
GUILD NOTES



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Arts Education as a Fundamental, Civil, and Human Right

BY JEFF POULIN

PUTTING OUR VALUES FIRST: COMMUNITY ARTS EDUCATION IN SOLIDARITY WITH TEACHERS

**Interview with Aurora Toshiko King
Director of Education, [Marwen](#) (Chicago, IL)**

Marwen provides free year-round, out-of-school visual arts, college planning, and career development programs to young people from nearly every neighborhood in Chicago.

Right before I left Oakland to move to Chicago, there was a teachers' strike. As an arts education community, we had already been convening a group of organizations who had a shared commitment to social justice to talk about advocacy, resource sharing, and best practices. Because we were already working together, we were able to respond quickly when the strike happened. This group, made up of teaching artists and arts organizations, drafted a letter and took a unified stance that we were not going to cross picket lines. Instead we moved our programs to "Solidarity Schools," which were basically community-based organizations who opened their doors to young people, provided meals, and mobilized resources from community partners such as arts organizations. We also were able to work with our funders to continue funding these programs outside of the schools. It was amazing to be able to act so quickly as a community in response to the strike in support of young people and educators, and to provide teaching artists a way to stand in solidarity with teachers and also stay in community with young people and families. Not only did this effort galvanize arts education organizations to work together, it was a real act of solidarity between teaching artists and classroom teachers.

When I moved to Chicago to work with Marwen and there was a teachers' strike, I was brand new to the city and not

as involved in the local organizing as I had been in Oakland. Marwen is center-based, so the response was programmatic and focused on how to open our doors to young people and being a resource in the community. At Marwen we have this incredible resource, a huge building that is equipped for lots and lots of young people. We usually work with high school students, but during the strike we expanded and expanded programming to everyone from first grade and up. We improvised and did different kinds of programming: some young people went to the picket lines and interviewed striking teachers. We did a teach-in about the history of school strikes in Chicago and offered lots of arts programming. This was a real community effort; families, Marwen young artists, local restaurants, Americorps volunteers, staff and teaching artists, colleagues interested facilitating teach-ins all worked together to make 11 days joyful, creative programming happen. We ate good food, made lots of art, and grew our community.

As organizations, we have to put our values first. It's a powerful act, whether that means making a statement or changing programming. In the end, we were able to mobilize for 11 days of full programming for all ages. A funder came in and funded the whole project, which was huge.

I feel that both strikes provided a unique opportunity to build responsively, learn and deepen the ways that we partner and think about our work. There was definitely a sense of movement solidarity, which felt important and essential. As an arts educator, I am thinking about what we can learn, how we can shift, and how we can be responsive in the most joyful way possible?

Last November, at the 82nd annual National Conference on Community Arts Education, Amir Whitaker took the stage to make the case for a new path forward for arts education advocacy.

The Journey of An Artist, Educator, and Civil Rights Lawyer
Amir is an artist himself with a unique backstory. Growing up in a house filled with music – R&B, hip hop...always playing loud! – he followed in his dad's footsteps as a musician. At age sixteen, he got his first set of turntables and purchased his first guitar. With no access to music education in his school, he took it upon himself to create his own access to arts education through his family and his neighborhood.

If we were watching his life in a movie, this would be a flashback foreshadowing his founding of Project Knucklehead, which uses education, music, art, and other forms of self-expression as tools to inspire our most vulnerable youth. The organization builds on Amir's belief that "Creative energy without a creative outlet is a recipe for disaster."

It all started in Miami when observing the juvenile justice system and the process for court appointed schooling for systems-involved youth. [Project Knucklehead](#) created a music program for young people in detention, which for many was their first exposure to music. For one student, who had dropped out of high school, got arrested, and was remanded to go to school, he told project staff that "This [music] is the reason I want to go to school."

