

Starting a Consumer-Operated Arts Center

1. Goals of the Center:

- Opportunity for being creative and pursuing artistic talents
- “Telling Our Stories”—means of communicating to others our recovery stories
- Freeing inner turmoil and emotional struggles through artistic expression
- Offering freedom for art to be appreciated without judgment, censorship or scrutiny
- Reducing stigma in the community; changing how society and the world thinks of us
- Forming partnerships with providers, family members and community artists for sharing special projects and for support and publicity
- Means to add income and for some to acquire economic self-sufficiency (this may be through art sales, arts business such as a greeting cards, craft items, etc., or as a performance artist, musician, poet, dramatic art)
- For having fun and socializing; making new friends

2. Steps

- Careful planning needs to occur at the front end before setting up a peer-run arts program.
- Research and study other model peer-run arts programs in other parts of the country
- Create an organizing committee with a varied group of people interested in the arts, both consumers and non-consumers.
- Include talented artists who have exhibited their work as well as people who are creative or who do art as a hobby
- Determine how many people should be on your planning committee and whether this will become the board of directors for the project. Make sure there are persons with various areas of expertise and that the group is at least half consumers
- Those starting up the program should determine how many people the program will serve (partly dependent on space allowance)
- By-laws are important to establish, and they need to be followed
- Determination should be made if some services need to be provided by non-consumers

- Do a survey to determine which activities are of most interest to people who will attend. Ask several other questions in the survey: Would you like to be a member of the center? How often would you come? When would you most like to come, day, evening, weekends?
- Find a suitable location for the center:

Avoid residential areas, as there is the danger that community residents will object. NIMBY is still alive and well, and there are many examples of programs that started in areas with the highest hopes that their program would succeed only to have local area residents organize and involve local government citing zoning regulations as the reason for their objections. Make sure the location is safe. Is it a high crime area? Is the location accessible to people of different cultures?

Some commercial areas might encounter similar problems. If members are entering a building next to a jewelry store or small business, for example, the proprietors may object to strange people who hang out affecting their business.

Other physical considerations:

Make sure the building is wheelchair accessible—When determining whether a building is wheelchair accessible it is advisable to consult with someone who is disabled and in a wheelchair. I have seen instances where a hotel, for instance, advertises being accessible, but persons will complain that certain physical aids were missing.

Parking accessibility:

Check to see if there is free parking space nearby, either in the lot next to the building of the program, or in a lot near the center. Parking on the street may be satisfactory if other space cannot be identified, but check to see whether or not meters are during day hours only or include evening hours.

Transportation accessibility:

Note city bus schedules and the location of the closest stop.

Adequate natural light to enhance creativity and for display purposes: An art center will benefit from a lot of natural light

Outdoor space for people to gather:

A picnic bench or tables located in outdoor space will allow for persons to socialize and network without disturbing people who are working on their arts project.

Smoking:

Allowed or not allowed? Often the policy is that people can smoke outside only.

Smoking inside is currently prohibited in almost all public facilities, including peer operated programs.

Is wall space available for display of artwork? Determine whether art will be displayed directly on the walls, or whether the walls will be covered in fabrics to protect the walls.

Sink for washing paint- brushes

Area for microwave and refrigerator

Cubby holes for individual artists to keep their belongings or current projects

Independent or Not: Pros and Cons

This is one of your biggest decisions: whether to be an independent center with tax-exempt status or to operate under the umbrella of another agency is a tricky question. Both of these options have pros and cons, and deserve careful thought.

If you decide to be an independent free- standing center, you will have all of the responsibility, including programmatic oversight and the administrative business aspects. The advantage of being independent is that you have ownership of the project. When you publicize the center, it will be with your own advertising and not part of another agency's promotion. You will be able to make decisions about growth, to determine the criteria for the participants, policies and procedures, role and functions of a board of directors. This all works well if the board has some experience in serving on other boards of directors and leadership has previous experience with administration. If this sounds ominous, it is. Many centers have folded because of financial and poor business decisions though the actual program was excellent.

There are many examples of successful centers that have operated independently over long periods of time, and would be helpful for you to talk to people who are engaged in these successful programs. Find out the factors that contributed to their success. How did they get adequate funding to operate including the infrastructure.

