

focus on

The Whole World Gets Well

In 2001, Scrap Mettle SOUL (SMS), a community performance group in Uptown, Chicago, entered into partnership with Imagine Chicago to experiment with ways arts and civic dialogue could be combined around issues of urgent social impact. In consultation with multiple local organizations, the partners decided to focus on gathering and presenting stories about health. Since Uptown is a community with poor health outcomes, which houses many newly arrived immigrants, mentally ill and elderly residents, 'moving to health' seemed an important theme.

In 2002, stories gathered in Uptown were brought together in a performance enacted by local residents entitled "And the Whole World Gets Well." (See related story on p. 42) The dress rehearsal was seen by a group of visiting UK dignitaries in April 2002, including UK Health Minister Hazel Blears, who had brought a team to Chicago to learn about effective community participation approaches to improving health outcomes.

In September 2002, two groups, one from Scotland, the other from London (Southwark), met SMS at the international Imagine Chicago celebration. Tasting community performance doing the storytelling game raised interest in how a visit by SMS to the UK might be a catalyst for local health conversations. Because SMS' cast and stories involve 'hard to reach' populations (mentally ill, homeless, abused young people, drug addicts, etc.) the hope was that their presence might provoke richer community dialogue about what makes health possible. It would also demonstrate the importance of storytelling and community participation in moving to health.

The tour was set for January 2003, requiring a whirlwind effort of organizing which became a major catalyst for expanded community connections in Southwark and Scotland, as neighbours were recruited as host families, local churches and shopping malls were transformed into theatre halls, and schools opened their doors to storytelling and community performance workshops.

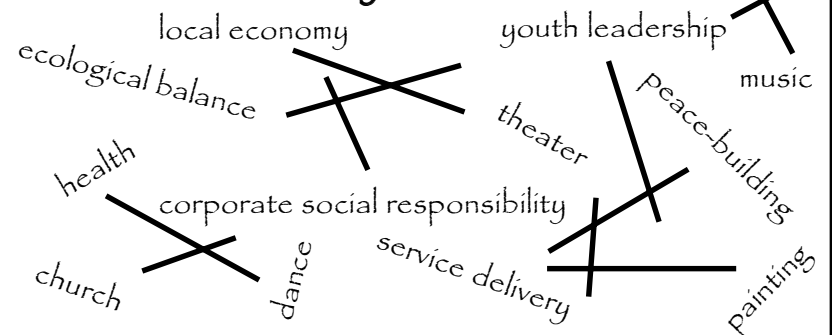
practice

BOUNDARY-CROSSING PARTNERSHIPS

"What I learned from my journey here to England and Scotland is that the world is my home. I am one small being among many. But we all have the same feelings, the same needs. We all want love, we all have our comfort zones and our passions and our needs and at times, yes, we have our pettiness, our small thoughts. Yet what England and Scotland gave me over and over was the grandness of people's spirit. You have fantastic people here, kind, and carrying on despite the isolation that bites into everyday life. Your people, as those in my country, need connections. They want to do the right thing; they want to be heard. And right now there is little opportunity for them to do this. Sometimes, one needs community to give courage, to provide that bridge to make this possible..."

- a Scrap Mettle SOUL cast member

What boundaries can you cross?



On January 10, 2003, 20 SMS members came from Chicago, accompanied by Bliss Browne, who was invited to facilitate public conversations in conjunction with each performance, and Richard Geer, founder and artistic director of SMS. Many of the cast members had never travelled before. Because the cast was smaller than in Chicago, cast additions were made in the UK, including local children who were incorporated into the performances in each venue.

The rich mix of events, performances and key local partners included:

Christ Church, East Dulwich: where the first performance played to a packed house. Those attending included congregations from three churches, and most local hosts from the neighborhood.

St Joseph's Primary School, North Southwark: two storytelling workshops were held with 180 pupils, and Healthy Schools and Education Action Zone Coordinators.

