



Minneapolis Is Funding Artists' Community Healing Projects With Police Dollars

Repurposed police dollars funded artists' community healing projects.



EMILY NONKO FEBRUARY 3, 2021

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One of ten projects the City of Minneapolis supported last summer and fall was "Haircuts for Change," by artist Sam Ero-Phillips, which offered passersby self-care and haircuts on an outdoor stage.

(Photo: Pierre Ware)

This past fall, the artist Sam Ero-Phillips erected a stage at Chicago Avenue and Lake Street in the Powderhorn neighborhood of Minneapolis, about eight blocks north of [George Floyd Square](#). For eight days, it showcased his project “Haircuts for Change,” which invited passersby onto the stage for haircuts and self care. The stage doubled as performance space for [Barebones Puppet Theatre](#)’s fall performance, *PASSAGES: Mourning The Fires of Lake Street*, which explored the impact of fires on that street in the midst of protesting the police killing of George Floyd.

The ultimate goal: harnessing art to facilitate community healing after Floyd’s death. “I knew I just needed a platform and a stage — I needed to create a container, and once I had it, social interaction would fill that container with the type of community engagement we wanted to see,” Ero-Phillips says of his project.

Haircuts for Change was [one of 10 projects](#) supported by the city’s [Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy](#). In the wake of Floyd’s death in May, the team repurposed grant resources to mobilize the skills of local artists and designers “to engage with and expand the impact of healing and community support.” The resulting projects, all led by artists of color, took place between August and into this month. This year, the work will continue and expand — with repurposed police dollars. In 2020 the Minneapolis City Council [voted to shift](#) almost \$8 million in police funding to expand other services; the Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy received \$150,000 specifically for artist-led community healing.

In 2013, the Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy launched the Creative CityMaking pilot with the goal of partnering city departments with experienced community artists to work toward eliminating economic and racial disparities. “We asked the question, what can artists do for city planners and city staff in general?” says Gülgün Kayim, director of the office.

Ero-Phillips was part of the inaugural cohort, working with two other artists to engage members of Linden Hills and Dinkytown on two land use and development plans. In ensuing years artists and city staff worked with underrepresented communities to spur innovative thinking and more responsive government practices, including targeted community outreach for the 2020 census and creative wayfinding practices. Creative CityMaking became an official city program in 2016.

During the 2015 Creative CityMaking cohort, Minneapolis police [shot and killed](#) Jamar Clark. “Our artists that were working with our staff rushed to the front lines of the protests to support the community,” says Kayim. “We felt very strongly that what we experienced we needed to learn from. We had no way to support or respond to that effort at that time.”

Kayim and her team set new commitments to adjust the program focus in times of emergency.

The most important shift, she says, was transitioning from working with city departments to supporting the artists directly “as these artists were already at the front lines working with communities most impacted by the police violence.”

In the midst of COVID-19 and following the death of George Floyd, the office was prepared to quickly pivot to fund and support artists to respond. “We wanted to help the artists support the communities that they come from,” Kayim says. “We felt, at the end of the day, we couldn’t ask the artists to bring that knowledge into the city if we weren’t also helping them support the communities they are connected to.”

The office quickly developed a framework for a new project: “We asked for proposals that could bring us toward some sort of healing, as the artists defined it,” says Kayim. “We didn’t want the city departments to define what that meant, we wanted the artists to define what that meant.” The call for proposals went out to past Creative CityMaking artists, prioritizing responses from Black artists, followed by artists from other marginalized groups.

Minneapolis-based organization [Arts Midwest](#) served as fiscal agent which enabled the team to fund and execute the projects swiftly. The office’s call for proposals went out at the end of June, the city approved 10 projects in July, and artists started working in August.

Roxanne Anderson and Anna Meyer were part of the 2019-2020 Creative CityMaking cohort, collaborating with the Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations on 2020 census outreach. For this project they received funding for “Rising From The Ashes,” a series of online gatherings that facilitated healing and community dialogue with local queer artists and artists of color who created art during the city’s uprising. It culminated with [an online art exhibit](#) featuring work by those artists during that time.

“Artists are our first responders,” says Meyer. “We see artists responding first to any social issue that comes up. We’re really looking at how we support them as first responders in their work, and looking at artists as doing healing work because of the creativity, expression and story sharing.” Funding allowed Meyer and Anderson to pay the participating artists and healers for their time. “We could offer financial support for folks to invest in themselves and their own healing,” notes Meyer.

Ero-Phillips found a resounding response in his community to Haircuts for Change. Beyond offering haircuts, the project encompassed a mural painting, drum and prayer circles and in-person connection. “It was a good sharing of community love,” he recalls. “People are thirsty for interaction under COVID-19. It was important to do this project to heal but also provide a safe way to do an art project that almost looked like a play, in public and bringing people together.”

The 10 healing projects that took place will serve as examples as the program expands. “In 2021 we’re going to step outside the container of Creative Citymaking,” explains Kayim. The office will work with a broader array of local artists who have relationships with marginalized Minneapolis communities. Kayim expects to release the “call for artists” by the second quarter of this year. She hopes incoming artists can be mentored by artists behind the inaugural projects.

Kayim agrees with Meyer in that artists are on the frontlines of social justice movements — “it’s just that government has not recognized that and found a way to support it.” While Creative CityMaking was built to address and implement changes to that end, this latest iteration of the work prioritizes direct artist and community support.

“These 10 projects can now become resources for continuing discussion and dialogue,” Kayim says. “Creative City Making is about democracy, it’s about everyone participating. That also has to be at the level of policy.”

This article is part of [“For Whom, By Whom,”](#) a series of articles about how creative placemaking can expand opportunities for low-income people living in disinvested communities. This series is generously underwritten by the Kresge Foundation.

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