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Fall 2019 – PRACTICUM
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“Critical Paper | Final Paper”
December 16, 2019

Taking Music to the Streets:

Creating Relationships for Homelessness and Incarcerated

Introduction

Street Symphony is a nonprofit organization providing music programming, workshops, and performances for a community that is affected by homelessness and incarceration. This essay explores how music connects people and restores relationships. Music has an emotional effect that is difficult to understand through metrics. It is hard to measure an intangible product through a survey or explained through words. I embrace the profound experience through Street Symphony as simply being present, being authentic, and empathetic. I worked within the organization for one year, participated in programs, and conducted interviews to understand how empathy can be discovered through the art of music. Through community engagement, trust is gained and relationships has flourished with those experiencing homelessness and incarceration.

Music breaks down the fourth wall, allow ourselves to become vulnerable, and creates a new path to connect and relate to one another as human beings. (Seo, Dustin. Personal interview. 77 Sept. 2019.) We can seek to heal ourselves through listening to the sensual sounds of music and sharing. Music can bring us together to share our own life stories, experience, and struggles in life. There is an

emotional depth to the impact of music. I came to understand that we are all the same kind of different,¹ struggling with our own brokenness, seeking to survive, and fix our souls.

Personal Positioning

There is a personal journey that everyone walks through in life during the transition to becoming an adult and discovering what life has to offer. My path has been about success, and leaving a legacy behind through my career. I felt passionate about my work in marketing and creative design but, after twenty years of success, I felt an underlying disconnect with my purpose and value in life. This instantly shifted when I realized my drive was intended with greater purpose. I left a corporate career, and sought to enter the nonprofit world. I went back to school to earn my Master of Arts degree in Arts Management. I wanted to use my efforts towards things that truly matter and make a difference. I have come to better understand myself, reflect on my current life situation, and how to develop to be a better version of myself for tomorrow.

During my journey, I met an amazing individual, Vijay Gupta — a violinist who is the Founder and Artistic Director of Street Symphony and was recently awarded the Genius MacArthur Grant.² He is an international violinist since he was 8 years old. At the age of nineteen, he was the youngest member of the orchestra to ever be accepted in the Los Angeles Philharmonic performing at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. By 2011, Gupta established Street Symphony, an arts organization utilizing musical programs to connect with the homeless and incarcerated members of Skid Row. He balanced his life as a violinist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and growing his grassroots nonprofit

¹ Same Kind of Different As Me Foundation, Accessed September 14, 2019.
<https://www.samekindofdifferentasmefoundation.org/>

² Javier, Carla. "LA violinist named MacArthur "genius" fellow" 89.3 KPCC. Accessed April 12, 2019.
<https://www.scpr.org/news/2018/10/04/86524/la-violinist-named-macarthur-genius-fellow>.

organization. Like me, he also decided to make a pivotal change in his successful career. Towards the end of 2018, he honorably stepped down from his role at the Los Angeles Philharmonic and went full time as a leader, educator, and musician at Street Symphony, using his artistry and passion for a grander objective in his life.³ His passion as a violinist, took him in a new-found direction — to dedicate his efforts towards Street Symphony.

By no means would I ever compare myself side-by-side to Gupta himself, but I do know that there is a special form of kindness that cannot be taught. Rather, it can be discovered in everyone through the process of living life and learning by experience. Not everyone will find it, but when you do, you find yourself surrounded by extraordinary individuals with like-minded, ambitious dreams. Our dreams can evolve beyond the self, manifested towards creating meaningful relationships and connecting when it matters in a given moment — a season or for a lifetime.

Working with Gupta helped me understand more about Street Symphony and the greater depth of the stakeholders and communities involved. I was able to understand more about the homelessness and incarcerated community built around Skid Row, and discovered the positive effects of the art of music while connecting with human stories without prejudice.

When I first heard of Street Symphony, I had the impression they simply provided musical performances exclusively for the homeless community of Skid Row. Since January 2019, when I began working as their Operations Manager, I realized the organization had more depth and purpose than my original impression. Street Symphony engages with Skid Row through music and providing a safe outlet for people to be themselves, share their journey in life, and discover ways to cope with their struggles.

³ Vankin, Deborah. “L.A. Phil violinist Vijay Gupta is leaving the orchestra and taking his song to the streets,” Los Angeles Times, Accessed March 9, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-vijay-gupta-leaving-phil-20181216-story.html>

After months passed, I came to know the organization was far more than that I originally understood. It has been pinned as an organization that uses music to work with people in Skid Row as advocates for social justice. I learned that the organization is truly about the basic human kindness of interaction. It provides opportunities to transform the narrative of our lost humanity. It was far more than just showing up to perform classical music for the Skid Row audiences and leaving to the next event like it was a gig. The musicians presented an emotional connection, intentional stories, and personal depth that organically happens during their musical programs.⁴ The musical notes became a pathway to communicate, relate, and exchange. They ensured that regardless of economic and racial status, regardless of labels, all people matter.

What is Skid Row?

