

[Creating Social Change Through Community Connections & Shared Arts Experiences](#)

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Animating Democracy: Social Impact & Evaluation Blog Salon

Recently, I found myself sitting in a circle in Portland, ME, leading a group that includes the city manager, police chief, a leader in the Occupy Maine movement, one of the founders of Portland's NAACP, leaders from the Sudanese and Congolese refugee communities, the president of a city union (CEBA), and a doctor active in public health, among others. The members of this group are impressive and diverse, but what we are sharing is more so.

In only seven minutes, 20 city and community leaders composed poems that draw upon their personal histories, the history of Portland, and those things they have witnessed in this place we all call home.

Increasing the Odds

All of [Art At Work's](#) projects are designed to increase the odds that Portland and their partner cities (Holyoke, Northampton, and Providence in 2012), launch their own Art At Work will be better able to turn anticipated social and economic crises into opportunities by integrating creative engagement in their 'way of doing business.'

This workshop was a part of [Portland Works](#), another one of our experiments in figuring out how to harness the transformative power of art to achieve concrete community-based outcomes. These workshops bring together community and city leaders to create a dialogue and increase understanding between individuals and groups that often see one another as obstacles as opposed to allies. "It's just brilliant," says Mike Miles, the City of Portland's director of human resources, "using art to break conceptions about who people are and what people do."

Art At Work, of which Portland Works is just one part, is designed to improve municipal government through strategic arts projects involving city employees, elected officials, community leaders, and local artists.

The process of making art dramatically increases our ability to access our flexible intelligence, function collaboratively, analyze complex challenges, integrate contradictory perspectives, envision a positive outcome and take inspired risks that lead to innovative solutions.

"Is my new home another Congo, where I will live with many unanswered questions about my future?" asks Claude Rwagange, the founder of Community Financial Literature.

"I've seen this city grow older, while its people grow younger still. It struggles and soars, keeps open its doors," wrote Lee Urban, Portland's former director of planning and development in his poem entitled *Old Munjoy*.

These are a few examples of the questions explored within the poems and the Portland Works group as a whole. These insights highlight the importance of mutual trust and support between community and city leaders, especially in the tumultuous economic and social climate in which we are living.

New Relationships As Indicators

Building relationships is key to the survival not only of Portland, but the world as a whole. Artmaking in a group allows people to make connections across borders; it lowers their defenses and gives them the much-needed opportunity to share a piece of themselves with others.

Portland Works successfully bridged gaps between the community and the city. City Manager Mark Rees, Police Chief Mike Sauschuck, and Occupy Leader Jake Lowry met to discuss the protest and lay out terms for withdrawing from their encampment.

Claude Rwaganje became a member of the City of Portland's financial planning committee, and League of Young Voters Portland President Nicola Wells was able to develop new relationships and inroads with city employees and municipal organizations like Creative Portland and Portland Adult Education, an important hub for newly arrived immigrant and refugees.

Counting the Numbers

An in-depth evaluation of the police poetry calendar project, which was designed to improve the historically low morale among police officers, revealed that 83 percent of the participating officers reported it had a direct impact on improving the morale of the force. Additional indicators of success were that the second year saw more than twice as many officers volunteering to write poems and than writing three times the number of poems required.

The calendar, which was only one of several outcome-driven arts projects with the police department, also had the impact of prompting a long-sought change in policy, increasing positive citizen/resident/officer contacts, introducing poetry-related nicknames for some of the officers (Ex: 'Warrior Poet').

Police officers also participated in a poetry reading, followed by five arts-based civic dialogues. Their poetry and photography became a permanent exhibit at police headquarters and without prompting officers decided to open the exhibit to the public for Portland's First Friday Art Walk.

The project received widespread positive local, regional, national, and international media coverage.

Creating Elemental Change

The most significant indicator of impact came amidst escalating tensions after the police shot and killed an armed Sudanese man who had been a city resident for many years. In increasing numbers, high school students, primarily from Portland's immigrant and refugee communities, were throwing rocks and bottles at police, parks, and public service workers.

The police chief called to ask me to write and direct police officers in a performance for local high school students that focused on the work and lives of the officers. My counteroffer, which he agreed to, was that I'd like to work with the officers "more likely to cross a line" as Art At Work's mission is for art to affect elemental, not peripheral, change.

Solutions the Size of the Challenges

"This process [Portland Works] has taught me to look at things globally and holistically," says Greg Mitchell, the economic director of planning for Portland. "I'll apply that less mechanical thinking to my work."

Creativity is an underused tool, a tool that is able to transform situations, inspire people to action, conceptualize brilliant perspectives, catalyze innovative ideas, and create solutions the size of the challenges; the work of Art At Work.