



NeighborWorks® America

CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Pathfinder Services
Bright Spot Case Study

April 2018

Working Together for Strong Communities





ARTS FORGE PATH TO INCLUSIVENESS AND INDEPENDENCE

Creative Abilities Art Studio participant.

Photo credit: Evan Mower

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ART STUDIO PARTICIPANT

Sarah Schwab loves creative expression, so when she filled in as a substitute for the adult day program of NeighborWorks network member Pathfinder Services in 2012, she decided to teach painting to her class of developmentally disabled clients.

Five years later, her painting lesson has blossomed into the organization’s Creative Abilities Art Studio, operating with five staff members at two locations. Thirty clients currently learn to paint, sew, papier-mâché and work with clay. The program has benefited more than 100 clients, who are learning new skills, socializing with one another and, in some cases, earning revenue from the art they produce. The studio has enriched Schwab’s life as well.

“It’s become something that’s opened my eyes [that] art is there for everybody,” she says.

After witnessing the benefits its clients reaped from participating in the Creative Abilities Art Studio, Pathfinder decided to establish an arts center where clients could work alongside community artists. The organization partnered with others to launch an inclusive planning process for the center. Now, two years into the process, the partners have made significant progress toward securing needed financial resources and community support. They hope to break ground



Creative Abilities Art Studio participant.

Photo credit: Evan Mower

What inspired Pathfinder to integrate the arts into its work?

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in October 2018 in the center of Huntington. Thirty-five units of market-rate apartments will be offered by a private developer, and a 15,000-square-foot commercial space will include a community arts center and an entrepreneurial center (operated by Huntington University). An art gallery, artist studios, maker space, commercial kitchen and an event room all will call the arts center home.

What inspired Pathfinder to integrate the arts into its work? It provides an innovative way to accomplish the nonprofit's core mission: enabling people facing physical, developmental or economic challenges to achieve independence, inclusion and stability.¹ For more than 50 years, Pathfinder has provided housing and support such as job placement and adult day services for the developmentally disabled in Huntington, a rural town of 17,000 people about 25 miles southwest of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Its work helps people "discover their talents and abilities," explains John Niederman, CEO. The arts, he says, "can positively enable people do so much more than what we think they can do."

Pathfinder's services are rooted in an intent to foster inclusion and self-reliance. Some clients can achieve this through job placement in the community. For those who prove harder to employ, the Creative Abilities Art Studio offers an outlet for self-expression and socializing, as well as a source of earned income from sale of their art.

Clients shape the direction of the program, giving instructors suggestions and generating ideas for their own creative projects. Individuals who previously faced considerable isolation due to their physical or developmental challenges now have consistent outlets for both creative expression and social contact. Pathfinder helps facilitate sales of participants' artwork in a storefront retail space, online (HumbleBuy.org) and through the local arts council's annual silent auction. The organization and its partners see a mixed-use community arts center as a way to further these goals as well as attract out-of-town visitors.

¹ "About Us," Pathfinder Services, Inc., accessed September 23, 2017, <https://pathfinderservices.org/about-us/>.



The buildings that Pathfinder Services and its partners hope to transform into a community arts center.

Photo credit: Evan Mower

Pathfinder and its partners want to develop opportunities for both local residents and visitors to create, learn and purchase creative products.

Extending Pathfinder's mission

Pathfinder's experience with its Creative Abilities Art Studio led directly to the community arts center exploration, the organization's first foray into commercial development. As Niederman witnessed the transformative role art played in helping their clients discover their talents and abilities and support their livelihood, he wondered if Pathfinder also could use arts and culture to help the wider community of Huntington. If the studio could unleash creativity in their clients, what untapped talent might be identified in other residents? If clients could make an income from their artwork, could other Huntington residents as well? How might clients benefit from creating art with other artists in the community? Visitors from Fort Wayne, the closest large city, flock to the new winery on the town's outskirts; what would it take to draw these folks into Huntington proper? Like many rural communities, Huntington has experienced population decline for years; if people discovered the city's assets, would they move there? Niederman and his partners believe the community arts center can do that and more.

Pathfinder and its partners want to develop opportunities for both local residents and visitors to create, learn and purchase creative products. Katrina Mitten, a nationally known beadwork artist who grew up and lives in Huntington, sees the potential. She says it was tough



Creative Abilities Art Studio participant.

Photo credit: Evan Mower

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to develop her professional credentials in a small town and hopes the community arts center will offer opportunities for aspiring artists to learn from artists in residence. Not only will the community arts center allow residents to learn from professionals, but also it will provide the appropriate space and tools to create, which can be a critical benefit. For example, Niederman describes a community member who can't sell her homemade salsa at the farmers market because she makes it at her home. A commercial kitchen would solve this problem and allow her to earn income from.

