

**Legal Name**

Bric Arts Media Bklyn Inc

**Project Title**

To support Ronald K. Brown to host a three-year residency to develop demand for contemporary dance among the residents of public housing developments surrounding BRIC Arts Media House in Brooklyn

**DDCF Grant Number**

2013020

**Project Progress and Successes**

BRIC partnered with Ronald K. Brown to pilot a three-year artist residency program beginning in the summer of 2013. This project is intended to use contemporary dance to drive both experiential and observational participation in the arts among the community surrounding BRIC's new multi-arts facility, BRIC Arts | Media House.

BRIC House opened to the public in October 2013, celebrating BRIC's 35 years of presenting contemporary art, performing arts, and community media programs that reflect Brooklyn's creativity and diversity. Ronald K. Brown has a longtime relationship with BRIC as a performer and artistic advisor, and his dance company, Evidence, has historically been resident in and committed to the local community -- however, his company had never before had a Brooklyn home for performing. BRIC House has provided both BRIC and Evidence with a public-facing home in downtown Brooklyn for the first time. We began working together on this extended residency as a way to expand engagement and embed our work within the neighborhood. BRIC House is located in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, which encompasses the second-poorest census tract in NYC, including the Ingersoll and Whitman public housing developments. To advance our mission and succeed as a true public arts center, BRIC views it as our organizational responsibility to be good neighbors and make programs accessible to those who would traditionally feel unwelcomed and/or priced out. This residency seeks to build a two-way street, bringing contemporary dance into the homes of local residents and building a shared home at BRIC that is illuminated by and reflective of our community.

The target market for this project is the economically distressed community surrounding BRIC House, specifically the 8,800 residents of the adjacent Ingersoll and Whitman public housing developments, where the average salary for a family of three is \$9,001 -- less than half of the official poverty line for a family of three nationwide. To begin developing demand for contemporary dance among this audience, BRIC and Brown expanded their partnership with the Ingersoll Community Center, a relatively new establishment serving residents that is operated by University Settlement, a well-respected community based organization with multi-service programs throughout New York City.

Before the residency began, BRIC and Brown defined the following criteria to determine its success. The project aims to:

- 1) Develop demand for contemporary dance among Brooklyn residents who feel

- unwelcome in a traditional performance venue;
- 2) Provide a home and compensation for Ronald K. Brown/Evidence to partner with BRIC;
  - 3) Activate BRIC House as a public space for dance;
  - 4) Have a positive transformative effect on BRIC, Brown/Evidence, and the local community.

In this first year, BRIC has worked to address each of these goals by implementing the four components of the project outlined in our proposal: education, performance, socialization, and reflection. To date we have seen the most success in our education and performance initiatives. We found that it was necessary to build the project and our relationship with our partner organizations and members of the public through these components before fully integrating the socialization and reflection pieces of the project. Each element is reported on in greater detail below:

#### Education:

Ronald K. Brown and members of Evidence began teaching free, bi-weekly dance classes that were open to the public on July 1, 2013. These ongoing classes are held on Monday evenings from 6:00-7:30pm. Initially the classes were located exclusively at the Ingersoll Community Center's gymnasium; once BRIC House opened in October 2013 the location alternated between the two, with the BRIC classes taking place in the BRIC House Ballroom, a flexible performance space equipped with a sprung floor that is ideal for dance. In conversation with the staff of the Center, we have adapted the classes with the goal of reaching as many participants as possible and building on their stories, to encourage expression of individual and shared life experiences through movement. Attendance has grown dramatically over the past year. When the classes first began at the Center, 3-10 students were participating. After BRIC House opened in October 2013, with classes at both locations and increased marketing efforts, attendance has grown to 15-25 students at the Center and 40-55 students at BRIC House per class. In particular we saw a rise in the number of students who attended after our first series of public performances. Throughout the year there have been new participants each week and many returning students who now attend regularly at both locations. Feedback from students has praised the quality of the instruction and also expressed how grateful they are to have access to these classes for free. In response to participant feedback, we have adjusted the time of the class a half hour later to accommodate their schedules.

