

**Legal Name**

University of Minnesota Foundation

**Project Title**

to support Northrup's work in collaboration with choreographer Emily Johnson, Socially-Based Participatory Engagement that challenges traditional ideas of participation and performance to create greater demand for contemporary dance in Native Communities

**DDCF Grant Number**

2013027

**Project Progress and Successes**

As Northrop prepares to reopen its doors in April 2014 after a massive interior revitalization, we are undergoing an evolution in how we connect with communities, artists, and University students/departments. Northrop is being transformed into a place where artistic and academic activity intersects and multi-disciplinary content emerges. Working collaboratively with choreographer Emily Johnson is pushing Northrop as an organization to be more nimble, ask questions of the community, and examine the relationship between art and civic life. Working with Emily, we are becoming more comfortable moving from a model of merely presenting artistic work, to co-creating experiences with our artists and audiences.

As the capstone of Northrop's Grand Reopening in June 2014, Emily will premiere her newest work SHORE, which Northrop is commissioning. The third in a trilogy (including The Thank-You Bar (2010) and Niicugni (2012), SHORE is the vehicle for our audience demand inquiry and Doris Duke residency work. Together, Northrop and Emily set a goal of working with communities in ways beyond conventional audience participation through four engagement strategies: community-based performance, storytelling, volunteerism, and feasting. Our hypothesis is that these activities together will create an artistic and social environment that makes dance more relevant and accessible. SHORE's week of performative experiences in June will bring together many months of research and experimentation with these strategies all focused on building new and lasting relationships in communities.

For Emily, the research and creation of SHORE is progressing in an organic way. SHORE inherently connects to many communities, including: indigenous communities, social service organizations, food communities, volunteer communities, literary organizations, writers and, of course, the dance/performance world. These connections are the foundation of SHORE's creation and our residency work.

Some of the events Emily has hosted in research and development for SHORE include:

- o GRAND MARAIS RESIDENCY hosted by the Grand Marais Art Colony and in partnership with the Grand Marais Park Board and the Grand Marais Gardening Club. This residency enabled testing of outdoor elements of SHORE (both volunteerism and performance, and how the two merge) as well as movement and sound ideas that may become part of the large cast score for full-scale performances of SHORE. More than 60 hours were spent on

initial research, contacts, meetings, planning, event planning, and coordination. We learned that future residencies need to include a site visit at least one month prior in order to gather partners.

- o SHORE PRACTICE POTLUCK gathered about 30 people from different areas of Minneapolis to test out ideas for the feast section of SHORE. We realized that participants were eager to share their stories and recipes, so recipes and photos from the evening were gathered as part of a SHORE "zine" that was later sent to all potluck participants. We learned that formal introductions and instruction are necessary in order to facilitate connections between individuals who do not know each other.

- o SHORE PREVIEW PARTY tested the movement, sound, and story score for approximately 300 attendees. A month was spent in outdoor rehearsals between the Mississippi River and Northrop's Plaza.

- o SOLSTICE EVENT in partnership with The CornerStone Group presented an opportunity to test the process of gathering and walking as a group. We learned that having multiple events is an effective way of enabling a large group to participate, and that being open to small and frequent events is a strategy for increased engagement.

- o COMMUNITY VISIONING SESSION with Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI) generated 100 volunteer action ideas, and NACDI wanting to host Community Visioning Sessions once per month. We learned that it is very easy to come up with volunteer action ideas, but need to get more attendees at the upcoming sessions to diversify the voices in the room.

- o Other research into aspects of feasting, public celebration, and outdoor performance has been conducted through attending events including a Powderhorn Youth Farm community-based meal, Rye House community-based meal, and Cry You One, a traveling interactive performance in New Orleans.

The residency work has presented a useful opportunity to build new relationships with partners in addition to the original partnering organizations in our proposal. Some of these additions include the North American Community Development Institute, Minneapolis Park Board, The Loft Literary Center, Birchbark Books, Allies Media, Red Stag Supper Club, Dream of Wild Health, River Life, CornerStone Group, Grand Marais Park Board, Grand Marais Garden Club, Grand Marais Art Colony, and Foxtail Farm. SHORE's premiere will be presented in partnership with many of these organizations.

Collaborating with Emily has given Northrop insights into new ways of working with the community. One example is that the language used to describe artistic work is critical to the perception of how inclusive the activity will be and how much interest there is. Words like "community performance" seem much more accessible and welcoming to audiences than "contemporary dance."

Much of Emily's work is based on building relationships with rural communities. She has found that it is critical to make at least two trips, with the first point of connect being in person, and be aware that relationships have a long lead-time before a project can be formalized. Thus far, our plan is to work with a variety of organizations in 5 different Minnesota communities as we build the varied aspects of SHORE. These communities are Grand Marais, Minneapolis, Richfield, Morris, and one additional site yet to be found in northwest Minnesota. In each geographic location, we try to connect with a diverse group of community groups and organizations. Site visits, language, the commitment/energy of the partnering organization, and immediate ways for people to get involved are elements that have a direct impact on the success of each residency.