Kings Fund, a performance to representatives of London based Primary Care Trusts, the National Health Service and tour underwriters.

St Giles Church, Camberwell, performance hosted by the Cares of Life Project, part of the South London and Maudsley Hospital, attended by users and providers of mental health services.

Lambeth Mission, performance attended by congregation of Lambeth Mission, and patients and staff from the Lambeth Walk GP practice.

North Edinburgh Arts Centre: Audience drawn from local population, including teenagers living in North Edinburgh who openly disrupt



the performance. When challenged by local staff, they choose to stay and be respectful which shows they had become engaged.

Leith Community High School, workshop with drama students

Bonnington Primary School, interactive story telling workshop with primary students.

Thomas Morton Hall, performance in centre of Leith re-establishing a drama tradition in a hall not used for this purpose for a long time.

Ocean Terminal, two performances in a busy shopping mall with community conversations in between performances. Malcolm Chisholm, Scottish Minister of Health, in attendance, as well as faculty from the University of Edinburgh Nursing School.

Sikh Temple, excerpt from the show followed by discussion and story telling around intergenerational issues.

Comments gathered during the tour, and written evaluations after the tour, suggested impact on three interrelated levels: individual, organisational, and community.



Individuals

Audiences, tour organisers, cast members, and hosts all benefitted in important ways. The process raised consciousness about health issues and strategies, including moving past isolation, stereotyping and abuse. Post-performance discussions gave a chance to talk publicly about issues raised, like how to help systems listen, the challenges of mental illness, making taboo subjects like child abuse more visible, the value of storytelling to healing, and the tensions resulting from health care provider understaffing

and excessive bureaucracy. Audiences also learned about and developed skills in appreciative civic dialogue.

Cast members learned to take care of themselves, as well as noticing and helping when someone else was sick. "Before the trip, the cast were people out for themselves. During the trip, they came together as one unit," a cast member remarked. Hosts found caring for their American guest engaging, inspiring, and demanding, especially when medical emergencies led them to navigate the National Health Service together.



Organisations

Many organisations used the performances as a way of strengthening their own effectiveness and outreach. In Southwark, the Cares of Life Project hosted one of the performances and used it as a catalyst for public discussion of mental health issues and how to strengthen delivery of local mental health services to the African and Caribbean populations of Southwark. In Edinburgh, members of the Sikh temple used a performance to catalyze discussion about intergenerational communication and faith transmission.

The opening night host, Christ Church, had recently decided to tear down one of the church walls and install a glassed-in café as a gesture of opening out to the community. The SMS performance brought together multiple congregations who had some connection to Christ Church but no interaction with each other. Seeing the church filled with interested community groups gave great hope to the church of the real

possibility of living into its expanded vision of community building.

Communities

Many new partnerships were built at the community level. Neighbors met neighbors, organizations connected to policy makers and to one another.

"The Whole World Gets Well" community performance series made health waves! The positive energy of this global-local partnership created new connections and an expanded vision for creative community participation in improving health outcomes.

Health Waves

Kate Start, organizer of the Southwark tour, has now created Imagine Health to work with individuals, organisations and communities to revision 'health' as a broad-based (not just medical) good. On the principle that all are beneficiaries, Imagine Health brings together funders, policymakers, medical practitioners and service users. www.imaginehealth.org.uk

Imagine Health is now working with the Cares of Life project, directed by Dr Olajide, Consultant Psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital, to improve the mental

health and welfare of the local African and Caribbean people by working with local communities. In this instance, of particular importance are faith groups, hairdressers and barbers.

The Christchurch 'Open Out' project, directed by Rev. David Haslam, is creating their community café as a health outreach project. Aimed at family health and nutrition, in particular mothers with young children and senior citizens, it includes family literacy and is developing fair trade projects.

For more information on Imagine Health, contact Kate Start: kate@imaginehealth.org.uk

In every community there is work to be done.

In every heart there is the power to do it.

People will support what they help to create.