People living in Los Angeles have, more than likely, heard about Skid Row. It is known as a fearful place to drive, let alone walk through. The area has an uncomfortable stench of pee and trash. It is an overpopulated neighborhood of homeless, addicts, mentally ill, and incarcerated. It is an uncomfortable area to be in. It sounded horrible, and I had assumptions about Skid Row, until I walked those streets. At first sight, I felt bad for so many people roaming the streets with soiled clothes, holes in their shoes, and a make shift tent of cardboard boxes and tarps to call home. I drove along the roads, parked, and walked amongst the streets. I felt uncomfortable, unsafe, and completely displaced to the social norm construct that I have grown to know. After minutes passed, I recognized my premeditated thoughts instilled by others' misguided judgements and stereotypes. Sure, it was not a pretty area and definitely a different neighborhood than I was unprepared for. It was unknown to me.

⁴ "The Weingart Center, 'Music for Change'." YouTube. Street Symphony, May 16, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFmTtN0cVhQ>

I was approached by many with brief random exchanges. Some were aggressive, screaming at me as I passed by, and others were kind, happily smiling and saying hello. “Have a beautiful day and to stay blessed.”

I felt a sense of kindness which was unusual as I walked down the street minding my own business. I was surprised that most people were welcoming, and I found myself more comfortable. Skid Row was like any other community, encompassed by different people with stories, living their day to day life, trying to make it to the next day.

Skid Row is bordered by Third Street to the north, Seventh Street to the south, Alameda Street to the east, and Main Street to the west in downtown Los Angeles. It consists of people who are experiencing homelessness, addiction, and were incarcerated.⁵ Many of these people came from a life filled with family, career, stability and a home. According to a Baylor University Study Release and Panel Discussion. Faith-Based Impact on U.S. Cities and Homelessness, “People don’t become homeless when they run out of money, at least not right away. They become homeless when they run out of relationships.”⁶

Many can dream and assume that money is everything. If only I had all the money in the world, I would do this, and that, and I would finally be happy and have everything I ever need in life. The reality is, there will always be struggles, whether you have little of it, or plenty of it. Money cannot buy you love, people who care, and meaningful relationships that you need in life.

The Importance and Value of Meaningful Relationships

⁵ Union Rescue Mission. Accessed April 6, 2019. <https://urm.org>.

⁶ Baylor University Study Release and Panel Discussion. Faith-Based Impact on U.S. Cities and Homelessness: New Findings. <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/doc.php/281857.pdf>

People need relationships, more than material things. You realize the value of the people in your life, when you find yourself struggling with life and begin to rely on the support of friends and family, people who genuinely care. We naturally rely on people who know us the best. We have strong trusting relationships built for years and emotional bonds showing that we genuinely care for one another.

What causes people to lose the relationships they have? There are many social factors that come into play when people are dealing with homelessness. The American Public Health Association explains further reasons such as factors of poverty, unemployment, physical disabilities, mental illness, and addiction to alcohol and other drugs.⁷ Life changing events can spiral and become why people become homeless and lose connections with people they care about. While dealing with a crisis in life, people tend to make their needs — such as addiction to drugs and alcohol — a priority and lose sight of their family and friends.

Even those dealing with the release out of prison, do not know the next steps to reenter society and eventually damage relationships they do have because of their struggles to adjust to life outside of prison. Even when homeless members of the community seek housing, they still do not have support and connections with meaningful relationships. As mentioned by the Atlanta Mission nonprofit organization, they only have the means to build a support system with the homeless community.⁸

People seek to create relationships and for human kindness. They need a strong support system, and a sense of purpose in society beyond the confined boundaries of their homeless community. It is apparent that homelessness is not the matter of just losing financial security, or

⁷ American Public Health Association, Accessed May14, 2019.
<https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/30/14/37/alcohol-and-other-drug-problems-among-the-homeless-population>

⁸ Atlanta Mission Ending Homelessness, Accessed October 4, 2019.
<https://atlantamission.org/social-factors-ending-homelessness-around-world/>

having a stable living situation. It is a much bigger issue of losing things that are much more priceless in life. Matt Stickel, Integrated Marketing Director at the Springs Rescue Mission organization, mentions that “Running out of relationships is arguably the number one cause of homelessness in America.”⁹ He discusses how Springs Rescue Mission spends \$1.97 for a warm meal and provides the opportunities to rebuild well needed relationships with everyone at the table, whether it be with other residents, staff, or volunteers. Eating together is an opportunity to share stories among the people who sit at the table enjoying one another’s company over a hot, delicious meal. The value of the meal was more than just the obvious of feeding the homeless. The meal was a reason for people to come together and feel treated like human beings and a regain a sense of belonging to rebuild new profound relationships. For Stickel, a meal lead to opportunities of shelter for the night, a chance to learn about a recovery and addiction program, and simply a night of hope.¹⁰ Springs Rescue Mission understood they were providing resources to the homeless community. They needed to rely on others, and not just themselves. This would require a community effort to help one another. A shared meal was a form of kindness. It provided safe place to create hope in one another, create relationships whenever you can.

