

The following is a proposal for a storytelling project that I would like to implement in my hometown of Bethel, Alaska.

For the purposes of this proposal, I will be making up my own project name, mission statement, core values, overview and assessment plan. However, I want to clarify that when actually implementing this work, I would like the group I am working with to help with the creation of these. I want to work alongside the community as an accomplice because, “Meaningful alliances aren’t imposed, they are consented upon.”¹

I believe that honoring where we come from is of paramount importance. As Alaskans, we share a deep sense of pride over where we are from and I promote the self-sustainment of our community by encouraging those who leave pursuing higher education to eventually come back and help the community with the skills they have acquired. With that in mind, this project can act as the bedrock from which future projects can emerge.

Project Name

‘Where We Come From’ - Stories from the YK Delta

Mission Statement

“Where We Come From” is a project created for and by our community that aims to bridge generational gaps by telling stories, sharing arts and traditions, promoting creativity, and fostering a dialogue between the elders and the youth of Bethel and the surrounding communities of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. We believe that all stories and voices within a community need to be expressed.² From the company’s explorations

¹ <http://www.indigenousaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/> “Self proclaiming/confessional Allies”

² <http://www.artspotproductions.org/about.htm>

and discoveries, we intend to honor the process of building relationships as well as sustaining and nourishing cultural traditions. Our process will eventually lead to the creation of a theatrical production to share with the community and continue the dialogue with our audience. We hope to inspire a sense of possibility leading to sustained engagement with the arts as a creative outlet for all.

Core Values

1. *We honor the sacred space of our rehearsal room* - Whatever is said in the space, stays in the space, unless it is your own story and you choose to tell it. Our rehearsal room should be a safe and nurturing environment where no one should be afraid to say or do anything.
2. *Speak for yourself and no one else* - It is so easy to make general inferences about a group of people. We, as a community, actively promote the use of 'I' statements to avoid stereotyping and broad generalizations that may lead to hurtful outcomes. Never assume anything about yourself or those around you.
3. *Everyone is seen and heard* - No two people have the same story and everyone has a rich well to contribute from. Everyone should be treated as an asset. Our community is an asset.
4. *The process is more important than the product*³ - We do not focus on what our end product will be, but rather give weight to every step of our journey.
5. *Culture is a human right* - As expressed in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community."⁴

³ Petra Kuppers, "Introduction" from Community Performance: An Introduction (2007), P4

⁴ <https://usdac.us/statement-of-values/>

Project Narrative

Before beginning this work, I would like to go to Bethel City Council meetings as well as conduct interviews with elders and youth to assess the importance/need for this project first. This was something I learned from Harold Steward, *Executive Director of The Theatre Offensive*, Boston, MA. He said, "Be a good visitor first". Although I was born and raised in Bethel, I know I am a visitor now in my adult life and I would like to offer my service to my community in whatever way first before offering my skills and ideas.

I plan to then seek out help from members of our community who have been born and raised here, have an interest in theatre and the arts and who are of Yup'ik origin/can speak the language. Taking inspiration from *Mobility Movilidad's* project, *Proyecto Carrito*⁵, I want to make clear to our project participants that they have the option to speak in their Native tongue if English feels too uncomfortable or not as truthful to them.

In order to make this program known to a wide net of our community, I would like to talk to anyone and everyone about it. Word of mouth is the best way to get news around a small town fast. I'd also like to contact our local radio station, KYUK. My close friend, Katie Basile, is a Multimedia Producer/Director on the KYUK production team and is a valuable resource. She recently received an individual artist award from The Rasmuson Foundation to "explore climate change in the YK Delta through portraits and interviews with elders, illustrating the danger of disconnection from traditional

⁵ <http://www.mobilitymovilidad.org/proyecto-carrito/>

knowledge in the Yup'ik teaching.”⁶ I want to talk to my educator friends as well like Danielle Craven, Haley Hanson, Madeline Reichard and Liann Walgenbach to gain their insight into which students would perhaps benefit from this program the most. I hope to have about 16 participants of different ages by the end of the search. The project will run throughout the summer months for 10 weeks, ideally meeting 2 times a week. The layout of the weeks will run as follows:

Weeks 1 and 2 - Community Building

The first 2-4 meetings will be solely focused on creating our community and establishing trust, because I firmly believe that work suffers if there is a lack of it. I will lead name games and getting to know each other exercises such as, “The North Winds Blows”, “Place your hand on someone’s shoulder if...”, and “Object In the Middle” to name a few. All of these are games that help you remember names, discover similarities between yourself and the group and hopefully build trust.

Weeks 3 and 4 - Storytelling

In the third week, I would like to introduce storytelling. I’ll have them pair up and tell each other 3 things that they don’t know about each other and then have them introduce their partner. I’ll also have them tell the story of, ‘How did you get to the workshop today?’ Then ask them to decipher what was the beginning, middle and end or their partner’s stories was. Then retell them to the class.