This education component of the project has helped BRIC begin to build a network of participants and patrons from the Ingersoll and Whitman community and others in our neighborhood who can go on to become involved in the other aspects of the project. In late September the Ingersoll Community Center's gymnasium was the site of a public audition seeking non-dancers to add to the cast for Brown's upcoming performances of BRIC House. The audition was promoted to class attendees as well as through other channels. Ultimately Brown identified a cast of 30, which both included previous class participants as well as attracted new attendees for future free classes.

#### Performance:

Evidence's first six-week residency at BRIC House culminated in a series of ten public performances that took place November 13-24, 2013. BRIC provided rehearsal and performance space and the infrastructure to develop a new adaptation of the performance piece entitled *On Earth Together*, set to the socially conscious music of Stevie Wonder. Ronald K. Brown auditioned and identified 30 participants aged 5 to 70 from his classes and elsewhere in the community to join his professional cast in six weeks of rehearsal and performance for the public. BRIC worked with staff at the Ingersoll Community Center to raise awareness of the upcoming performances and make sure they were accessible and

affordable to its members and their family and friends. In keeping with BRIC's mission, prices for general admission also remained low at \$22 a ticket, with a \$16 option for students and seniors. We offered an allotment of complimentary tickets to Ingersoll to distribute as well. Although BRIC House was still a brand new venue in the neighborhood, word about these moving performances spread such that the final two shows were sold out, with over 250 attendees. A total of 1,579 people came to BRIC House to see On Earth Together during the run, filling 66% of the total capacity for all performances.

In preparation for the performance series, BRIC carried out a multi-faceted marketing campaign that included distribution of 3,000 postcards via direct mail and street teams, targeting nearby community organizations. BRIC's publicity team also worked with media outlets to conduct targeted outreach in Brooklyn and ran listings in publications such as The New York Times, The New Yorker and Time Out New York. As a result, positive reviews were featured in several publications. The New York Times noted that "the prospect of all of Brooklyn dancing like Mr. Brown's company is a glorious idea of community service" and that "the warmth and artistry and infectious joy made this house into a home." Dance Enthusiast wrote that "Evidence dancers and guests manifested a level of joy and connection that was a pleasure to witness," and Broadway World said "It was the brilliance of Brown's movement that made it accessible to everyone. Each dance interpreted the work uniquely, shining as individuals."

To get feedback directly from the community in attendance, BRIC conducted a short audience survey that was intended to focus on our efforts to develop demand for dance, asking patrons, "When you watch Ronald K. Brown/Evidence what do you see?" and "Does it make you want to see more dance performances? What kind?" The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with many patrons reacting to the piece with similar words. What they saw was: vibrancy, joy, energy, communication, love, compassion, support, interaction, the human experience, and an image of community. The majority of responders answered that "yes" they wanted to see more dance performances, and that they were eager to see "all kinds" of dance, with many requesting to see work of similar style and lineage to Brown's work.

These professional performances at BRIC House have been coupled with other important performance experiences for members of the Ingersoll Community Center. During the 2013 season of BRIC's Celebrate Brooklyn! Performing Arts Festival, BRIC arranged free transportation and reserved seats at a large-scale, professional dance performance by Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal at the Prospect Park Bandshell. Additional opportunities have been arranged for two dance performances during the 2014 Celebrate Brooklyn season, featuring Shen Wei Dance Arts and Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Planning is well underway for the second series of performances by Evidence in the fall of 2014. The dates have been set for November 6-8 and 13-15. Based on our experience in the project's first year, we have reduced the number of performances from ten to six, with three shows per week during the two-week run and the option to add a seventh show if there is sufficient demand.