The Drop Zone

Skid Row is approximately 4.21 square miles. There are 55,188 homeless people in the Los Angeles area, with approximately 40% without actual shelters.¹¹ Amongst those people are individuals

⁹ Stickel, Matt. Springs Rescue Mission. “Lack of Relationship a Cause of Homelessness”, Accessed September 30, 2019. <https://www.springsrescuemission.org/relationship-causes-homelessness-cosiloveyou/>

¹⁰ Stickel, Matt. Springs Rescue Mission. “More than a. Soup kitchen: A meal is an #ActofHope”, Accessed September 30, 2019. <https://www.springsrescuemission.org/more-than-soup-kitchen-act-of-hope/>

¹¹ Morain, Dan. “A walk along Skid Row in Los Angeles – block by bleak block,” CALMatters, Accessed May 16, 2019. <https://calmatters.org/articles/a-walk-along-skid-row-in-los-angeles-block-by-bleak-block/>

released from a state penitentiary with merely \$200 gate money. 33% of California's prisoners are eventually sent to Skid Row, the incarceration drop zone.¹² Nowadays, \$200 will probably last you a few days in the City of Los Angeles. Skid Row is supposed to be a place for people to start over. It was even a place for immigrants to start a new life seeking for the American Dream.¹³ It is currently a low-income community, below the poverty line of approximately \$15,000 per a household, with additional resources to allow people who are struggling to get back on their feet.¹⁴

Robert Greene, editorial writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, addresses the issue of prisoners being released and dropped into Skid Row.¹⁵ A person released out of prison needs more than just a roof over their head to call home. They need support of a community, addiction rehabilitation, and a reentry program back into society. If they get released, go directly to the streets, or try to reunite with family, they may eventually find themselves homeless because of their lack of resources to cope and adjust to their new life outside prison life. Whatever they had before no longer exists and they require a major adjustment to reenter society.

Starting over means finding a new path, dealing with the aftermath of experiencing prison, and also, possibly, dealing with the struggles of addiction or mental illness. If they are dropped off in Skid Row with only a few hundred dollars to their name, they can either find themselves buying drugs and alcohol, or find it within themselves to find the resources provided in Skid Row to join the right programs and begin the efforts to their new life. The Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership

¹² Los Angeles Poverty Department. Accessed May 16, 2019. <https://www.lapovertydept.org>

¹³ "How Los Angeles Created Skid Row," The Daily Beast, Accessed July 1, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-los-angeles-created-skid-row>

¹⁴ Wikipedia. Accessed April 14, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skid_Row,_Los_Angeles.

¹⁵ Greene, Robert. "Opinion: From jail to skid row, where 'all healing needs are met'." Accessed June 28, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-starks-los-angeles-homeless-20160203-story.html>

leaders mentions that one of every people released from incarceration will eventually find themselves on the streets.¹⁶ Reentering society is about dealing with the larger psychological issues at hand that got them to the position where they are today. Emotional trauma, resentment, anger and other experience in life that drove them in jail, addiction, or on the streets.

Skid Row is a drop zone not only for the incarcerated but also for patients who have nowhere else to go. According to Dan Glaister, a writer for *The Guardian*, hospitals and police dump repeat offenders or discharged patients in the midst of Skid Row because of its abundance of resources to assist people experiencing homelessness.¹⁷

Are there enough resources to go around for everyone, and are people fully aware of the resources that are available to them on Skid Row? Those that are experiencing mental illness and find themselves on Skid Row usually do not have the capacity to work. This leaves them with minimal income, disoriented, unable to comprehend how to help themselves. Once again, it's a lack of relationships in their lives to provide that support to assist them with their mental health. According to the Homeless Hub, mental health can worsen when people experience homelessness caused by additional stress, anxiety, fear, depression, and substance use.¹⁸

I remember driving through the streets of Skid Row, seeing people limping around with crutches, pushing themselves along in a beat-up wheelchair, and others standing in the middle of the street carrying on a conversation in the mid-air. My heart instantly hurt. I wondered why they are out on the streets without the proper care, not knowing how to care for themselves. They need to be in a

¹⁶ Greene, Robert. "Opinion: From jail to skid row, where 'all healing needs are met'." Accessed June 28, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-starks-los-angeles-homeless-20160203-story.html>

¹⁷ Glaister, Dan. "Down and out in Skid Row." Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/27/worlddispatch.usa>

¹⁸ Homeless Hub. Accessed October 6, 2019. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/>

hospital for their injuries and get proper treatment for their mental illness. We cannot expect homeless people with mental illness to get off the streets if they are already disoriented and are unable to care for themselves. They have to be coherent to understand how to find resources that are available to them. Individuals experiencing health problems do not have family and friends to provide them the support. Who else can they turn to?

Skid Row became a drop zone for the incarcerated and hospital patients who have nowhere to go. This is not a solution. It became a temporary fix to hide our issues in one particular area. Skid Row was once a place to get a fresh new start when life has turned for the worst and to reclaim their life again. It appears to now be a drop zone for the poor, the hopeless, the mentally ill, and incarcerated. Skid Row is also a community of people whose story matters, seeking for hope and redemption.

