Using Art to Build Empathy and Create Community: Color Empathy to Life-School Based Mural Project

Mountain View + Sunnyvale, United States

Carol Mellberg

Year Founded: 1973

Organization type: nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector

Project Stage: Established

Budget: $50,000 - $100,000

Website: http://chacmv.org

- Arts & culture
- Community development
- Youth development
- Youth leadership

Project Summary

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

This project proposes to bring together a broad community at several schools, to design and execute a large and colorful art mural on school walls. The process of students, staff and parents creating the mural together will cultivate empathy, bringing a sense of ownership and belonging.

WHAT IF - Inspiration: Write one sentence that describes a way that your project dares to ask, "WHAT IF?"

we could bring together students, teachers and parents at each and every school to jointly create a large, colorful mural on school walls, thereby activating empathy, transforming the educational environment and increasing the sense of ownership and belonging.

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

CHAC is a nonprofit mental health services agency, working in 33 local elementary, middle, and high schools offering counseling and psycho-educational programs. While some of these schools have a strong sense of community, there are many schools at which parents and children feel alienated, teachers feel distrusted and administrators unappreciated. This can lead to bullying, absenteeism, depression and disengagement.

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!
Empathy and community are key to making our schools welcoming and inspiring places of learning. There are some programs, including a few by CHAC, to model empathy in classrooms and small groups. This solution proposes to use mural-making in large groups to activate empathy. Neuroscience research points to a deep connection between visual stimuli, the brain and empathy. There is also research in the use of murals in building self-esteem and community. In one of our local schools, a group of over 80 kids painted a mural to remember and heal from the death of a beloved teacher. A mural created by a group of students, parents and teachers has the potential to activate empathy as well as leave a beautiful artifact for the school.

Impact: How does it Work –

Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

Every year CHAC hires a new group of over 60 interns. We use the process of making a group mural to create a sense of community and allow each intern to make a mark on the space. One of our local schools recently created a mural to allow the kids to process the death of a loved teacher. Over 80 kids were involved - they came together in small groups at lunch to jointly design the mural. We will use a project leader as well as interns already in schools to organize a similar process of kids and teachers coming together at lunch and after school to design the mural. Our First 5 community outreach program will organize up to 5 weekend sessions, with food and music, for the community to come together to design, create and enjoy the mural.

Impact: What is the impact of the work to date? Also describe the projected future impact for the coming years.

CHAC has been operating for over 40 years, and has 85 interns in 33 local schools offering counseling as well as group programs such as Tween Talk and Just For Kids. CHAC is very valued in the community and the School-Based Group Mural project is a new opportunity for us to increase our impact. The powerful effect of collaborative mural painting has been presented before by different therapists and professionals in the field. However, quantitatively measuring the difference such a solution makes has not been attempted before. We will partner with NDNU university to develop new as well as refine existing measurement methodologies. We plan to administer a Belonging Scale and an Empathy Scale questionnaire at the school before and after the mural project. We will also conduct interviews to collect qualitative anecdotal evidence on the efficacy of the approach.

Spread Strategies: Moving forward, what are the main strategies for scaling impact?

Since the grants will only be announced in October, our plan is to do mural projects at two schools by the end of the school year. We will use this to work out how to manage a creative process involving several hundred people so they all feel ownership of the result. We will also refine our measurement methodology. In the next school year, we will expand to 5 schools within our community, with more to follow in future years. We hope to raise future funds based on positive results from the early schools. Our university partners will spread the approach beyond the community we serve.

Sustainability

Financial Sustainability Plan: What is this solution’s plan to ensure financial sustainability?

CHAC's current services are supported by a number of sources. The School Based Mural project is a new idea. Funds are needed for a project leader; stipends for interns since this is beyond their responsibilities and does not count as clinical hours; supplies for the mural; and for community weekend events. This $100,000 grant will allow us to do the project in a few schools. We will apply for further funding based on positive initial results.

Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?

Other approaches to activating empathy - small group discussions, classroom modeling, etc., - don't leave behind a beautiful memory. There have been group mural projects by school kids - usually small groups, usually focused on developing leadership qualities of the participants. An example of an entire school being involved in mural creation took place in China, facilitated by Lily Yeh, who also founded Barefoot Artists to use art to bring about social healing and change. We hope to systematize and disseminate the process of group mural creation to activate empathy and increase belonging.

Team

Founding Story

Carol Mellberg, the lead for this project, is a Registered Art Therapist, in addition to a LMFT. She is passionate about the use of art for sustainable relationship-building within communities. She initiated the annual group mural making with each new batch of CHAC interns, gradually converting the cold walls of the underground garage into beautiful inspiration every time people drive in. Her 9-year old son was involved in the group mural honoring the teacher who passed away, and proudly points to his piece on the wall. And she is totally inspired by the book "Awakening Creativity: Dandelion School Blossoms", by Lily Yeh, documenting the school transformation in China. Carol wants to bring this amazing experience to our schools here!

Team

Most of the team required to execute the School Based Mural project is already in place. The project leader Carol Mellberg, and the First 5 Director, Maddie Pascua, work at CHAC. The interns are already at CHAC - stipends will support their additional work on the project. Dr Carolan (Faculty), Mr. Goldman (School Superintendent), and school principals are supportive. A full-time project leader has to be hired and a Phd student recruited.
About You
First Name
Carol
Last Name
Mellberg
Twitter URL
Facebook URL

About Your Project
Organization Name
How long has your organization been operating?

Organization Country
, CA, Mountain View
Country where this project is creating social impact
, CA, Mountain View + Sunnyvale
What awards or honors has the project received?
Funding: How is your project financial supported?
Friends and family, Individuals, Foundations, Businesses, Regional government, Customers.

Supplemental Information
On which of the following California counties does your project focus its impact? (check all that apply):
Santa Clara.

How does your idea help cultivate empathy skills to strengthen communities and equip young people to become leaders of change?
CHAC proposes to execute an ambitious project at several local schools, facilitating the process of the larger school community coming together to conceive, design and paint a large group mural at each school. The process of creating the mural will cultivate empathy among students, teachers and parents, and contribute to addressing issues such as bullying, absenteeism, alienation and lack of engagement. CHAC has provided mental health services in this community for over 40 years, and is uniquely positioned to experiment with large scale empathy development involving communities of several hundred people. We also have partnerships in place with universities to catalog the process, measure its impact, and scale to more schools.

Needs/Offeres
Tell us about your partnerships
CHAC partners with the public elementary, middle and high schools in Mtn View, Sunnyvale and Los Altos. We have 85 interns in 33 schools, offering individual counseling as well as group programs for both kids and parents.
CHAC partners with the art therapy department at Notre Dame de Namur University, which has recently created a new PhD program. Also, art therapy interns from NDNU volunteer to work at CHAC.

Challenges
We feel it is important to involve teachers and parents as well as school kids in the group mural project. As far as we know, no mural project involving several hundred participants has been attempted at a school. We plan to use our interns and our experience with a prior mural project involving over 80 kids, to design this project. Also, CHAC's successful First 5 program will help with parent involvement. Additionally, measuring the impact of such a project can be challenging. An NDNU professor and graduate students will help refine the measurement instruments we already have.

Does your project use any of the following approaches to cultivate community members as empathetic and collaborative leaders?
blding leadership skills, storytelling, collective problem-solving, enabling action.

Target Age Group(s)
3-5, 6-12, 13-17, 18-35.

Source URL: https://www.changemakers.com/packardempathy/entries/using-art-build-empathy-and-create-community