ARTS IN A SMALL TOWN - DURING A PANDEMIC

MILAN
MN
Pop.
429

Each grant approx.
$7,000

2020: Greater Milan Initiative | The Defrost Project

This grant allowed artists with particular expertise in applied theater and community art-making to visit Milan and interface with the community in new and exciting ways. The Defrost Project provided enriching activities for young people and other community members during an extremely isolating time. They also provided programming for young people over the school spring break. This grant allowed the Defrost Project and the young people in Milan (particularly those involved with the Milan Youth Center) to connect over differences, share space and reflect on a tough year, learn new skills, and create a lasting artifact (the film) that captured the interests and perspectives of the Milan Youth Center members. Participants also engaged and built skills in art forms such as poetry, image theater, role-playing work, and photography. The fruitful workshops between the young people and these artists would not have been possible without this grant funding.

2021: Greater Milan Initiative | "We are Milan" Theatre Camps

This second project used theater and storytelling with residents of Milan to culminate into a live time capsule installation that the community curated in the Milan School Building. The purpose of the time capsule was to serve as a message from 2021 to the year 2121. It included visual art, objects, and an original movie, all made within the community. This project provided an exciting, theatrical way of catalyzing reflection and art-making around the questions: What represents who we are now? What do we want our world to become?

In addition to camp, artists led visioning activities with adults at the American Legion, National Night Out, the library's book club, the city council meeting, and the park.

The culminating event's festivities were also engaging for the community. Milan residents of all ages and backgrounds joined in to celebrate. Many of them spoke about how proud they were of the art they made and/or saw.

Looking back on the effects of a global pandemic sheds light on the resilience and tenacity of humanity. One such bright light is a project that was undertaken in Milan during and after COVID-19 rocked the world. The "Defrost Project" was a FY20 Arts Project funded by the Southwest Minnesota Arts Council that had initially intended to bring artists from New York to work with the community. Because of travel restrictions and health concerns those artists did not travel to Milan in the summer of 2020; instead the organizers set to work to alter course and co-create a meaningful experience given the new constraints on the project. The entire project was conducted remotely via video conferencing, social media, and traditional media outlets over six months.

Ann Thompson of the Greater Milan Initiative explained, "We were committed to using participatory applied theater as a tool for community building, celebrating Milan's many strengths, and exploring and proposing solutions to local challenges. This was a time of disconnection, isolation, and loss for so many, and we knew that the arts could provide unique ways of connecting us to each other." Various versions of the Community Questions were used to engage participants via discussion, writing, and making art. Additionally, theater games adapted for the online platforms were played addressing various versions of the community questions to examine how students felt about themselves and others in Milan and surrounding communities.

One of many substantial outcomes of the Defrost Project was that the young people created an original documentary film about Milan in 2021 where they articulated their predictions about what the next 100 years might bring for Milan, and reflecting on the roles they could play in shaping that future. Amelia Hefferon, lead artist of the project, stated, "This served as a strong foundation for the in-person work we did in Milan in August 2021 with funding from a second SMAC grant."

Both grants succeeded in providing a space for community members to gather and reflect on a difficult and unprecedented year, celebrate aspects of their community, and imagine the future they want to see. These newly-learned art forms such as poetry, image theatre and photography enabled the participants not only to express themselves but to build skills and find new, effective, and unique means of communicating their interests, desires, and perspectives. Hefferon summed it up, "The fruitful workshops between the young people, the community and the artists would not have been possible without this grant funding."

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