Understanding the Need of Affective Housing & Resources

The goal of solving the homeless crisis is to have more affordable housing and resources. I cannot imagine having one or the other. We need both. Housing is an important factor, but it needs to be affordable. We require more space to build more housing within people's parole restrictions. There needs to be resources such as reentry programs, health and wellness programs, addiction support programs, and rehabilitation programs that are accessible and effective. Not just programs that fit all their needs but tailored towards their personal trauma and obstacles they currently face to avoid being homeless. They need to be treated as individuals rather than as a group of people, after all they all went through something different.¹⁹

¹⁹ Greene, Robert. "Opinion: From jail to skid row, where 'all healing needs are met'." Accessed June 28, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-starks-los-angeles-homeless-20160203-story.html>

There are existing correction and reentry programs provided by the county of Los Angeles but not all are effective. The programs include an array of different resources to assist in employment, housing, and other forms of help to start a new life. In fact, the government Office of Justice programs provides ratings on their existing program about which programs have effects, are promising, and are effective. 49 of inmate programs and treatment programs have a 6% effect rate.²⁰ There needs to be a better process to understand which programs and resources are most effective and which are a priority. Housing seems is a major need because if we can provide them proper humane accommodations then we can begin to tackle the larger issues at hand, such as chronic illness, addictions, or trauma. Though, as recently mentioned not everyone will be ready for housing. They need psychological assistance to determine what their priority may be upon reentering society again. Not all individuals will accept the means of housing without understanding their value and purpose in society again.

More than just reentry treatment programs are needed. The other big issues formerly incarcerated members of society have to deal is being offered viable housing and employment opportunities. Without housing or work, how can we prevent them from becoming homeless or committing another offense? Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership (LARRP) is an agency that provides additional resources for the reentry system to provide positive change for millions. Their approach is helping the incarcerated by ensuring programs are focused to meet the needs of all the people they serve.²¹ The population of former prison inmates are almost ten times likely to be part of the homeless population.²² This suggests a relationship between incarceration, homeless, and urban

²⁰ Crime Solutions. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/TopicDetails.aspx?ID=31>.

²¹ The Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership, Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://www.lareentry.org>.

²² Wiltz, Teresa. PEW. "Where 'Returning Citizens' Find Housing After Prison", Accessed October 5, 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2019/04/23/where-returning-citizens-find-housing-after-prison>

poverty.²³ While support services are needed for affordable housing, recovery from addiction, mental illness, and work reentry, one area of need that can be directly addressed through the arts is the lack of emotional programs for the members of homeless communities and formerly incarcerated.

Emotional Healing Through Music

There will always be normal practical resources available such as education, health services, housing, and work. Those leaving jail are usually overwhelmed with an abundance of paperwork to qualify and receive those resources.²⁴ Everything is a due process to complete this form, go to this program, and move on to the next resource. What about the personal interaction of empathizing beyond the paperwork and shoveling people from one program or office to the next?

Street Symphony is one organization that does not require a piles worth of paperwork to attend, it's simply the willingness to show up to the music program. To listen, to participate if willing, and to make the best of the program as it fits for their own individual need at that time. The art organization presents monthly classical music programming to the community of Skid Row and surrounding areas experiencing homelessness, and for those who are currently in prison or formerly incarcerated. With Gupta's background in classical music, he gathers other professional and aspiring artists to come together to bring joy to people's souls. Most importantly, the musicians do not just perform and leave. These musicians come with a greater purpose to communicate through music and hoping to connect with individuals. Through music, people acknowledge one another, interact, and exchange something of value.

²³ "Effects of Poverty on Society," Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://borgenproject.org/how-poverty-effects-society-children-and-violence>.

²⁴ Greene, Robert. "Opinion: From jail to skid row, where 'all healing needs are met'." Accessed June 28, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-starks-los-angeles-homeless-20160203-story.html>

Street Symphony offers opportunities for people to engage as human beings. Amy Fogerson, the Director of the Daniel Chaney Fellowship Program and Director of the Chamber Singers, mentions that “we perform, they receive, and we reciprocate with question and answers.” There is a connection that cannot be forced to create these conversations. Music is offered and everyone organically participates with genuine feelings, experience, and vulnerability.

Through my experience, I have seen people closed off, arms folded and expressing with their body language how disinterested they are. I too felt reserved when I first attended a Street Symphony program. Somewhere along the way, resistance fades, and interest is inspired. When someone leads the conversation, others openly participate. They might say that they don’t understand the music, or they relate to the beats, or they find themselves moved by the peaceful or aggressive notes. Stories are shared in reflection about how the piece made them feel. Fogerson says, “Music has the power to set aside time and space. Listen to take you away from where you are physically. Music inspires. A break from their worries. Speaks directly to their minds and soul. Placing a parenthesis around a time or period. Sharing something special together.” There are not right or wrong answers. It is a very safe and comfortable space to speak their mind and feelings based on what was musically shared with them.

After a few months working with Street Symphony, I realized that the impact was not about performing music. To quote one of their mottos, "Show the F**k UP". Yes, just show up. Be present to respond, engage, and exchange with one another. It was about using music as a tool to break down the fourth wall, and to deepen relationships through musical experiences. Not one program will ever be the same. Music changes, attendees vary, and different stories are always shared. The amazing curation of their program is not solidified with a set itinerary rather an organic experience that is directed by those attending and participating. Their strength is not only in just providing high quality classical performances but to also be vulnerable and authentic through their music. When Gupta first

started “Music with a Mission” program at the Weingart Center, he passionately explains how it is our artistic duty to have creative and expressive life, dignity, and respect for all people. It is important to understand that we must have a conscious shift in how we talk about people experiencing inequality, racism, homelessness and incarceration.²⁵ The community of Skid Row are people, with their own stories and they too matter.

