

**Creative Community;  
The Experience of Creative Expression (through Arts & Culture)**

A report from AiPhilanthropy for Positive Change to The San Diego Women's Foundation

**Introduction**

AiPhilanthropy, a newly formed philanthropic corporation born of the San Diego Women's Foundation (SDWF), has been conducting an inquiry into Creative Expression (through Arts & Culture) in partnership with SDWF. The purpose of the inquiry is to engage the community in Conversations that will both inform the SDWF grant guidelines and create a shared understanding of what works and what we want to support as a vital, creative community. This inquiry is the first of its kind - a pilot application of appreciative inquiry as a vehicle to inform grantmaking, to educate SDWF members and to connect and inspire a broad, diverse creative community.

In order to model collaboration and to maximize the return on our philanthropic investment, we invited and trained additional interviewers from the City of San Diego Commission for Arts & Culture and the Envision San Diego Creativity and Innovation Task Force. We also included interviewees from the San Diego Foundation Arts & Culture Working Group and appreciate the support of Victoria Hamilton and Julie Fry in helping us to compile the list of interviewees. We look forward to sharing this report with these groups and exploring ways to incorporate what we're learning into their initiatives.

Our hope is that this report serves as both a catalyst and an invitation to participate in a community-wide process where everyone has the opportunity to think strategically and imaginatively about our common vision for this creative community. As a catalyst, the report provides inspiring snapshots of personal experiences of creative expression *at its best*. We, as participants, found ourselves energized and excited about the region's future as we shared stories and began imagining the future.

**How this report was put together**

Most of the inquiry was conducted over the summer months, which was a challenge - a gift of time and energy by the interviewers and interviewees - in order to complete the process as a prelude to the SDWF grants cycle.

The questions used in the interviews were generated by a design team and tested in an initial round of 12 interviews, eliciting personal stories of peak experiences of creative expression and exploring the conditions that made them possible. From those interviews, we identified four topics that seemed to be present in all the stories. Those topics were: exposure, hands-on creation, reflective experience, and expansive thinking. Subsequent interviews were designed to explore these topics in several ways: When have people experienced these conditions in this community? What can we do to create more of the conditions that make these powerful experiences possible for more people? The four inquiry topics, developed by and with the interviewers, are threads (not labels or levels) that are interwoven throughout the stories and experiences...conditions that we want to understand and replicate.

In order to include as broad and diverse a group as possible, AiPhilanthropy conducted two training sessions for new interviewers. More than twenty volunteer interviewers (all women, aged 15 to 60+) conducted personal interviews with over fifty interviewees, who represented a broad cross-section of artists, performers, appreciators, supporters, grantmakers, administrators, government agencies, foundations and others, over a five-week period. Additional interviews and stories are still being completed. Interview summaries were typed and submitted to an electronic archive. The summaries provided the basis for two roundtable sessions to mine the stories, identify and understand core conditions and refine the interview protocol to explore them further.

To prepare this report, we conducted a forum on August 24th that was open to all interviewers and interviewees. Stories and quotes from more than fifty interviews were shared and selected to illustrate the four topics. Inspired by those experiences and by an emerging understanding of what makes them possible, participants began to develop images of our future as a creative community. A subsequent session augmented these images of the future with interviewees' wishes, compiled and rendered as a dream map and highlighted in this document for each topic.

Some of these stories, quotes and images will be part of an SDWF education session on October 26th, which will include many of the inquiry participants. Many more, powerful stories were shared than are included here. The interviews are wonderful opportunities to connect with the community, and the resulting *data* is very rich. We appreciate the participation of all those who volunteered to develop our understanding of what we're hearing and hope that it will continue to inform what we all do – as individuals and organizations.

We sincerely hope that these insights and experiences will inform, inspire and enable SDWF to craft a granting process that captures the essence of what we would like to grow more of in this Region. We also look forward to working with other organizations to share experiences, dreams and opportunities and identify actions to vitalize this creative community.

### **How to read this report**

1. Read the summary at the beginning of each section to get a feeling for the topic. Ask yourself, if we could be this way all the time, would I want it?
2. Enjoy the sample quotes and stories and get an idea of what people actually talked about. Ask yourself: Do these quotes illustrate the topic ideal? Do you have other examples from your own experience that help illustrate the way things could be?
3. Reflect on the thoughts and wishes for each topic. Ask yourself, what is it we want to create? What actions can we take – as individuals, organizations, or communities - to do so?
4. Remember: When a community as a whole takes time to give voice to its preferred future, it is all the more likely to bring that future about. Put simply, it is easier to do things together when there is a common focus.