Though he is an arts educator today, his background actually stems in that of civil rights law. His work as a civil rights advocate and lawyer brought him all around the United States to Alabama, Florida, and eventually California. In this journey, he saw one thing constant: there was simply not equitable access to arts education opportunities for youth, particularly for black and brown youth. In Alabama, he struggled with what to do, but when he reached California, he saw a path forward using the laws on the books to reframe the argument and increase access for all students.

What's Happening in California?

In the past year, the California ACLU and such groups as the California Alliance for Arts Education and CREATE CA have been pursuing a new means of advocacy for arts education – framing access to arts learning opportunities as a civil rights issue utilizing the state's data which reveals arts gaps based on race and socio-economic status.

For the ACLU, this is an issue of an infringement on a student's freedom of speech and free expression. By not granting these through arts education in schools, the state is limiting young people from fully being able to participate in communities, and, in part, a form of cultural censorship by not allowing their creative expression.

Arts advocates, on the other hand, have historically been more focused on education policies and the law. In the state of California, the education code (which was adopted in 2000) mandates access to arts learning opportunities for all students in the state. However, many districts are not complying with this law resulting in over 100,000 students with no arts in schools at all, despite the law requiring it.

The data has been strong for years: the arts increase attendance, raise achievement and grow graduation rates. However, when the schools give some students access to the arts and not others, we, as a society create a gap. We often read about opportunity gaps, but this is an arts gap...and the gaps are not often where you might expect them. Throughout the State of California, charter schools make up about 10% of all K-12 schools but produce about 30% of the students who have no access to the arts. When promising greatest flexibility in academic offerings, charter schools are often the biggest arts-gap-offenders.

This issue is broader than just access in K-12 schools, however, because the systems in place regarding higher education also preclude students who do not have access to the arts. Since 2006, the University of California System has required visual and performing arts credits in order to be accepted. So, if a student does not have access to the arts in high school, like in the case of Amir himself, then they are immediately



Amir delivering his keynote speech at the 2019 Conference for Community Arts Education. Photo by Mei Makino

precluded from admittance to the state college system. The ripple effect of no arts access in schools compiles to affect college and beyond for hundreds of thousands of students in the state.

Arts Education as a National Civil Rights Issue

The research has shown that where arts gaps do exist, they often fall along racial and socio-economic lines. This issue persists beyond just the state of California, too. In 2012, Obama-era then-Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, highlighted this finding:

“For a host of reasons, high-quality arts education is absolutely critical to providing all students with a world-class education....Unfortunately, the arts opportunity gap is widest for children in high-poverty schools. This is absolutely an equity issue and a civil rights issue.” The language used by the Secretary stresses the importance and urgency of this issue within the federal context.

Shortly after, in 2015, the Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, serving as our nation’s federal education law. The arts hold a prominent place among the “well rounded subjects” which must be taught to every child in the country. However, the law also democratized control of the implementation and monitoring of education to the states and local districts, thus creating more steps for arts education advocates to hold our government accountable to delivering on this promise .

The same urgency of Secretary Duncan in 2012, was amplified by Amir Whitaker in 2019: “It is our collective work as a society

to keep the arts alive.” His call rings true for us all, whether a K-12 certified arts educator, a creative youth development practitioner, a policy-maker, artist, parent, or young person – we all have a responsibility to speak up and advocate for more equitable access to arts education, particularly for those groups who have the system working against them.

A Movement from Civil to Human Rights

Around the globe, advocates have been framing the arts in the way of California and the United States for several decades – largely since the UNESCO adoption of the 2006 Lisbon Roadmap for Arts Education. Advocates can cite that arts education is a fundamental right by tracing the policy and international doctrine lineage to the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Within these international doctrines, all have the right to be equal before the law and entitled to no discrimination (UDHR, Article 7), the right to education (UDHR, Article 26), and the right to freedom of expression (UDHR, Article 19). Additionally, children specifically have the right to education (CRC, Article 28), the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (CRC, Article 31), the right to form his or her own views, and the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child (CRC, Article 12).