I was mesmerized by classical music. Meditatively, I reflected on my current battles and felt blessed for my life. It was a tug a war of emotions but it gave me hope, for everyone in my life, and even the new relationships I've created while working with Street Symphony. I saw and felt hope in every musical experience with Street Symphony. This was the impact of art and understanding the basic act of human kindness. Street Symphony is here to produce relationships. It creates the pathway for opportunities of connection. Real conversations. It helps us get our humanity back. Experiencing music became a healing process even for those that were uncertain from the beginning. It took time and consistency to create a trusting relationship over time.

Understanding Impact

Like any other service organization, reporting is important to understand social impact. As unique as this organization is, we realized that reporting would need to be just as unique. Benjamin Shirley, a former Street Symphony fellow, co-composer, and the current Director of Community Engagement simply stated, "I am here developing relationships, being of service, mentoring, and helping others." (Shirley, Benjamin. Personal interview. 17 Oct. 2019). Shirley was once on the streets of Skid Row. He found connections through the Midnight Mission, later met Vijay, and discovered

²⁵ Christiaansen, Dana. “Street Symphony at the Weingart Center.” YouTube. Street Symphony, December 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WvTPe9K-bE>.

Street Symphony. Shirley shared his story, "Music got me to open up. Creating relationships, network, connection. Once you're NOT connected, you lose everything." After all, he experienced this himself.

Shirley had a background in music since he was fifteen years old. He played in a rock band and even got signed on with Epic Records in 1998. He had a few records and went on tour but alcohol got the best of him. By 2010, he could not function, had a DUI accident in 2011, found himself in and out of recovery programs, hospitals, and psychiatric wards. Eventually his family and friends gave up on him and cut him off completely. He had lost his relationships with friends and family. He lost his home, and got kicked out of the recovery home. His friends in his recovery group dropped him off at the Midnight Mission in Skid Row to seek help and start over. This was his first time ever visiting Skid Row. It gave him a different understanding of how people became homeless and dropped off in Skid Row. After twenty-six months at the mission, attending school, and in recovery, his sponsor encouraged Shirley to start his new life outside of Skid Row. He then had a moment of clarity, a sense of relief to allow himself to start over and change. Recovery for him entailed, developing relationships, being of service, and mentoring others. According to Shirley, being involved with Street Symphony just felt right. He made relationships and was in great company. (Shirley, Benjamin. Personal interview. 17 Oct. 2019). He continues to attend and participate in the Weingart Center program every week and shows up to the Midnight Mission's Music with a Mission Program. It's not easy, but he understands the importance of connecting with others, being accountable, and showing up. You can't put a number on Benjamin Shirley's experience of impact through music.

Amongst other experience like Shirley, Ray Lewis, part of the Ashe-Ashe Drummers From the Heart, can relate with Shirley and the rest of those facing addiction and homeless in Skid Row. Lewis experienced homelessness for more than thirty years and addiction for about twenty-five years. He took his beats to the drums reminding himself he will make it and that very reminder became his

mantra.²⁶ It saved him and he indeed made it. Lewis finds himself wanting to share his stories in hopes he can help others through his life experience and how he channeled his energy into music and found light in his darkness. Dustin Seo, Director of Music Programming, has been a part of all the Street Symphony programs and experienced the impact of music. Seo explains that a lot of the magic happens within their program is through listening each other's music and seeing what they can do together. In a single moment, where humans are connecting with other humans is what makes this musical experience special and unique.²⁷

How does one measure the effect and its success? The measure of success is creating an experience to ensure the community members of Skid Row are acknowledged, creating engagement, and providing an exchange of conversation. Stakeholders ask, show us the numbers, show us the charts graphs, and the value of how many people has been affected. It is a difficult challenge to truly determine the statistical number of how many people are impacted. We can provide numbers of how many people attended in comparison to other programs or prior events but measuring an intangible product like an authentic experience is unexplainable through numbers or even words.

Capturing a collection of stories in the moment through videography is just as powerful as numbers. One can view the genuine, authentic experiences shared through the programs, conversations, interactions, and relationships built over time. The organization has many videos capturing the emotional connection and moments through the entire event, and gathering qualitative data through interviewing people about their experience. A more in-depth process in understanding the positive impact of our programming and the personal emotional experience of attending or

²⁶ "Our First Block Party." YouTube. Street Symphony, August 1, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_ZaTq-BkJ0

²⁷ "Our First Block Party." YouTube. Street Symphony, August 1, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_ZaTq-BkJ0

participating in all the Street Symphony programs, not only for the community members but everyone else involved such as musicians, artists, and the organization staff as well.

Partnerships With the Midnight Mission

The positive impact that Street Symphony organization has built in the community for the last decade was not a solo act in itself. With many partnerships and supporters allowed Street Symphony to grow its program and to continue to enhance the relationships built over the years. Georgia Berkovich, the Director of Public Affairs at the Midnight Mission for over a decade and also an important member of the Street Symphony board of directors, expresses her passion and story being on Skid Row.

She uses the power of arts, using music, comedy and art to bring joy and hope to people to open the opportunity of a new positive outlook in life. Berkovich saw more than just human suffering and pain in Skid Row, she saw hope and the opportunity of recovery. She strongly states that, “Music is a great equalizer. We are all the same when we listen to music.”²⁸

Her heartfelt story of starting to drink at the age of seven, crack addiction in her early twenties, she has experienced a life of struggles losing everything but led her place in the Midnight Mission. In the kindness of others she found her sobriety and her passion to be of service helping others. Berkovich’s art initiatives, particularly in partnership with Street Symphony, they created the Music with a Mission. It was a safe outlet to allow people to tap into their feelings they have blocked for so long and a way to express themselves.