## Exploration of topics

We chose to frame the inquiry around Experiences with Creative Expression in order to circumscribe preconceived notions and definitions of Arts & Culture. All interviews began with the following question:

*Describe a time – a high point, if you will, when you were moved by a creative expression – yours or others’ – that brought you to a new level of awareness or understanding of a person, a community or the world around.*

The stories that people shared were personal, inspirational and moving. They covered a broad spectrum of *the arts* – visual, music, theater, dance, writing – as well as a range of age groups. Many reflected on experiences from childhood while others recalled more recent, powerful experiences in their adult lives. As we explored these experiences and elicited more examples, creative expression (*the arts*) emerged as fundamental, not peripheral to our human experience. And the conditions that surround those experiences – the **exposure** that creates opportunities for **hands on creation** and/or **reflective experience** that lead to **expansive thinking** and a sense of personal connection with the world around us *are essential* to both individual and community vitality.

Each of these topics is stated here as an ideal. Two things are important to keep in mind when reading through the report. First, these topics emerged from people’s actual experiences. There are many, many examples of each of them – only a few of which are included here. Second, the topics are described in the present tense, not because they have been totally attained, but because people are saying this is their present “ideal” based on experiences when they/we have been at our best. We invite you to think of this document as a resource, a catalyst, to help you think seriously about what you want this community to be like in the future.

**EXPOSURE** to *the arts* is the key. Access to forms of artistic expression, whether initiated by the individual, the artists or others, provides the opportunity for appreciation and creates the possibility for personal connection.

Access to all forms of creative expression, together with receptivity of the *audience*, can move people to new levels of personal and community awareness. Art piques curiosity, allows us to think independently and connect with our community. It speaks for us and to our emotions, without words.

#### Quotes:

- “It is only through exposure that you can ultimately know it’s food. It’s only by tasting (cultural experience) that you know that you like it.”
- “Theater isn’t if no one’s there to see it.”
- “Everyone, no matter what background, can experience the arts and culture. No matter what circumstances a child is born into, they deserve the opportunity to explore creative expression. It is a principle of mine.”

#### Stories:

On Spring break, I went with my parents and (a friend) to London and Paris. In London, my dad wanted to go to the Eye of London but there was a museum next door where there was a Dali Exhibit. (When you entered), there were black walls covered with his quotes. I was taken back by the quotes and then you went on to see ~500 of his works. I went to his pencil sketches and looked at his purpose in adding color. In most cases, I am a fan of pencil and detail and think that color detracts. His ability to add color but keep a “sad portrait” blew me away. Also, he had a mass production with differences between (the works) that were overwhelming. I was amazed at the ability of the human mind to create and in such numbers! I also felt a sadness or inadequacy to put art to my feelings .

O

When I was a high school student in the late 60s, a friend’s mother took us both to a performance of the Joffrey ballet. It was the first time a classical ballet had been re-invented using rock music, tie-dyed costumes and rock concert-type lighting. It was the first professional ballet performance I had ever attended – and quite a departure from the local amateur productions I had been exposed to thus far. I liked dance, had taken lessons at a dance studio in grade school and my friend was a ballet student.

The whole performance “spoke to me” as a young adult. The whole approach to ballet was so different and stimulating; not only the beauty of the dancers and their incredible technique but also the choreography (I’m sure some of the dancers wiggled their hips), the music, the lighting all of it. It made me feel happy...made me think about the possibilities of “classical” performances. By adapting it to more a contemporary style, they made it possible for me to “get it”. Unless you’re a student of ballet, you don’t know or understand what you are seeing. But this performance created a “connection” for me.

Maybe it was because it was the first time I had been exposed to a professional performance – I felt the elevated emotion, the tingle. I was curious, wanting to know and understand something new, beyond my previous experience. It was a coming-of-age experience...a young adult passage moving me to a different level of understanding of the world.

O

I had an elementary school teacher in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade that always had a sculpture project going. He would sculpt head of students. It was always on his desk. They were composite heads – so & so's ears, so & so's eyes, neck, etc. They had an immortal quality – beautiful, eternal, intriguing. Everyone was always looking for themselves. They caused reflection.

He always traveled, read and integrating everything. He sang, had percussion instruments in the classroom. He showed that the arts integrate intelligence. It was an act of compassion, humor, and enjoyment. It was an opportunity to think independently. We stayed friends throughout my adult life.

The world just opened up. I discovered that art could have so much meaning. I loved the nonlinear, holistic nature of the experience. I learned that art was inside me. The experience brought it out. It lit me up.

