

## TRAUMA PREVENTION INITIATIVE – ARTS INTEGRATION PROJECT



"Still I Rise" mural by artist Bryant Mangum installed on the northwest corner of 125th Street and Vermont Avenue in West Athens. July, 2018.

During late spring and early summer of 2018, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission (LACC) partnered with the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network (AIYN) and Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) to support Trauma Prevention Initiative (TPI) efforts in the Westmont/West Athens and Willowbrook communities.

At the heart of this project is the core belief that integrating the arts is an effective strategy to build community health and well-being. Arts engagement is correlated with many protective public health indicators, including improved school performance, self-efficacy, social-emotional development, and physical and mental health. On a structural level, civic engagement, collective efficacy, economic

development and improved quality of life are outcomes related to the infusion and accessibility of arts and culture within communities. In fact, the mere presence of cultural assets located within a particular region heightens social well-being by deepening protective factors for health, personal security and school effectiveness.

Between April and July 2018, LACAC and AIYN implemented arts-based strategies to build the capacity of youth and adults to support each other through their shared vulnerabilities and aspirations, connecting them to a purpose that incentivizes people to take care of each other and leaves community members feeling stronger and less isolated.

### BACKGROUND

In 2002, LA County voters approved Measure B, a special tax that provides revenue to support trauma centers, emergency medical services, trauma prevention and bio-terrorism response activities. In December 2015, DPH was allocated Measure B funding to support the development of TPI efforts focused on reducing the disproportionate level of violence-related trauma visits in South Los Angeles. In 2017, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors expanded TPI funding to pilot innovative violence prevention and intervention strategies in Westmont/West Athens, Willowbrook, Florence-Firestone and unincorporated Compton. The following year, DPH enlisted the expertise of LACAC and AIYN in integrating the arts into TPI efforts. The main project goal was to design and implement arts-based strategies that enhance trauma prevention, community engagement and revitalization opportunities in Westmont/West Athens and Willowbrook.

The project timeline, between April and July, was significantly condensed due to challenges with contracting and project clarification. As a result, the program design was adapted to produce communitywide impact within the time constraints and to lay the groundwork for potential longer-term investment and engagement in arts-based strategies. Staff capacity was also a challenge during the early stage of the project, but the hiring of a project manager by AIYN helped to relieve some of the pressure on

LACAC staff in coordinating stakeholder relationships and contracting with local artists and organizations. Throughout the project, LACAC and AIYN met regularly with DPH and community leaders at Community Action for Peace (CAP) meetings to plan, debrief and address concerns regarding each of the project deliverables.

## TIMELINE

### Willowbrook

- Apr 12, 26                      CAP Meeting at Mona Park
- May 9                              CAP Meeting at Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Public Health
- May 19                            We Are Willowbrook Summit at Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science
- May 24                            CAP Meeting at Mona Park
- Jun 8                                Peer Learning Exchange #1 at Willowbrook Senior Center
- Jun 22                              Peer Learning Exchange #2 at Willowbrook Senior Center
- Sep 5                                Myraculous Media photography exhibit at Willowbrook Library
- Sep 5                                Willowbrook Touchstones mural unveiling at MLK Jr. Center for Public Health

### Westmont/West Athens

- Apr 4 & May 2, 30              CAP Meeting at Helen Keller Park
- Jun 9                                Westmont/West Athens 2018 Unity Summit at Los Angeles Southwest College
- Jun 10-Jul 12                    Summer Wellness Workshops at Girls Club of Los Angeles
- Jun 27                                CAP Meeting at Helen Keller Park
- Jun 29                                Peer Learning Exchange #1 at CHANGES community center
- Jul 9-Aug 13                      Healing Hearts Art Workshops at CHANGES community center
- Jul 13                                Peer Learning Exchange #2 at CHANGES community center
- Jul 22                                "Still I Rise" mural completed at 125th Street and Vermont Ave

### General

- Jul 17                                TPI Advisory Committee Meeting at California Endowment

## KEY STRATEGIES

The TPI arts integration project was guided by the belief that centering the arts is a critical strategy for public health and safety, and that collaboration is essential for long-term change. To put this into practice, LACAC and AIYN looked for ways to partner with those already in the community, place trust in community wisdom, and seek out ways to increase arts engagement beyond artistic performances.