#### Socialization:

After opening BRIC Arts | Media House in October 2013, BRIC began hosting free monthly dance parties open to all. BRIC used its long history of presenting world-class, free performing arts programming at the Celebrate Brooklyn! Performing Arts Festival to leverage its existing artist, community, and audience relationships and establish an exciting new opportunity for social dancing in the neighborhood. Free family dance classes that were thematically linked to the day's events were part of the programming for each of

these day-long events. Students from the community dance classes and other members of the Ingersoll and Whitman housing community have been invited and encouraged to attend these parties alongside our other neighbors. Given that the events are free and open to the general public, we however have no way of tracking the extent to which Ingersoll/Whitman residents were in attendance for these events.

Scheduled on the second Saturday of every month, each BRIC House Party has an inviting theme and includes a full day of multidisciplinary arts programming that engages audiences of all ages and activates every space within our arts and media center. Our first House Party on October 12th embodied the expansive and welcoming mission of BRIC with the theme Brooklyn is the World, celebrating the creative and cultural diversity of our home borough. Guests explored our contemporary art exhibition of artwork by Brooklyn artists called, Housewarming, Notions of Home from the Center of the Universe, and enjoyed tours, interactive installations, hands-on media activities, poetry readings, dance classes, and more. The day was topped off with a performance by Gregorio Uribe Big Band, a 16-piece Cumbia group, followed by a global dance party with Que Bajo?!. Subsequent BRIC House parties have featured themes such as Party in the Key of Life, a reflection on the diversity of life, invoking the Stevie Wonder music that accompanied Evidence's performance at BRIC; Find Your Wow Factor, encouraging individuality and imagination; and Eat Sleep Break Beat, encompassing the fundamentals of hip hop: break dance, DJ, graffiti art, and rap. These House Parties have been widely attended, with audience numbers in the range of 500 to over 1000.

As we move into our second season at BRIC House, we look forward to integrating the Ingersoll and Whitman community more into the House Party activities with the intention of not only engaging their participation but also incorporating them in the planning and curatorial process, as planned in our project proposal.

#### Reflection:

The final component of the project, reflection, aims to use BRIC's community media resources to help Brown and his students document and disseminate their experiences. As the public access television provider for Brooklyn, BRIC's television channels serve as the primary media outlet in Brooklyn to empower and address the needs of the borough's diverse population, reaching over 550,000 households with professionally-produced programming. Our media courses enable members of the community to produce their own content for television and the internet and to learn more about the changing landscape of technology.

In consultation with the staff at the Ingersoll Community Center, BRIC developed an introductory media class package targeted to individuals at the Center and offered for free in addition to the dance classes, to give participants a chance to become familiar with media technologies and storytelling methods as a first step toward recording and sharing their own stories. However despite our best efforts to generate interest and awareness, the classes were poorly attended and we found it challenging to create a strong connection between the media activities and the dance class program.

The intention behind this component was to empower participants to document their own experiences such that the project can become part of the collective memory of the community. While the integration of the media component remains a work in progress, which we intend to approach differently in the coming year, we did invite the media team into the community rehearsal process (see the attached link) and shared the resulting piece with Evidence, Ingersoll and the participating community members. We have also worked strategically to build participation and reflection into aspects of our evaluation process (described in greater detail below and in attached evaluation plan). Evaluators

asked class participants to reflect on their experiences of the classes. So far student testimonials have attested to the transformative power of dance, and documentation of classes and performances allowed them to continue their engagement beyond the live experience.

#### Evaluation:

During this pilot year, our focus has been on introducing community residents to dance through diverse engagement opportunities. In this phase of work, we first needed to determine who was attracted to the programming and through which aspects in particular. We also examined how one experience within the offerings might encourage future engagement and greater depth of experience. At the same time, we were hoping to understand more about barriers to involvement and the quality of experience of those who participate in the program.

To assess increased demand for contemporary dance in the community, we recorded class attendance, looking at numbers of new and returning participants as well as the balance across age groups. As the engagement increased at BRIC's facility, we continued to look for ways to make sure that there was an exchange back and forth between the two centers and that the Ingersoll and Whitman community was not just coming to BRIC but that BRIC's community was also going to Ingersoll. Our hope was that these members were not only looking to participate in our programming but also seeking out opportunities for contemporary dance outside of Ron's classes and performances.