To formalize Emily's relationship to Northrop, we have facilitated a yearlong residency within the University's Institute for Advanced Study (a partner tenant of Northrop). The

Institute is enabling her to connect with various departments, faculty, and fellows throughout the University that are aiding in her research and participating in the development of SHORE in various ways including as advisors and volunteers. As part of her fellowship, Emily will conduct a public lecture on the Institute's Thursdays at Four series in February of 2014.

During the 2014-15 season, Emily will continue residency and research work in locations around Minnesota, returning to the communities she worked with leading up to the premiere. This is an important part of the investigation, gauging both initial impact and how returning to communities deepens the lasting imprint of Emily's work. We are also developing a Minnesota tour of this commission that will accompany her upcoming national tour.

### **Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project**

Like any large project, we experienced unanticipated challenges during the first few months. Negotiating a complex working relationship, changing the "business as usual" arts presenting model, deepening evaluation methods, and exploring the impact of this research influencing future decision-making have all tested this project and the organization.

1. A change in organizational leadership as this project was about to begin required new discussions in order to find collective agreement on budgets, resources, services, and support between Northrop and Emily.
2. The challenge of adapting Northrop's working model from a very straightforward, traditional presentation model to a more labor-intensive, ambiguous artistic collaboration process has required thoughtful, dedicated staff time and considerable trust between Northrop and artistic team.
3. Partnering with Emily has enabled us to further examine how we evaluate our selves and our programming. For her residency work in rural Minnesota, standard evaluation processes seem to fall short. Though quantitative data and documentation is necessary, it is not enough to tell the complete story. Collecting personal narratives, reflections, and insights is truly at the heart of her work. We are currently working together to develop a tool for capturing that information throughout the duration of her project. We are learning how to ask the best questions to get the data and insights we are truly looking for. Engaging participants in open-ended conversations helps us best understand what we are achieving and in what ways. We continue to struggle with gauging long-term impact and are currently looking for ways to maintain contact with participants over longer stretches of time.
4. Dedicated research is having a great impact on Emily's work and process. She is also determining how the research and creation of SHORE works in concert with Northrop's larger body of programmatic work. Iterative program development is not a familiar way of operating for Northrop, so together we are trying to figure out how our combined research will affect the way we operate in the future and how the information we are gathering will be sustained beyond the life of the project. This is a daunting task because it is discontinuous from current practices, which will require strong staff support and future resources to meaningfully sustain.

### **What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?**

This three-year project gives Emily an exclusive opportunity to be housed within Northrop and test demand-building strategies. An incredible occasion to develop a close working relationship with Emily, the residency has also brought about the need for additional staff

support, fluid communication between artist and presenter, and the marriage of operating timelines between artist and a large research University. Dedicated human resources and a serious commitment to the work have been critical to keeping the project moving. We have found that it is necessary to have a designated project manager working with Emily to maintain communication while she is traveling and keep records of the stories and learning she is gathering along the way. Meetings and "checkpoints" (scheduled in advance) help to accommodate full schedules on both sides. Other key lessons gleaned from challenges include:

1. Not underestimating the impact and recalibration after a change in leadership. Proactive and honest conversation has been essential to course correcting during our leadership transition;
2. a commitment to ongoing documentation and evaluation. Because we are exploring new concepts and approaches, our documentation and evaluation methods continue to evolve based on participant responses and results; and
3. an ability to embrace the iterative nature of long-term, experimental residency work. There is not always a clear road map, but rather a gut instinct or inkling that guides this work, which can be uncomfortable and scary. When participants trust the action/reflection/adjustment process, both collaborators and community participants are more successful and connected to the work.

**Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.**

Emily Johnson/Catalyst: <http://catalystdance.com/>

Northrop: <http://northrop.umn.edu/>

Northrop's presentation of SHORE: <http://northrop.umn.edu/events/emily-johnsoncatalyst-shore>

Northrop Revitalization: <http://northrop.umn.edu/about/northrop-revitalization>

Community Visioning Session: <https://www.facebook.com/events/243608825810774/>

SHORE Residency in Grand Marais

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/emilyjohnsoncatalyst/sets/72157634877165368/>

SHORE Practice Potluck

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/emilyjohnsoncatalyst/sets/72157635091065604/>

SHORE Preview Party/Benefit

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/emilyjohnsoncatalyst/sets/72157636813357823/>

SHORE Dance Residency, Studio 206, Minneapolis, MN

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/emilyjohnsoncatalyst/sets/72157638121924373/>

**If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N**

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Yes, Sarah Thompson - [smthomps@umn.edu](mailto:smthomps@umn.edu) / (612) 625-2807