#### Thoughts & wishes:

Exposure, integrated into every aspect of education and life, every day, is essential. There are a number of effective arts education initiatives and partnerships between arts organizations and the schools. Schools also provide an opportunity to reach the community. And while exposure starts with kids (there were a number of stories of third grade teachers), it is critical at all ages. We can bring arts to communities and communities to the arts. There is a yearning for FREE events, festival venues, public art and classes that allow people to come to one location, to get outside and commune. There are also opportunities for celebrations of the arts within communities. Financial, geographic and cultural *accessibility* to all are key.

**HANDS-ON CREATION** – If exposure is key, then creation unlocks the door – to untapped creative assets, talents and capabilities of individuals and groups. Opportunities for people to express themselves creatively in safe (emotional, positive, conducive, non-judgmental, nurturing) environments allow people of all ages to discover and share their gifts – to find the courage to step outside their boundaries, express themselves creatively and experience the satisfaction of achievement, a sense of liberation or even triumph. Encouragement has the power to fuel creation and release its byproducts – personal growth, transformation and healing.

Creative expression in collaboration with others is also a transformative experience. The act of creation often gives a whole system of individuals, in many different roles, the opportunity to be part of a creative, collaborative community. Personal initiative evolves to collaborative power.

Quotes:

- “Art serves a basic human need – to express, create, speak, and be aesthetically moved. It’s something within us that drives us to action - whatever gets us out of bed.”
- “Kids will quickly become disillusioned if they are told that ‘it’s wrong’. Art is a personal expression of what’s inside. When a child is told ‘you didn’t do that right’, it has the effect of saying ‘you’re not good’. We need to get over the notion of how art should look. A purple son and mom with green hair should be just great.”
- “There was a studio space that was shared by three artist-friends working individually but who collectively created an atmosphere of creativity that was stronger than if there had been only one.”

Stories:

S. was doing a project with an elementary school class that included a boy who was clearly ADD affected. He sat all alone at a desk by himself because he had problems controlling and containing himself. The project involved building a visual display of a day-in-the-life of these kids. They were to use 2 x 3’ panels of cardboard, building collage images with photos, pieces of fabric, etc. This difficult to manage child became totally engrossed in the process and produced, by far, the best work. At the open house where they were to show the work to their parents, he was appointed to introduce the work. He had become a leader. His teacher had altered her perception of him. His father, who was used to getting only negative reports on him, was shown his success and latent ability. He had found his gifts and his strengths had become visible. S. expressed that she wished she could have continued to monitor him and be able to play an ongoing mentoring role with him, but acknowledged that the small moment had huge and lasting impact for the boy, the father and the teacher. The boy had found his strengths; the father could know pride and the teacher would acknowledge that she began to see other ADD children differently.

O

At our school, the teachers fuse the subjects together. One of the most incredible projects that came out of the fusion happened this last year. In History, the kids studied ancient cultural myths and wrote their own scripts for a myth based on one of the cultures they studied. In art they made marionettes based on the characters in their play. In music class they listened to the cultural music, and composed their own music based on that to add to their play. Every part of the project was student made and they loved it. Parents came to see the performances and they were blown away.

O

I took a Brass seminar/workshop at SDSU, which was 1 week long. We had the opportunity play

with young musicians (interviewee is ~50). It was truly fun and educational as there was an opportunity for a variety of age groups and musicians to come together to play, and hear the

Westwood Brass and other outside people in mini-performances. Most of the people (~80%) were late-high school/early college and a few were over 50 so I (interviewee) was only in the middle [age]. You could feel the light bulb going on in [the participant's] heads with the camaraderie, fun and overall uplifting experience. There was a combination of education with lectures and an ability to put [the concepts] into practice with being able to listen. There was a wide range of music – mostly classical with some jazz, but all lent to the brass format. All were so much younger but music was the universal language/experience. It didn't matter what you looked like, where you were from, etc. It was a very unifying experience.

#### Thoughts & wishes:

Connecting artists with the community creates opportunities for people to look, see and try – to find the artist within themselves. Artists in residence, in schools and communities, open studios that provide a glimpse of the creative process, and encounters with artists all fuel appreciation and creativity.

Supporting artists and connecting them with each other reinforces the artistic process. A substructure of people who help create the opportunity for artists to do their art is critical...a collaboration of volunteers and fundraisers with tremendous talent and energy can ensure that *the show will go on*. A vibrant, vital artistic community can engage and inspire others.