To continue learning from our experiences, BRIC has hired an outside evaluator at ARTS Action Research to conduct a study of the project. Her work looks at all four aspects of the program, as well as the relationships among the project partners and includes a variety of approaches to understanding the impact of the program. An outline of AAR's plans are incorporated into this progress report as an attachment. By working closely with Brown and his company members, as well the staff at the Ingersoll Community Center and our outside evaluators, we intend to document their participation and appraisal of the process, and gain anecdotal insights into the experiences of project participants.

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

While BRIC is an organization with a long history in the borough, BRIC House is new to the neighborhood. Our first challenge has been to spread the word about this new public destination where the community can congregate and experience art for free, seven days a week. We needed to begin by building trust among neighbors and finding the right connectors to reach our audience.

At the start, we relied on Ingersoll Community Center as our only way of reaching the target community for this project, and we realized that we have to establish more diverse points of entry moving forward. While attendance at the dance classes has grown over time, we have noticed a need to continue to offer specific and targeted invitations to the Ingersoll and Whitman community and to make sure the content and feel of the classes remains accessible to them. We also came to learn that, given that the Community Center itself was a relatively new amenity at the housing developments, our partners there also struggle to cultivate buy-in and trust among residents, as well as continue to face challenges in how best to promote all of their offerings to local residents.

As we have attempted to make deeper connections in the housing community, one

obstacle has been that many of our intended participants are working multiple jobs and do not have free time to engage in our programming. By developing a greater understanding of the life pressures that our participants are juggling, we hope to be able to accommodate their needs by scheduling classes and performances around working hours and encouraging them to see the value of an ongoing commitment in spite of their busy schedules. As indicated by our attendance numbers, there is a larger number of students attending the classes at BRIC House compared to those at the Ingersoll Community Center, which may be an indicator of a perceived barrier to entry at BRIC House on the part of Ingersoll residents and a parallel perception on the part of non-residents with regard to entering the Community Center for classes located there. We are still working on creating a balance between the two sites.

Although we have the advantage of an existing partnership with Evidence and the Ingersoll Community Center, another challenge we face is that each organization has varying resources and capacity to prioritize the project and implement its components. BRIC has taken the lead in administration and production, and we are happy to share our assets. Yet, we also realize that the programming may be more influential if the participants in the public housing community see familiar faces as leaders in the programming. This will help us avoid perceptual barriers such as race and class. We understand that it is essential to the success of the project, both internally and from the perspective of the public participants and audience, that all three partners manage and guide it with an equal sense of influence and ownership.

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

We have benefited from our partnership with the Ingersoll Community Center in that we can learn from their experience in the other programs that they offer to families in the housing community. As we worked to understand their needs, we found it was particularly important to them that there be consistency in delivering the promised programs. They have found that skepticism and mistrust are barriers to participation. However, by following through with our bi-weekly classes and developing reliability, we were able to create a sense of commitment and community pride among participants.

In our evaluation and ongoing discussion with Brown and the administration at the Ingersoll Community Center, we are working to facilitate a stronger sense of mutual leadership within the project. We understand now that we could have benefited from more planning time prior to implementation that would have enabled us to design the program as a team so that all three partners could feel equally engaged right from the beginning.

Additional lessons that may benefit others:

- Consider the quality of invitations to participate. Simply making the programs available to the public is not enough to be considered a true invitation to communities who perceive barriers to entry.
- Devote resources (particularly time) to building good collaborative relationships as a base upon which to build program activities.
- Keep in mind that implementing a multi-pronged plan requires a good foundation and significant human resources and organizational capacity. We have chosen to focus on building strength in a couple of areas and then add others as we are able. There may be other appropriate strategies as well.

This first year has showed us how we can adjust our approach to be even more successful in the project. The generous three-year timeline will help us develop the program and

learn as we go.

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

<http://bricartsmedia.org/performing-arts/long-term-residencies>

<http://vimeo.com/79132661>

**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).

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