Advantages of being a program within another agency:

It is easier to do what you do well when you aren't spending a lot of time seeking funding or looking for sponsors. The business of running a program is rarely what creative people do well

and the creativity is what will draw people to your program. If possible, it is best to grow your program under the business umbrella of an established business, at least until you have enough funds to be able to hire people who specialize in the business tasks that will need to be complete.

One of the most successful arts programs run by consumers is in Broward County Florida, 9 Muses Art Center. The advisory committee voted early on that they did not want to be responsible for budgeting and finances. They wanted to concentrate on developing the arts program a

My personal viewpoint on this subject has changed over the years. I would never have thought that I would support programs that did not start out being independent. It is because I have seen many programs be successful for many years while others have failed that I have come to the conclusion that at least temporary oversight by another agency, can be helpful. aid that I supported programs Also, you should spend some time talking to national con

Determine whom you will serve. Your primary goal will be to serve persons who are living independently in the community. This will include persons who you know: they go to a drop-in center; they receive mental health services at a local agency, or they have been involved in your local advocacy organizations or groups. Other people will find out about you through word of mouth or through community advertising. They may not have been interested in a program advertising mental health but an art center will attract their attention. Voila! You have a new group of persons who heretofore have not learned about the consumer/survivor movement.

A third group are people living in assisted living facilities or residential programs. While a few people will be able to come independently to the center most will come by agency transport van and will come at regularly scheduled times. It is important to schedule group time separate from individual work time due to space requirements for larger groups, and so that persons working intently on a project will not be distracted.

What to call the center: Take suggestions from the committee and others to name the center. Selecting a catchy or meaningful name will help people to feel an identity to the center and for publicity and fundraising. Avoid using mental health in your title; even words that have become common such as Recovery have begun to be overused. Come up with something totally creative. You can add a subtitle that identifies the fact that you are serving persons with psychiatric disabilities, which is actually an essential for membership purposes.

3. Become familiar with other consumer run arts projects and programs in other parts of the country. They are not easy to find on the internet but there are now a variety of programs including longstanding theater groups, some independent arts programs, drop-in centers with an emphasis on the arts.

Art Therapy vs. Creativity:

Know the difference between art therapy and creative expression. Art therapy requires specific training and a special license certifying one as a licensed art therapist. Anyone can teach a class on creative arts, though it is important that instructors have *some* training and experience.

Membership:

Membership will be established by doing an interview with a prospective member who voluntarily discloses their history of a psychiatric disability. New members will sign a form agreeing to conduct guidelines and then receive a membership card.

Develop criteria for membership and membership cards. This involves determining whether a person is a mental health consumer, which at first, you may have no doubts or concerns. Later, though, as the center becomes more widely known you may have people who come to do art without meeting the criteria. Many centers have struggled with this question. In one center, people started to come who learned about the center word of mouth on city buses. Meals were being served and people showed up for these meals. Eventually they had to come up with a policy for identifying whether or not someone had been diagnosed with a mental illness.

Interview: Sharon Wise, July 13th

(Have known Sharon for many years and visited her DIC approx. 10 years ago. I do not have all of the information as she had to leave) but will get more

Name of Center: Our Turn Drop In Center: Washington, D.C. (Sharon fill in more information and if you remember anyone's comments who liked the center for the arts please put in a quote.

Sharon Wise, Executive Director, Artist

Center was funded by a community program in D.C. with funding that came from the DMH.

Program was open six days a week 8:30—5:30 and 10:00 -4:00 on Saturdays.

11 employees (PT and FT and volunteer)

Sharon's salary_ \$12.50 /hr. other employees she said got \$1.00 less an hour.

At some point the center decided to go independent. Had consultants come to help them develop a board and file for 501c3. (Wilma Townsend)

Board of directors started abusing and started paying themselves. Board did not understand they could not be paid. According to Sharon within 3 months the money was gone and she didn't get paid a salary. According to Sharon, the department continued to send the money.

(This is a sketchy part of the story; as I recall there were several versions; but Sharon went to the department repeatedly to complain with no results. The center closed. Sharon went into the hospital for a month.)