AIYN's creative development process is designed to support a vision for youth and community justice that strengthens public health and safety while simultaneously decreasing and replacing harmful structures that perpetuate criminalization, incarceration and other negative outcomes. A culturally relevant, community- and youth-centered arts practice is inherently inclusive. It grounds participants in shared human experiences and offers opportunities to incorporate individual stories into artmaking. Arts and cultural resources provide a powerful outlet for personal struggles and is a conduit for relationship- and community-building by valuing inclusion, self-expression and social connection.

With these principles in mind, the project was implemented through three core strategies:

**Summits** provided space for community members to participate in conversations, share resources and identify next steps to reduce violence and trauma in their communities. For their part, LACAC and AIYN supported the integration of arts activities and performances. Each day-long Summit included community speakers and performers, while arts partners facilitated interactive activities. Breakout sessions covered topics like trauma/healing, economic/workforce development, civic engagement, youth empowerment, faith-based collaboration, law enforcement and community relationships.



Westmont/West Athens Unity Summit. June, 2018.

Artists and performers were drawn from each community, with musical performances by local youth scheduled at both Summits. The Willowbrook Summit featured three local residents as storytellers to recount the history of the neighborhood. Arts organization LA Commons invited participants to share their thoughts about hope and healing by creating glass touchstones to be later used in a community art project. Youth voices were prominent in Westmont/West Athens, where four gifted K-12 students from diverse backgrounds – two from foster homes – showcased their talents through spoken word performances. Each of these local students, ranging from fourth to tenth grade, gave powerful accounts of their experiences as young people with creative aspirations.

#### We Are Willowbrook 2018 Summit

- Arts Partners: LA Commons
- Emcee: Dr. Perry Crouch
- Performers: Fellowship Baptist Church Youth Choir
- Local Storytellers: Ebony Luchien, Jacques Fields, Stephen Fisher
- Attendance: 150

#### Westmont/West Athens 2018 Unity Summit

- Arts Partners: Bryant Mangum, LA Commons
- Performers: Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center Drumline, Ian Flowers, Janae Burney, Matthew Sutton, Phenomenal Angels (Arianna and Lilyanna Smalls), Rhythm Arts Alliance, Washington High School Jazz Band
- Attendance: 189

**Peer Learning Exchanges** partnered with local artists and organizations to explore healing-informed arts engagement that builds community resilience and encourages storytelling and advocacy. Using visual art, theatre, music and creative writing as tools for community-building, participants of Peer Learning Exchanges built trust in each other, increased their sense of empathy, and learned strategies for emotion regulation and restorative justice. Across all four Peer Learning Exchanges, a majority of attendees who responded to a post-event survey reported feeling confident about integrating art into their everyday lives, understanding the strengths of



Willowbrook Peer Learning Exchange #2. June, 2018.

art-based organizations serving their communities, and building community identity and pride through the arts.

#### Willowbrook Peer Learning Exchange #1

- Facilitator: Arrowyn Ambrose (AIYN)
- Arts Partners: LA Commons, Unusual Suspects (AIYN)
- Attendance: 28

#### Willowbrook Peer Learning Exchange #2

- Facilitator: Zoe Rawson (AIYN)
- Arts Partners: LA Commons, Street Poets Inc. (AIYN)
- Attendance: 35

#### Westmont/West Athens Peer Learning Exchange #1

- Facilitator: Arrowyn Ambrose
- Arts Partners: Bryant Mangum, Rhythm Arts Alliance (AIYN)
- Attendance: 7



Westmont/West Athens Peer Learning Exchange #1. June, 2018.

#### Westmont/West Athens Peer Learning Exchange #2

- Facilitator: Arrowyn Ambrose
- Arts Partners: Mary Sutton (Collective Remake), WriteGirl (AIYN)
- Attendance: 25

The following are highlights drawn from survey responses at each Peer Learning Exchange:

- “I learned how art and acting can improve and facilitate communication across ethnic lines.”
- “More people need to learn and experience healing through the arts.”
- “Me gustó cómo el arte tiene muchas maneras de sacarte de una depresión.” (I liked how art has many ways to get you out of a depression.)
- “I learned that everyone has a story and that we all go through things. For some people, it’s hard to explain or open up. Nonetheless, it’s importance to share your voice.”
- “I did not know what to expect [from the event]. I hated getting up this morning but I am so glad I did.”
- “I learned about the values of sharing one’s story and finding resilience and inner peace.”
- “The things that I’ve learned here are helping me support my son in his time of need. They will also be useful for the youth I work with myself.”
- “Si pique conocieron lo extraordinario y fantástico que es liberarse por medio de la música... Es importante estar bien con uno mismo para poder estar bien con los demás.” (If only people knew how extraordinary and fantastic it is to gain freedom through music... It is important to be good with oneself in order to be good with others.)

