

Bridging cultures, generations through drama and public art

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By: [Erin Hinrichs](#)

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We've all encountered a contagious laugh — the deep belly chuckle that echoes through the room, or the lively staccato outburst that rattles off the walls.

But unless you crane your neck to investigate where it's coming from, the source remains a mystery.

But what if that sound of laughter was harnessed to build a lasting sense of connectedness? It's a concept that city officials in Maplewood, guided by the creative leadership of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, are actively pursuing.

Students in Maplewood may soon have the opportunity to collect samples of laughter in their community to be displayed in pop-up "laughter museums." Equipped with the skills of clowning, puppetry, improvisation and laughter yoga, they'll conduct street interviews with residents and record them laughing. Then the students will design kiosks, where members of the community are invited to connect with the person, and the story, behind each laugh.

"When you hear someone laugh, you can't see skin color, you may not get clues about household income or even age or gender," says Shari Aronson, co-creative

Z Puppets' creative director Shari Aronson with puppets from the "Monkey Mind Pirates" production, a puppetry, rock, yoga adventure that helps families overcome stress and anxiety. (submitted photo)



Sean and Tori Slawik and their mom Mayor Nora Slawik, at the Sensory Friendly performance of Shrek at the Children's Theatre. Through her involvement with the Autism Society of Minnesota, Slawik trained Chris Griffith and Shari Aronson, co-creative directors of Z Puppets, along with other artists, on how to create a sensory-friendly environment for their productions. (submitted photo)



Z Puppets' creative director Chris Griffith leads children in a group activity. (submitted photo)

director of the project. "You may not know what you have in difference from the person, but instantly you know what you have in common: you, too, laugh. The goal of the 'laughter museums' is to bring out and celebrate this universal gift of laughter that we all share."

It's not your typical sculpture in a park or mural on the side of an old building. It's creative and interactive, designed to invite all resident — young, old, Hmong, Somali, Karen, Latino, Vietnamese and white — to engage in the community.

The laughter museums, along with other innovative performance arts initiatives, caught the attention of those at Bloomberg Philanthropies. The city of Maplewood, guided by the creative leadership of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz artists, has been selected as a finalist for the Public Art Challenge. Narrowed down from a pool of more than 230 applicants, Maplewood is now competing against 11 other major cities across the nation — including Chicago, Atlanta, Boston and Los Angeles — asking for \$250,000 to implement its vision for "Kid City."

"Together with our artist team, Maplewood will tap into the energy and innovation of our young people to engage and revitalize the whole community through 'Kid City,'" Mayor Nora Slawik said in a press release.

'Deeper than it sounds'

In 2014, Bloomberg Philanthropies invited mayors of U.S. cities with more than 30,000 residents to submit proposals for innovative, temporary public art projects that address a civic concern, while demonstrating collaboration between artists and city officials. In May, at least three winning cities will be awarded up to \$1 million each to execute their projects over the course of a year.

There are lots of worthy causes, but Slawik says she's confident that the Maplewood proposal stands apart from the rest. Not only does the project hold the potential to have "deeper penetration and meaning" in a smaller city (relative to those in the running), she says, but it also embraces the transformative power of performance arts.

And she trusts that the talented team of multicultural artists at Z Puppets will make "Kid City" a success.

"It's deeper than it sounds. I'm having trouble conveying that to people who haven't seen [Z Puppets] perform," Mayor Nora Slawik says, noting she's felt the lasting impact of their performances in her own life.

What is 'Kid City?'

If awarded funding, Aronson and Chris Griffith, co-creative directors at Z Puppets, will help roll out three distinct phases of "Kid City," with the help of multicultural artists.

After introducing themselves to the community through a series of public performances, the artists will work closely with students to create the "laughter museums" and establish a "Kid Council," which will allow youths to explore civic issues by using improvisation to problem solve. They'll present their findings to the city council.

"Kids don't have those deep life experiences, but maybe that's a good thing," Slawik says. "[It'll] bring us a diverse perspective of what's going on in Maplewood."

In the eyes of all those involved, the stakes for securing project funds through Bloomberg Philanthropies are high. Staff participants are currently working on drafting a final proposal, due April 9, and are preparing for

an on-site interview slated to happen beforehand.

"As mayor, it's wonderful to be able to bring this kind of project to Maplewood," Slawik says. "And I certainly hope we win."

Erin Hinrichs can be reached at 651-748-7814 and ehinrichs@lillienews.com. Follow her at twitter.com/EHinrichsNews.

A mayor's testament to the power of theater

Not only has Maplewood Mayor Nora Slawik participated in improvisational theater for a number of years; she has also witnessed how theater can create a safe space for an open dialogue and positive interactions. Having worked with Z Puppets in the past, through her work with the Autism Society of Minnesota and the Children's Theatre, Slawik thinks the creative partnership is the perfect way to engage Maplewood residents.

"I have a son with high functioning autism and I know that the type of work they're doing has such a positive impact, not only on the kids with autism but also with the parents. Often parents of kids with autism don't get to have those really positive interactions. The day-to-day can be really challenging," Slawik says.

"They provided a forum where people can have really deep, good experiences together. Because I've seen that, I'm hoping it can translate for the people of Maplewood."

Having seen theater alleviate communication barriers for youth with Autism, she's hopeful it will translate to a tool for bridging cross-cultural and inter-generational communication gaps in the community.

"Improv takes you in a direction that just allows you to open. That will allow our youth to open up. People find their voice - that's what I see more often than not," she says, noting it will help minorities in the community find their voice as well.

Local focus, local need

The concept of "Kid City" dovetails with the Maplewood's new Parks and Recreation Master Plan, adopted this past January.

Working closely with the project, the city's parks and recreation director DuWayne Konewko says, "We need to do a better job of integrating art in not only our parks, but across the city as well.

"The demographics of the city are changing, and we think this Kid City program can help us bridge those gaps."

Police Chief Paul Schnell, along with local teachers, school administrators, parents and others involved in the city's new Integrated Youth Development (IYD) program, will also play an important role in helping execute the proposed "Kid City."

As stated in Maplewood's project proposal, the city is in the North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District, which serves a diverse student body. Roughly 41 percent are students of color, and about 47 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Students and their families speak 35 different languages, with English, Hmong, Spanish, Cambodian and Chinese ranking as the top five.

Project coordinators cite the economic growth and changing demographics of the city as assets, but caution that more needs to be done to include new residents from Latino, Somali, Karen and Hmong backgrounds.

"These communities remain separate from one another, and seldom interact. This isolation combines with other risk factors, making Maplewood's students some of the most at-risk in the region," the proposal states.