²⁸ LA Stories Staff. Spectrum News 1. “Midnight Mission's Georgia Berkovich on Inspiring Skid Row's Community”, Accessed November 11 2019. <https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/la-stories/2019/11/11/midnight-mission-s-georgia-berkovich-on-inspiring-skid-row-s-community?fbclid=IwAR2uFIDpN8hj3xY3CrrWJIvv6ZBou7bEwRmSjNemGb3RgTW0d3GufX0kcls#>

Yet another example of people of many walks, experience life struggles and finding an alternative artistic methods to heal their souls and be able to find a different way of expressing themselves. Art of many forms, as Berkovich exemplifies in her Midnight Mission programming are one of many resources, just like Street Symphony that are seeking the arts as a method to break down the fourth wall. Art allows people to become vulnerable and provides a safe haven to release their stress and worries. It's organic, genuine, and as authentic as it can get and people embrace it with such joy.

Conclusion

Almost a year has passed since I started working with Street Symphony. I came to understand Street Symphony organization is about the basic human kindness of interaction. It provides the opportunity to transform the narrative of our lost humanity by connecting through the art of music. I had the pleasure of participate in the restructuring of the organization. Our goal is to maintain the integrity of the organization, and to dive deeper into relationship building through music. Street Symphony exists to show up and be a place of present. It provides the experience of music and allows the participants to create what they need from it. Every program is presented with a personal touch with vulnerable intentions from the musician's perspective and feelings they would like to share through their performance. Every experience will always be different, unique, and special. As I have noticed, some programs are more meaningful than the last, or sometimes more emotional and therapeutic.

Funding requires accountability, and we cannot always provide the kinds of metrics that every grant or stakeholder might want to see. We collaborate with people who value the genuine and authentic impact music can create for anyone, even within a community like Skid Row. Ed Yim, the

Vice President for artistic planning for the New York Philharmonic, states, “If organizations create and design programs purely for the sake of generating metrics, purely to chase the funding, then we create organizations which are following, not leading.” Street Symphony is here to lead, to play music in the streets, literally and metaphorically. Street Symphony is an art organization that uses music to restore humanity, to heal, and to connect people to each other.

It’s easy for people to lose hope, fall back into their addictions, and to struggle. Government can continue to create solutions such as providing the housing and resources but how do we ensure all programs are making an impact? Every person has their own story, a different struggle, and not all will heal exactly the same. How do we ensure we provide plentiful opportunities to build a real connection, break down barriers, deal with their emotional struggles, and form relationships to provide the support system that our human soul needs?

There are other forms of resources or organizations that can provide these emotional outlets of truths that people seek. Street Symphony is just one of many that utilizes art as a form of communication. As more organizations will follow like the Midnight Mission and Weingart Center, we hope more organizations provide more artistic methods as another form of healing and recovery. Art is a one possible solution to create a pathway to not just intrude and build a bridge over people’s wall, rather to tear down that wall to create meaningful relationships. An equal exchange of respect for one another. To be human, to be kind, and to listen to other’s stories. Emotions run deep, thoughts weigh heavy, and people need people. People need each other to motivate them, to provide guidance and advice, and to simply relate; we need empathy.

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Appendix A.

Interview Questions:

1. Please provide me an introduction of your background, including your name, role/relationship with Street Symphony.
2. Prior to joining Street Symphony and outside of Skid Row, what was your prior knowledge of the homelessness and incarceration issues in Los Angeles?
3. What was your first impression or understanding about skid row? Provide some background knowledge that you first knew about skid row and your view or feeling about skid row now.
4. How did you first get involved with Street Symphony? Tell me about your first experience with the organization.
5. Tell me about an important or life altering experience you've had with Street Symphony that may have impacted you and why?
6. Can you share your experience or any stories that you have in participating with Street Symphony events or programming?
7. What impact, if any has music been for you? What role does music play for you?

Appendix A.1.

Interview notes with Dustin:

- before we connect let's break down the fourth wall, breaking the boundaries. Let's not create the bridge to close the gap so our different worlds are colliding because societies wall is too high to build a bridge over nor to jump over/overcome our current issues. Let's create the space to have mutual exchange of invitations to share stories and allow ourselves in each other's space.
- Create platform or space to allow people to use art as a way to engage, be vulnerable, the art in itself forces us to be open, as long as we are present it's an invitation to receive and give that mutual respect and engagement. A form of connection will naturally, effortlessly be created but it's our own individual experience to determine its results and affect.
- Ray, Steve and Brian's stories, is that a success for Brian even though we lost him. Or Steve if he got kicked out of Weingart center and is using again? YES, because we could have lost them sooner to death or to their addiction. Our impact is not created but the lives we save, nor "fix" anything, it's measured by the experience, the value, the relationships and conversations we have had. Whether it be one moment, or experience, or a few months or a year. It's the impression we leave behind, it is their thoughts that we leave for them, the reflection of their life. The depth thought where they get lost in a moment with the music or discussion.
- Impact is individual, experience, may not affect everyone but one is better than none
- Artists responsibility to provide high quality music and to make it relevant.
- Sense of belonging unless we belong
- Skid row is no different than any other community (Alta Dena) it's a community of people just like the next. What makes Skid Row different is it's unfamiliar territory of the smell, trash, and tents on the street. But you won't understand Skid Row until you go to Skid Row, until you get invited and begin to meet people, talk to them, hear their stories, and understand they matter too.
- Fear skid row because of its label, stereotype and unfamiliar territory that is distant to the social norm/construct that we've been instilled in us.
- Social construct rules that we abide by as citizen but in skid row there is a diff world or diff rules. EX: We would never jay walk to or stand in the middle of the street without caution but in Skid Row they don't care or are not as cautious about the ramifications of standing in the middle of the streets with cars passing by. It's their conformed norm.
- Impact of sharing and receiving goes both ways. Fourth wall as a musician that doesn't allow connection in a big theatre music hall as you would get performing at jail or Weingart