**Community Arts Projects** invested in local artists and organizations to use public art and community arts engagement as a way to transform negative perceptions of the community, beautify spaces and express community strength.

#### Willowbrook Community Art Projects

- LA Commons (Willowbrook Touchstones)
- Myraculous Media (photography project and exhibit)

### Westmont/West Athens Community Art Projects

- Bryant Mangum (mural)
- CHANGES (Healing Hearts Art Workshops)
- Girls Club of Los Angeles (summer wellness workshops)

In total, ten community-based arts organizations and 28 local artists participated across these three strategies, reaching 509 community members of all ages. To make each event accessible to families and caregivers of children, children’s activities and childcare were offered at each of the Summits and Peer Learning Exchanges. Translation services in Spanish were also provided to attendees.

The collective power of the arts resides in its ability to mobilize and empower people to shape their lives and their environments, setting the groundwork for addressing social conditions and structural inequities. Participants in the Summits and Peer Learning Exchanges noted an increased sense of connection with each other and greater pride in their community. The arts were used to lift up and call out community challenges in creative and unexpected ways.

### **COMMUNITY ARTS PROJECTS**



Touchstones to be integrated into a mural at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Public Health.

### Willowbrook Touchstones

LA Commons has worked in the Willowbrook community for five years, initially with LACAC to map the neighborhood’s cultural assets and subsequently with the office of Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas to create a gateway mural at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Hospital. The organization is also working with a local high school to create a mural that guides students and community members to a wellness center on its campus. These projects have enabled LA Commons to develop strong local connections.

The central focus of the project was to celebrate sources of healing in Willowbrook. LA Commons began the project by developing relationships with key local stakeholders who became integral to hiring an artist with sensibilities aligned with the community. The project artist was expected to be skilled at leading others in the completion of artwork, to work as part of a team in the creative process, and to inspire community dialogue and engagement in collective artmaking. Los Angeles–based artist and designer [Grace Lynne Haynes](#) was ultimately hired by LA Commons for the Willowbrook Touchstones project. Prior to this commission, Lynne Haynes produced social impact design and illustration work for other Los Angeles communities, including Koreatown and Leimert Park.

The project was initiated by engaging community members at the Willowbrook Summit. At the event, the community had the opportunity to share their thoughts about trauma prevention, hope and healing by creating glass touchstones to be incorporated into a “touchstone tree” mural. Touchstones celebrating the people, places or ideas that enrich people’s lives in Willowbrook were also gathered at Peer Learning Exchanges and Parks After Dark events.

Following the creation of touchstones, Grace Lynne Haynes and youth assistant Emily Lares Pérez completed initial mural designs for partners and stakeholders to review. After receiving feedback from the community, they finalized their designs for the mural and prepared it for fabrication, attaching mosaic components to produce a final artwork for the healing room space at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Public Health. The mural will be unveiled to the public at a grand opening of the Community Healing and Trauma Prevention Center on September 5, 2018. This event will feature a morning of healing arts, spiritual wellness and guest speakers, including Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas.

“As an artist and social impact designer, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to create art that represents healing, beauty and relief,” Lynne Haynes said. “Seeing the room [at the Center for Public Health] transformed through artwork reminded me of the power that art has to brighten up a room and spread positivity. I am looking forward to seeing the community's response, and continuing to grow as a community-based artist.”

Myraculous Media photography exhibit (Willowbrook)

Myraculous Media is a Los Angeles–based company that specializes in graphic design, photography, film and music. The company was tasked with documenting the people and places of Willowbrook with a series of photographs that tell a positive and uplifting story of the community. Ten photographs were printed on canvas and exhibited at the June 22 Peer Learning Exchange at Willowbrook Senior Center. The images served as a catalyst for group conversations about personal histories and experiences. In addition to the photography exhibit, Myraculous Media screened a short video of interviews with community members who attended the May 19 Willowbrook Summit and local Parks After Dark events.