**REFLECTIVE EXPERIENCE** - The opportunity to reflect and/or engage in dialogue allows people to connect a creative expression with their personal experience. Integrating intellectual understanding with emotional experience can lead to discovery – often, a spontaneous, personal *surprise* that engages *whole-brained* learning, enriches life and inspires action. Reflective experience is available to everyone and can occur in everyday life if we allow it. It opens the door to experiences that tie people of different backgrounds and skill sets together. Art builds on art. It is a catalyst - able to change the world, touch a million souls.

Quotes:

- “What I bring is the gift I’ve been given to bridge business, world, practical, visionary, arts, spiritual . . . Aspirations to compassionate interactions created the world.”
- “At the end, the kids dialogued with the audience...to see the kids, the parents, the learning allowed me to reflect that this is why I do what I do.”

Stories:

I worked as a photographer on an archeological dig in central Turkey in 2002. At the dig site there was a clear segregation between the visiting American archeologists and the resident Turkish workers. One night the Americans threw a party and invited some of the Turkish workers. One of the Turks who attended was the “Don” of a large local family -- his children and grandchildren also worked on the dig. The Don brought one of his great grand daughters to the party. This young woman was about 17 or 18 years old and was planning to attend medical school – a woman attending medical school is very unusual in Turkey.

At the party this young woman played a traditional Turkish instrument – sort of like the “Bazuki”, a traditional Greek instrument. Her playing was the community’s contribution to the party. She was a stunning talent and very brave to perform on the spot in front of a group of mostly foreign men. She played traditional Turkish music beautifully.

This woman was from a small, impoverished rural area of central Turkey. She was a rising star with a bright future. Interestingly, she chose to learn and play traditional music. Her relatives appreciated her commitment to the traditional music by helping buy her instrument, pay for her lessons and transported her to the town one hour away for lessons.

This story is also remarkable because Turkey is a male dominated society yet the community supported her -- a woman, playing an instrument played primarily by men at a gathering of foreigners, mostly men. The community affirmed this woman and her talent.

This experience was so striking because so much of art has a formal component -- a “how things should be done” aspect. This musical performance was impromptu, but still high quality. It was more about communicating the experience (informally) rather than a formal presentation.

○

I visited a project where a high school and playhouse were working with the kids – 15 students – they did everything to transform a classic play, Electra, to a contemporary scene – they wrote the play, directed, did the music, lighting, the project was 6 weeks – I was amazed. At the end the kids dialogued with the audience...to see the kids, the parents – the learning – it allowed me to reflect that this is why I do what I do. It was a feeling of gratification – grateful for the opportunity to be there – an affirmation that what I am doing is the right thing – very validating – for my career and my life.

○

A high school marching band, consisting of over 100 student musicians, put on a wonderful half time show. Like the football players, these students had the opportunity to share in the limelight on this exciting occasion, yet share an entirely different set of talents. The performance of the marching band was every bit as important to these musicians as was playing the game to the football players. It was a “shinning moment” for both. Unfortunately, our school did not participate in the half time show. They didn’t have one student performer.

I was stunned and saddened. It is very disappointing that the district had phased out their music program and the opportunity for musically talented students to perform and connect with their school.

I realize that starting and supporting a musical program and marching band takes tremendous collaboration, support, and commitment. It is an expensive undertaking, requiring hundreds of hours of parent volunteers, and a true commitment by students and faculty.

As I left that stadium I was determined to bring music back into the district. I am pleased to report that most of our middle schools and each of our high schools now has instrumental music programs.

#### Thoughts & wishes:

The structured integration of opportunities for dialogue, before and after performances, allows people to share the reflective experience, and think about how people are personally affected – to witness, not just watch, from their own experience.

Cross-community, cross-cultural creative experience creates a universal language. It allows people to see the world from a different perspective, to question assumptions and perceptions and to feel welcome and connected. Communication between communities strengthens what we have now.

**EXPANSIVE THINKING** broadens our understanding of the world. Creative expression of different points of view, perspectives and cultures can fade boundaries and connect people to a broader context or understanding of their humanity, of interconnectedness. It opens you up to passion, to be inspired. It leads to personal awareness and growth.

The artist is the catalyst for experiences that open you up – to listening and understanding, self-awareness, self-discipline and visionary thinking. Isolation and solitude can become shared experience. Social dialogue and thoughtful collaboration are possible. By both recognizing and moving beyond the past, creative expression can create bridges to the future.

Quotes:

- “I like working on problems that don’t have simple solutions, across disciplines that I don’t know anything about.”
- “I have learned to see the differences in people and know that I can live in a place without conforming to the place. I am able to be myself and learn from my surroundings.”
- “Art is a voice for the voiceless.... Our renaissance period is coming. We realized we can express ourselves...it’s radical...”
- “Through music, the human spirit transcends time.”
- “Compared to other places, San Diego’s history is short. Our relative youth makes the ideal of multiculturalism easier to attain.”