Further, for those member states ratifying the CRC agree to “respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.” However, there is one issue here: The United States is the one country within the United

Nations which has not ratified the CRC.

Regardless, though, there is a lot to be learned from the international dialogue about the right to arts and cultural education. There has been a large movement to change the narrative around arts education away from the more ‘instrumental’ arguments (like raised test scores, attendance, and graduation rates) to a more philosophical argument (like fundamental, civil, or human rights). Especially since we see young creative leading the charge of national and global movements, like Fridays for Future and A March for Our Lives, we have also witnessed a similar shift in the centering of young people and a reiteration of the urgency to deal with the arts gap once and for all.

In October 2019, at the World Alliance for Arts Education conference, held in Frankfurt, Germany, delegates from 49 nations crafted the Frankfurt Declaration, which stresses the urgency to reform supports for arts education in nations around the globe and implores government agencies to take action:

“[We] call for transformative action for arts education as being integral to sustaining communities and meeting the needs of all people in the face of critical global challenges...[This] Declaration celebrates the unprecedented arts performances linked to ... movements led by children and young people throughout the world. It asserts arts education as a right for all towards the nurturing of a paradigm of solidarity, cooperation and good living”

Through this declaration, the parties express their desire to hold a 3rd World Congress on Arts Education, which will foster the exchange of ideas and urge policy development to close arts gaps (like the ones seen in the United States, and specifically in California) and fully embrace a new narrative of arts education as a fundamental, civil, and human right.

“We Can’t Have Creative Dead Zones”

In Amir’s keynote, he urged those in attendance – artists, educators, youth, and more – to not let us allow any more creative dead zones. By this he means we have to use our voice to drive change and close the arts gaps. We can do this by understanding this change of frame and by joining or creating coalitions to hold governments accountable.

Whether in your own community, at your state capitol, in Washington, D.C., or on the world stage, we as community arts leaders must take action. It begins by understanding the policies which impact our work, synthesizing the data to find solutions, changing our frame of argument and mobilizing for the cause.

This is our charge: learn, speak up, and take action.

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of being very open, trusting and respectful allows us to share freely in what we really think. Transparency is big for us. I think in a lot of other spaces that try to involve youth, it’s common for a lot of information to be held back from young people and their voice to not hold as much power in some situations. Because of our dynamic within RE:FRAME, we are able to share our different experiences as we are all in different stages of our life. All of staff is in a constant state of learning what is happening with young people, what is happening in our communities, life skills and real world lessons we may have not gotten from other parts in our life.

Creative Action & Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble

Austin, TX

Micky Johnson, Youth Leader

Creative Action’s Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble is delivered in partnership with Expect Respect—a program of SAFE (formerly SAFE Place). Since 2003, Changing Lives involves teen artist-activists that create and tour original, youth-led performances focused on violence prevention, healthy relationships, and social justice.

I am a part of a group called Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble, which is made up of 20-25 high school students from 9th-12th grade from across Austin. We learn about social justice all around Austin; We educate ourselves; We learn about how these issues impact our daily lives. There is one theme every year, and this year’s theme is ‘jealousy.’ We write about it as a group, and then we go into middle schools to tour around and perform.

Changing Lives opened me up to the world of social justice and activism. Even though activism was something I was always interested in, I didn’t have the resources to act on that interest. This is my fourth year in Changing Lives, and now I have the honor of being a peer leader and an assistant director.

Overall, social justice work is really heavy. Conversations get overwhelming and difficult but doing this work with art eases the stress of it all. Art helps balance out the heavier stuff and combining these worlds of social justice and art allows me to bring the skills I have in my creative part of my life to the organizing part of my life. Whenever I have met people combining social justice and art, it just feels like a different approach than most organizing. It creates a community that makes this work easier to do. For me, it is second nature to make things, and to make things with other people.