While the above story needs much more detail and written in a different way, the point is that this story had neither an advantage of being under another agency or being independent. (The agency took no interest in the center)

Re materials: (Interesting because of limited budget and way that Sharon found materials or improvised)

Started with collage: construction paper needed; magazines,
Sharpies

Rice paper—Rice ink (?)

Clay—silly putty or sculpie clay

Pottery wheels (2) Portable comes in fondue size boxes (?)

Staple guns

Paints –water color acrylic

Blank cards (to make greeting cards) also blank postcards

Champagne glasses (from Dollar Store) for painting

Mirrors (pop out mirrors)—glass paint

Sculpting tools

Materials for mobiles at Hanover Fabrics; (got leftovers in large bags)

Made hanging butterflies with these; string ,ribbons needed

Fabric paint

boxes (for making decorative containers)

glitter

puppet making with used clothes

Crepe paper

Scissors

Buckets for paint

Bowls (all from Dollar Store)

Pillowcases (for pillowcase project—can get these from hotels or hospitals)

Paper birds (cannot remember the name for this, origami—I think)

Performance art—Sharon developed a butterfly dance performance now being recognized

Telling stories (survival stories)

Set up an account at local art store

Bought a lot of materials at Dollar Store

Need to talk to Sharon more and may get her to write her story with more details, some recipes, etc. Also to make some recommendations re independent vs. not or what she thinks are the ingredients for success.

Quote:

When nothing is working, art is there to get me to the next moment. Art is a way of creating a meaningful event in a dark time or to scream out a secret prayer that no one but me could possibly understand. At the same time, some people are able to sense where I am in creating a work. Art is the place where what some conceive as illness, becomes fuel. This is how I was able to write a book that chronicles what it is like to fill my shoes in the times that I am fortunate to have survived and found peace (*Falling Into Peaces*). My name is Carol Coussons de Reyes and I am gifted, not ill.

To trivialize the art of mental patients is nothing less than a threat to humanity. Art that expresses the insights of altered states of consciousness and that protests oppression and injustice is, and always has been, at the cutting edge of human evolution. It is healing not just for the artist but for the rest of society as well. Mental hospitals and other impersonal institutions are inventions of the industrial age, themselves aberrations in 40,000 years of human consciousness. Such institutions are built to contain the loneliness and the fears of our age, and to hide away unwanted voices and visions.

By Sally Clay

Interview with Irene O'Neil: Awakenings Project, Elgin, IL

This program started out as an exhibit in 1997. Vision of Robert Lundin who later connected with Irene. Bob's interest in art focuses on literary and he has published a literary journal, *The Awakenings Review*, now in its 7 year or # publication.

There was no real plan for developing an arts studio; it just managed to unfold with acquired materials, increased interest, etc.

The first items they acquired were stands for showing art, hooks, wire, equipment for setting up exhibits.

They did a fundraiser (art exhibit?) which raised \$1,000, allowing them to purchase more stands. The rented art studio cost them \$3,000 per year, or \$250 per month. They received a grant that paid for rent.

For eight years the group had rented the above studio space, which for the first year, had no heat

or electricity. however it did have a skylight and lots of windows allowing light to fill the room.. Irene states they wore coats and blankets while they did their art.

Recommendations for start-up materials:

Different types of paper for watercolor, charcoal, etc.

Canvas boards, some stretch boards

Paint—an artist who died left them large amts. Of oil paint. (Large meant large, lasting years)

Acrylics

Brushes,

Charcoal

Felt tip pens

Have done a lot of projects but the group operates on a shoestring—still not funds, but did apply for a SAMHSA grant recently

The studio they are renting now is 15X 30 feet only allows for visual artists, not musicians, etc.

They tried to establish a theater group but failed for lack of interest. (Sound City from Chicago)

They have a long list of accomplishments: to list from their website

Board of directors meets four times a year with 11 -12 members. There has never been a problem with the board. No one receives a salary except an independent contractor for bookkeeping.

Bob and Irene both work full time and do the arts on the side. The studio is open on weekends,

Bob and Irene have rotated being the board presidents alternate years.

They do have their 501c3.

Irene sees an advantage to their not having funds. The National Artists for Mental Health did receive state funding and other funds but when, finally, the funds ended the program closed.

(need to try to find Frank Marquit to interview) Was the executive director of the NAMH.

(To add more information).