Appendix A.2.

Interview notes with Amy:

- LA Master Chorale performer
- Summer of 2014 met with Vijay with an idea, following March first event
- Recruit and rehearse, 30 singers, perform with about 8-12 singers
- Fellows program started a few years ago, voice lessons, at no cost, 2 year residency
- Daniel Chaney and Don Garza, organic happening and helping out with voice lessons
- Teaching artists, strong connection with the students
- Brian Palmer, develop a friendship and relationships
- Linda and Gerald, strong connections, two way relationship
- Skid Row history, felt horrible, no knowledge
- Now that she's spent time in Skid Row, changed your view, not just homeless people and just more of individuals. Issues no means, no power, no connection, ... fell out of social structure lack of job, illness or addiction (external circumstances).
- Biggest offer: engage as human beings, connection,
- We perform, they receive and we reciprocate with Q&A
- So little that divides us, financial or social economic issue, mental health and addiction
- Connection, vulnerability, open up to the idea of the performance, that have opinions
- Music has the power to set aside time and space, listen to take you away from where you are physically, music inspires. A break from their worries. Speaks directly to their minds and soul. Placing a parenthesis around a time of period. Share something special together.
- They don't get that engagement, always being TOLD what to do but never asked of their opinion.
- Get people there it makes a difference
- Compartmentalize those people away, not worry about them, they do not concern me.
- Constructs. Get to know and understand Skid Row. Awareness. Showing up. Experience it.
- Impact experience. Lynwood women's county jail. Sang for a cell block. They wanted to sing for us after Street Symphony performance. Eight inmates cleaning the hallway, walking out, inmates had to face the wall abruptly. Silent in shock of that event. Humanity stripped for one second. Restore humanity, value you as a person.
- Resources and programs. Social workers, mental health professionals, housing transition. We can provide something to hang onto, that they enjoy, fills them in a spiritual and emotional needs. MFC weekly meetings, feel normal, address their inner lives
- Impact experience in a moment: Men's county jail singing with us, participating, gen pop, special prisoners (LGBTQ) group. Sing together, to feel a sense of belonging and fulfilling. Gerald fellows, singing at Messiah. Charles teacher in the audience enjoying his performance and seeing the connection through music. Things you cannot quantify with statistics, but you see the affect, open doors of communication. Gerald, private, lives in SOR housing off the streets, was on the streets, section 8 (reduced rent) housing, now living in South LA, bus everywhere, organized his life to function. Studio 526 open mics, there every event to sing. Soft spoken. (private, don't share: produce more volume, but his father was verbally abusive so he chooses not to be loud).
- Impact on people of skid row but reason why it works is there is an impact on musicians just as much. Incredible experience because of the questions, response, and reactions. A chance to use music and remember how it's like to be touched with music. We forget about that feeling once

we become a professional. It's a spark of that moment of why they enjoy music. Giving two way sharing experience.

- Value about Street Symphony, intentional about everything we do and taking everything into consideration. Not a commodity we are trying to sell. Cannot force relationships and begin careful steps and move slowly.
- Brian Palmer – we are not a recovery and drug counselor. Gave Brian an opportunity to learn and experience music. Be in spaces to do something beautiful, to keep his mind off everything else, felt part of the Street Symphony family.
- Fellows, Scott Graff – teacher

Appendix A.3.

Interview notes with Ben Shirley:

