- Website: <http://www.hoyangfineart.com>

University of Florida, Master of Arts in Art Education (January 2013-present)

- Graduate student - <http://becauseartmatters.weebly.com>