

Changing the Paradigm for Recovery: A New Approach to Behavioral Health and Community Building

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September 2011

At Mural Arts, we believe that art can shine a light into dark places, draw out the best in people and communities, and ultimately transform spaces and change lives. In this spirit, we began a partnership with the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services to create mural projects that confront issues plaguing our communities such as drug addiction, mental illness and homelessness. We envisioned mural projects that were integrated into a path to recovery, tapping into the therapeutic and community-building nature of public art to create a deeper connection. The goal of this partnership was to bring a unique approach to the delivery of services and to start the difficult conversations about struggle with mental health and addiction within communities, bringing these issues to the forefront. Our intent was to build community by bringing people together around a common goal: the creation of a large-scale work of art. Through this unity, ultimately we wanted to reduce the stigma that sometimes serves as an

obstacle in taking that first step towards recovery.

The framework developed for the pilot projects of the Porch Light Initiative is broad-based, approaching behavioral health as not just a problem with an individual, but also a responsibility for service providers and the community to create support so that recovery can happen. Each project works on 3 levels. At the individual level, it helps the participant become part of something larger, and this connection becomes a support tool, and also aids in creating a sense of self-determination. At the provider level, the projects become incorporated as part of a treatment strategy that forms a deeper relationship between the provider and the participant. At the community level, the project builds a bridge between the provider, the neighborhood and the individuals in recovery.

Partnering with 3 locations in our pilot year, we created space for individuals seeking behavioral health services to become a deeper part of these organizations, and ultimately of the surrounding community. One project, Personal Renaissance, took place at Jewish Employment and Vocational Services (JEVS) on 4th and Berks Streets and worked with individuals in recovery from drug addiction. Over the course of the year we invited those receiving treatment at JEVS to art-making and poetry workshops.

What happened in those workshops was incredible. We

were inspired by the candor and courage of participants, and their honest desire for recovery, change, and to become part of a community. Lead muralist James Burns worked side by side with the group and was impressed by the tenacity and hard work of participants on their journey to recovery.

We saw the same community-building in another pilot project, *Finding Home*, by Kathryn Pannepacker and Josh Sarantitis. Ms. Pannepacker, a textile artist, hosted workshops at several sites around the city that provide services to homeless individuals. Participants worked with her to write their hopes and dreams on strips of parachute cloth that were painted and woven into the finished mural. Ms. Pannepacker also taught participants how to weave scarves, which they were able to sell. Week after week, participants returned to the project and even followed the project as it rotated between sites. Due to the success of the project, Ms. Pannepacker has continued to work with a group of participants at her studio, continuing to teach weaving and fiber arts.

This is the kind of engagement that we are seeing on these projects. People who were struggling come to the sites to get help, and become involved in something tangible that begins a sustained process, forging connections between people that provide support along the path to recovery.

During these pilot projects, we discovered that the social power of mural-making could have a real role to play in

creating a new model for the delivery of behavioral health services, transforming sites where treatment is received into places of community and creation, where participants are asked to share something of themselves in the project. Communities at these sites, in turn, are also asked to participate, listen and support, and the result is truly life-changing and transformative.

In the next phase of the partnership, we have begun to replicate this model, choosing sites in 3 Philadelphia neighborhoods hardest hit by drug use, violence and mental illness. Using the framework developed in our pilot projects, we hope to address the disparity in mental health and wellness in our city's poorest communities. We are currently working in 3 zip codes in North Philadelphia over the next 3 years to create long-term projects that have a lasting impact on participants. In the past, the provision of services in these communities seemed intractable, but we are beginning to see that our non-traditional approach adds an element to recovery that is fulfilling for participants and communities.

The power of these projects lies in the innate ability of art to connect us to our humanity, and our sense of shared struggle and commonality. The projects are presented as something to be a part of, to engage with, and to find yourself in. We are finding that, through mining the social power of art, the social application is powerful, and that this application can be used as a new model for behavioral health treatment and recovery throughout the country.