- Director of Community Engagement, first composer fellows, co-composer along with Rene Esmail. Natural progression to work with Street Symphony
- Playing since 15, always been a musician, playing in a rock band, 98' signed to epic records 2 EPS, few records, went on tour.
- Always drinking and 2010 could not function, 2011 DUI caused an accident, May 23 went into the Mission on Skid Row, 6 months had to do something and went back to school
- Found himself in Skid Row, first time ever, was in and out of recovery programs,
- Sobriety and dry is different things
- Found himself in hospitals, and psych wards from drugs and drinking
- Two people in the recovery group dropped him off at Skid Row
- Want to do the right thing, but he had to figure it out
- In recovery – obsession has been removed, Being Dry – seek to want, crave IT
- Can't picture life with or without it (alcohol)
- Shit on them enough, all support system and friends was gone
- Cutting me off, I had nothing, NOW what?
- Didn't find himself in prison even though he should have
- Homeless people – get a job. Incarcerated – what's wrong with you
- When he found himself there, he realized how difficult it was
- People who didn't want to get sober, because they have what they need to survive
- Resources/Services and some take advantage of it
- Recovery allowed him to change his life, programs helped him, and he was not dumb, this was not the life he wanted
- All life prior, only reconnected with 2-3 people. Amends with their parents, great relationship
- You don't have recovery, I have nothing.
- Original plan was to stay at the mission for 5 years until he finishes school.
- 26 months at the mission and his sponsor said he was ready to leave and start his life outside of skid row/mission
- Moment of clarity and allowed himself to start over and change (33 minutes in), sense a relief
- Developing relationships, being of service and mentoring and helping others
- Put application in for SF Conservatory of Music, composed music for an audition. Wrote a TY music, (40 min). Vijay heard it and wanted to play it at the Messiah Project. Kept in touch with Vijay. He asked Ben to compose a piece for the composer and you'll get training with Rena Esmail. Became composer fellow.
- Friends making friends.
- Brian Palmer past away. Seen his friends die. Devasted but not surprised. It's a good place of love. Brian separated himself away from everything/people that helped him. He doesn't need Skid Row anymore and UVP. Start of relapse, and lost connection. "One true act of love is listening." Brian became dry. Once you're not connected, you lose everything. Unfortunate, because it's unnecessary. Walked away from it.
- Not here to save anyone's life. We are here for you and the rest you have to do for yourself.

- Christina, current fellows. She's using again. I'm not all that bad. Everyone is here for her, she's dry, but she doesn't see it. Can't help those who don't want the help. She cut everyone off.
- We are no one's police. We are here for you but what are you doing for yourself?
- Must be accountable for yourself.
- There is a solution.
- This organization should not be about monetizing and franchising. Nothing starts unless we have a conversation. One relationship starts with next relationships. (57 min).
- Real conversations going. Get the humanity back. Safe area to talk and open up.
- Someone has to lead and be vulnerable enough to share. Let the mask down in that moment. Put my guard down because he saw someone else do it. (boiling water metaphor, one bubble after the next). Ripple effect
- I hate music, 3 weeks later. Sat in front and started having interest. Music became a common denominator of interest and conversations begin organically.
- Smart guys did some stupid shit. To belong, feel accepted.
- James, Music for Change participant, 20 years in the pen. Running clothes in midnight mission. Working at midnight mission. Music got him to open up. Now joining running club. Creating relationships, network, connection.
- You have to show up.
- Not in the business for numbers, rather relationships
- The big F You
- It's not outreach. I'm here, if you choose not to be a part of it, I'll be here tomorrow and the next day.
-

Appendix A.4.

Interview notes with Ndindi (board member):

- Ndindi Kitonga. She is a board member of Street Symphony. She has been on the board for almost 2 years.
- Q2 notes: Prior to joining the Street Symphony board, she had experience working with and teaching on issues concerning poverty, homeless, and incarceration. Been volunteering and teaching in programs with homeless youth in Orange, CA, Venice Beach, CA. Also been friends and tried to support the work of folks like Pastor Cue and General Jeff for over a decade.
- Q3. She was familiar with the issues that produce the homeless and hopelessness of Skid Row. First visited in 2001. She was a new immigrant to the United States. Originally from Kenya, and they have poverty and other issues associated with urban strife, did not have a homelessness problem on the scale like Skid Row. Her reactions were quite shocked and empathetic. Also very confused to learn that many Angelenos knew about Skid Row and had even maybe driven past but they considered it an irredeemable place...a place where people go to die. Began to make friends and learn how to be supportive as well as what legislative measures she should advocate for. To this day she is still shocked at the apathy Skid row receives. Also quite embarrassed at how few viable solutions are suggested or even applied here.
- Q4. She met Vijay several years ago when we were both teaching for the Longy School of Music of Bard College. During the Messiah project, Vijay invited the graduate students to attend and learn. It was during this time she realized how vital the work of the program was.
- Q5. Brought some of her students to a Street Symphony event several months ago. This was an opportunity for students to just be present and participate without being the “sage on the stage” or performing. A handful of students found themselves in a drumming circle with the local Ashe Ase drummers. One of her graduate students would later talk about this experience at length, citing, “I feel healed”. Later on, talked with one of the Ashe Ase drummers and learned that he had a history of incarceration and addiction but had found healing and community in making music. Was very touched by this musician’s holistic view of life and his desire to serve people through his art. Having spaces where we can confront each other regardless of our differences and life circumstances is very important. Street Symphony is a great organization that allows for these types of interactions.
- Q6. A highlight experience of the local Skid Row was the reggae DJ. This gentleman has expressed to her at least three times that he feels valued and heard when he does things with the Street Symphony. He has truly felt that the work we have done together has not only supported him but has been a true collaboration. He has also expressed gratitude for Dustin who has been a great listener, friend, and collaborator.
- Q7. Street symphony engages its members, staff, and musicians in a way she has rarely seen in other organizations. For one, street symphony makes it possible for musicians and staff to develop themselves. There is no way of being involved in the program in a disengaged way. This is a great success because I hear of musicians all over the city talk about gigging and not actual engagement, particularly in “volunteer” spaces. As far as the wider community is concerned, she has witnessed Skid Row community members feeling heard, understood and also developing their capacities.