Pathfinder also hopes the community arts center will attract residents from different backgrounds and act as a bridge to connect people. The partners in the project will strive to engage Huntington's low-income residents, many of whom live in the blocks surrounding the future location of the community arts center, as well as people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Mitten, a member of the Miami tribe of Oklahoma, makes art that draws on the beadwork and embroidery of the Great Lakes people. She talks of the "gap" between the stereotypes and reality of Native people and their cultures, and she sees her artwork and center as "a chance to showcase the culture of the Miami people and other Natives in this area." Mitten also describes lower-income residents as feeling "left out" of community projects and hopes the arts center will serve as a remedy, so "they know they're part of our city, not segregated from it."

Pathfinder also hopes the center will help attract visitors, economic vibrancy and perhaps even new residents to Huntington. Niederman notes that the city has supported the project by providing critical capital funding, and has taken steps to create biking and walking trails and other complementary improvements that, in tandem with the arts center, will create the quality of life amenities that will help potential residents see Huntington as a desirable place to live.

The organization's ambitions to improve its community through creative community development work do not end there; it also is working on an effort to create a broader community arts strategy that will be integrated into the city's comprehensive plan.

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Making the planning process well-resourced and inclusive

Pathfinder Services has worked hard with the city and a private developer to layer financial resources to intentionally incorporate the community arts center into a larger, \$8.1 million, mixed-use rehabilitation project. With funds from the Rural Local Initiatives Support Corp. (Rural LISC), the organization has engaged consultants to complete a feasibility analysis and business plan for the community arts center. NeighborWorks America also awarded the organization \$75,000 in strategic investment funds to engage two consultants, one for community arts planning and another for fundraising. Pathfinder assisted the private developer in securing capital via a historic tax credit allocation, city and county support (\$3 million), and a state regional cities grant (\$1.6 million). In addition, Pathfinder will raise an additional \$300,000 to make a soft loan to the developer.

To move forward with the community arts center, Pathfinder has tried to design an inclusive planning process. For the past two years, it has convened a Community Arts Center Planning Committee, a group of Huntington residents that has shaped the process. Serving on the committee are Mitten and other artists, city representatives, county officials (from the chamber of commerce, visitor’s bureau and school system), Huntington University staff and members of the Lafontaine Arts Council.

Pathfinder has worked hard to cultivate buy-in among these partners by “getting people on the same page and trying through a collaborative process to get everyone to feel like they’re part of something that’s bigger than themselves,” Niederman says. The community arts center’s future rests on this collective ownership. Although Pathfinder has committed some of the startup costs for the development and seeks to own the commercial space, other partners will manage and program the space. The Lafontaine Arts Council will run the community arts center and Huntington University’s entrepreneurial program will lease space for its student-run enterprises.

Niederman says the project’s biggest barrier so far has been securing financial resources to hire a consultant to intensify the community engagement process, essential for building support and fundraising. Now the organization has these resources and is ready to begin.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ **Start small, dream big.** Pathfinder's involvement with creative community development began with just a handful of clients in a classroom. Now the success of the Creative Abilities Art Studio has sparked ideas about how art could benefit the broader community. The organization aspires to achieve multiple objectives with the arts center, including bridging differences among people and attracting visitors to spend money in and perhaps even move to Huntington, reversing the population loss experienced by so many rural communities.
- ▶ **Cross-sector partnerships are key to project planning and execution.** Pathfinder does not have a great deal of experience as a commercial developer or arts organization. Thus, it needed to assemble a strategic group of stakeholders, such as the arts council, for the planning committee. Public sector participation proved necessary, too; the city and county both contributed dollars to the project and the city's other efforts to revitalize downtown will enhance the impact of the project.

When launching a new project for which success depends on new expertise, community development organizations benefit from thinking through up front how to build that capacity in-house or identify partners to fill the knowledge gap. Because Pathfinder lacks experience with commercial development, it realized it could benefit from a committee specifically tasked with reaching a co-development agreement with a private partner.

- ▶ **Meaningful engagement requires dedicated resources and dedicated hard work and sets the stage for community buy-in.** While Pathfinder's effort to attract partners has been successful, Niederman wishes he had recognized earlier the importance of robust community engagement and hired a community arts planner. To build community support, "we are constantly reminding people that this is not a Pathfinder project; it is a community project," says Loretta Mottram, the organization's senior director of business development. Before Pathfinder begins fundraising, it will engage the broader community with the help of an arts planning consultant and an AmeriCorps member.
- ▶ **Take a broad view of arts and culture.** Because Pathfinder hopes the community art center will attract a wide variety of residents and visitors, the center needs offerings that are of interest to many different audiences. Thus, the organization deliberately takes an expansive view of what art is as well as who an artist is. "Art" in this context includes the typical visual arts such as painting, but also encompasses technology and food. For example, some people may not automatically think of culinary arts as a form of culture, but the planning committee decided to include a commercial kitchen in the arts center. Participants can sell what they make in the kitchen at the farmers market. Residents also have expressed interest in cooking classes.

As for who is an artist, the answer is broad and clear: everyone. Everyone can be an artist, and everyone is included in the vision for the new center.



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