Fellowship Baptist Church in Willowbrook. Photo credit: Myraculous Media

“I was honored to have been chosen to work on the Willowbrook arts project,” photographer and company founder Myracle said. “Not being from the area, I was able to step out of my comfort zone and walk into a world of history, passion and culture like I’ve never experienced before. I have such an overwhelming sense of love and respect for the city and the community within.”



Mature H.O.T. Women’s Program. June–July, 2018.

Summer Wellness Workshops (Westmont/West Athens)

Since 1972, the Girls Club of Los Angeles (GCLA) has served over 75,000 children (ages 2–18) living in South Los Angeles, addressing a variety of unmet needs like children living in violent and unstable environments, high obesity, youth in the juvenile justice system, and the lack of high-quality child care.

Residents of Westmont/West Athens requested two events offered by GCLA in the past year to be made available on an ongoing basis: Let’s Be Whole, a wellness program created by Nina Womack of Transmedia 360, and the Mature H.O.T. (Health-Conscious, Optimistic, Triumphant) Women’s Program, a dance workshop and master class led by choreographer Kevin Iega Jeff. Let’s Be Whole was

part of a wellness day for families in November 2017. The program offered a series of workshops, including a food demonstration, yoga class, aromatherapy session, iridology readings and stress management

workshop, among others. The Mature H.O.T. Women’s Program was a two-hour workshop offered in January 2018.

Based on positive feedback from participants, GCLA worked to sustain these programs by securing a \$5,000 grant from the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health in May 2018. Matching grant funds from LACAC allowed the Summer Wellness Workshops to run continuously from June 10 through July 12, providing 35 local women up to ten sessions of three-hour workshops comprised of the Mature H.O.T. Women’s Program and rotating activities from Let’s Be Whole. The Summer Wellness Workshops combined dance, holistic education and dialogue to raise participant awareness of health and well-being and to provide a structure for supporting health-related goals to be achieved during the summer. Another objective of the project was to cultivate local residents into advocates for additional arts programming in the community.

#### “Still I Rise” Mural (Westmont/West Athens)

Project artist [Bryant Mangum](#) was formerly incarcerated as a teenager for the nonviolent crime of graffiti, serving four years on an eight-year sentence in state prison. Released early for good behavior, Mangum is now an independent artist and activist based in Los Angeles. Prior to the mural project, Mangum led art activities at the Westmont/West Athens Unity Summit and June 29 Peer Learning Exchange, where he was able to witness the community’s reflections on violence-related trauma and healing. The artist assembled a small team of youth assistants (Victoria Sosa and Tony) to support the creation of a mural that would acknowledge instances of trauma and abuse within the community while reflecting on ways to heal and move forward.

“These projects were inspirational and provided healing for not only myself but the people that it reached,” Mangum said. “I saw that art heals through the actions of people. These projects solidified my purpose and role in this world as an artist who heals.”

Mangum and his team knocked on the doors of West Athens residents to secure a site for the mural and ultimately found a local resident who gave permission for the artist to paint the mural on a wall adjoining their property, located on the northwest corner of 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Vermont Avenue. About 40-50 community members interacted with the artist and his team to admire the mural, ask them questions and thank them for their work. The image of a hummingbird was chosen for its spiritual meaning, while the title of the mural, “Still I Rise,” references a poem about self-respect and confidence by writer Maya Angelou.



Healing Hearts Art Workshop at CHANGES community center. July, 2018.

#### Healing Hearts Art Workshops (Westmont/West Athens)

Over six weeks, 60 community members – primarily grandparents, parents and foster parents of local youth – participated in weekly two-hour painting and drawing classes at community center Community

Helping Adolescents Needing Guidance Education & Support (CHANGES). The workshops provided a safe and supportive space for adults and seniors to relieve their stress, spend time with their peers and participate in artmaking.

### **NEXT STEPS**

The impact of centering the arts as a way to build community, strengthen protective factors, and invest meaningfully in local community efforts is clear through our evaluation and data collection. This makes the case for continuing to explore ways that arts strategies and Peer Learning Exchanges can become an ongoing practice within TPI. Gang intervention/violence prevention practitioners can and should include the arts as part of their healing-informed practice. Based on the positive impact of arts engagement, it would be worth exploring the creation of a fund, managed by TPI communities, that includes support for community arts programming and projects, and embeds arts engagement (not just performance) into all community events. A locally controlled community arts fund would provide opportunities for community members to tell their stories, express their community identity, and increase their sense of empowerment and ownership.