I will lead them into ‘Story Circles’⁷. I will mix together different generations into small groups and then ask, ‘What is your origin story?’. I believe this to be a very

⁶ https://www.rasmuson.org/arts/individual-artist-awards/2019-artists/?fbclid=IwAR3nGISDly6SrmQog4hmgPwdfDwsLh2zfiXrN_FGWru-JJRerUftBecXNfo

⁷ <http://www.racematters.org/storycircleprocess.htm> - John O’Neal, Junebug Productions

important role in taking ownership over your own personal story and how empowering that can be. I would like to discuss how dangerous it is to have one 'single story.'⁸ After that first story telling round, I want to open up the discussion to the whole group and ask them, 'What can we learn from each other?' and 'What stories do you want to hear more of?'

Weeks 5 and 6 - Folklore and Tradition

After a couple of weeks of telling their own stories, I want to ask the group, 'What individual skills do we all have and what can we bring to the group? What can we teach each other? What is everyone interested in?' and 'How do we proceed from here?' What would we like to create together? I would like to bring in a local storyteller, perhaps a local elder, or a history/Yup'ik teacher who I plan to meet during my research process and have them tell traditional stories. I'll ask the youth in the group to listen to legends and folklore and ask them to put themselves into the shoes of the characters in the stories.

I'll have them devise small scenes according to what stood out to them. To begin this process, I will pick out one well known Alaskan myth and tell a bullet pointed version of it to play the game "Whoosh!" where I read the story and invite the group to play the different parts in the story by creating the image in the middle of the circle. I'll ask them to discuss/explore, 'How do traditional stories relate to us today? How can we learn from them?'

I'll do some of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre, whereby we act out the devised scenes they have created around stories/legends and ask an audience member to

⁸ https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

freeze the action at any time and replace a character in the scene to change the ending of the story.

Weeks 7 and 8 - Asset Mapping and Creating

“Every community should have the opportunity to dramatize its history and local life.”

- Dudley Cocke, Artistic Director of Roadside Theatre

From the storytelling weeks, I will pose the question to the group, “What do we want to create together to show and interact with our community?” It will either be a story telling event, or a dance, or a small devised piece about origin and culture. But I will leave it up to them to decide.

Then we will do a brainstorm together about what we each offer the group. We may have musicians, dancers, singers. I want to acknowledge and celebrate everyone’s unique gifts and offerings and give them the opportunity to share them with us. We should have a good idea about who is in the room by now and our devising process will begin.

Week 9 - Developing

This week will act as a tech week where we map out the logistics of our performance and iron out anything else that comes up, as well as rehearse for the final performance the following week. I will actively encourage them to act and share the work they have done, but no one should feel like they have to perform if they don’t want to. That would go against the empowering nature of the work we have created over the last few weeks.

Week 10 - Performance and Celebration

“Art is meant to be a window into another world, to connect to people, invite them somewhere that perhaps they have never been, engage and empower them.”

- Robert West, Working Films

I would like the event to feel as warm and welcoming as possible. Food is always a good idea. Bethel is very good at organizing potlucks and many people have contributed to them over the years. We will have our performance, which will be between 45-60 minutes long and may or may not include audience participation. Then there will be an informal gathering afterwards to talk to the audience about what they experienced and what they want to see more of.

Assessment

Throughout the entirety of the project, I will be keeping a journal, marking our process and daily offerings.

To make sure everyone's voices are heard and acknowledged, even if they aren't the talkative group members, I would like a lot of sharing to be done in pairs or small groups of 4 throughout the process. I may never hear these dialogues, but they are important for the participants.

Katie Basile has been exploring documentary work and multimedia storytelling with Alaskan youth. With permission from the group, I would love to invite her, and any young people she may be working with at the time of the project, to come to a couple of our workshops to document our work through video/photos. This will be vital for future projects. She is a warmhearted individual who is very well liked and active in our community, so I believe her presence will be less imposing than some random videographer. She would most likely want to participate in the workshops as well.

Taking from *Urban Bush Women's Experience Survey*. I would like to offer the group a moment to write their own poetic reflections after their very first story telling experience as well as at the end of the project. These questions may include: 'I come from...', 'When I first entered the room I saw...', 'When we told our story, I felt...', 'I felt powerful when...', 'Right now I need...', 'Tomorrow I hope...'. I think that these poetic reflections offer a valid insight into the feelings of the group without the clinical nature of a survey.

If at all possible, I would love to welcome a representative from BNC (Bethel Native Corporation) to come in and participate in a day of workshopping at some point during the 8 weeks, so that there is a firsthand lived in experience of the work. This will be a good way to articulate the importance of this program and hopefully gain future funding.

On the performance day, I would like it to be filmed and I would love to record audience feedback on a voice recorder with permission from selected spectators.

Conclusion

The nature of this work is fluid and community led. This can only be a rough blueprint of what the project will end up being. It all depends on who is in the room at the time. I hope that this proposal excites and intrigues you as much as it does me and I would be more than happy to have an open dialogue with anyone and everyone who would like to be involved as a participant, supporter or financial contributor.