Stories:

I am a first generation Japanese-American and my parents were born and raised in Japan. One of my childhood memories is of my mother gathering us (my brothers and sister) around a table to tell us Victor Hugo’s story, Les Miserables in Japanese. She was a wonderful storyteller and we were entranced for more than an hour with saga of Jean Valjean. It was through her storytelling that we were introduced to much of the great literature of the Western world. In this way I came to understand that other people’s stories could have an affect on our lives, on our understanding of life and the world. Language is not a barrier; a story is universal.

**O**

We funded a film series, and I attended the presentation of a film by an African documentary filmmaker on the issue of female circumcision. The whole place was packed with Somali women who had gone through it, dealt with it. The filmmakers’ take was that “this is wrong” – that it was a means of control. The other camp’s was “it’s our tradition”.

The experience with all those people, in that community, was an amazing time. It was in City Heights and she was an award-winning filmmaker. The audience was incredibly diverse – not all Somalis- and there was conversation after the film. Not many Somalis spoke.

It was such a controversial issue, with this woman who felt strongly about it. The film was dramatic, tragic. What made an impression was knowing they’d gone through that. Understanding what they’re going through now was an eye-opener for me. I began to understand another culture from a unique perspective.

The author went through it. She’s had death threats, been attacked, and declared persona non grata because of the film. Her life is amazing. She came out, went to film school, and became a filmmaker. She was very inspirational.

## O

In February 2004 I had surgery on both my eyes. I have worn glasses since I was 8 years old. My vision was greatly impaired. On April 15, 2004 at the Port of San Diego Bay front the Martin Luther King Jr. choir sang at the dedication of a new piece of public art. At my request, the choir performed the Hallelujah Chorus version done by the Souls of Blackness. When I was asked to come center stage to make my statement about the public art and receive acknowledgement for the part I had played in convening the event all I could do was weep. It was the first time in 44 years that I could see everything around me...faces, signage, art, the landscape with the kinetic sculpture in motion, everything! For a visual artist this was an astounding moment, which will remain to be cherished in my memory.

It was a peak experience because the beauty of the music the visual art and the landscape all came together in a community so rich with creative potential and yet so under celebrated. I was there and could see it all.

### Thoughts & wishes:

There is growing appreciation for the potential of San Diego as a diverse, vital creative community and recognition of the creative resources already here. The opportunity is to connect and embrace them as vital to our growth and development.

Thinking outside the box, across boundaries and disciplines is critical. Having artists in the room brings different perspective – it changes the design of the wastewater treatment plant. There is an opportunity to bring people who are technologically linked – to computers, not people – to the arts. “You can’t help to create a vision if you don’t see it in yourself.”

## **Images of the future**

Forum participants then created images of our future as a creative community. Inspired by stories of our past and present, they envisioned creative expression (Arts & Culture) as the vital catalyst for and expression of our diverse, dynamic growing bi-national community.

**Headlines from 2010** applauded the transformation:

- “Sparked by the Arts”, San Diego Incubator Creates Radiant Society
- Vital Arts Scene Drives San Diego’s Dramatic Growth
- A World Class International Cultural Destination – a Region Without Borders
- San Diego Transforms Itself as a Diverse, Dynamic, Inspired Mega-Community.

**As the creative community of the future, the San Diego region is one where:**

- AAA – Arts are Available to All
- Arts are part of our being, integrated into curriculum and life
- Everyone knows they are a creative being and allows themselves to create
- Arts are valued by the community and the power structure
- People appreciate the impact of the arts on the economy and quality of life.
- Cultural tourism and the impact of cultural diversity & heritage are appreciated
- All communities have equal access to the resources to produce arts
- Communities are empowered to transform themselves using creative means
- Collaborations connect, support, and empower artistic creativity at all levels with intergenerational interactions

## **Conclusion**

The more we engage in these Conversations, the more appreciation, confidence and hope we have for this region as a dynamic, inspired, creative community. We wish to thank all those who volunteered their time, talent and treasure - as interviewees, interviewers, artists, appreciators, and supporters – to the creation of this report and the process that made it possible.

To capture, in a written report, the richness and energy of the participants' stories and insights, is a challenge. The real joy is in the process – the opportunities to make personal connections with the inspired, dynamic, diverse individuals who participated and comprise, with many others, this creative community.

This report is a gift to SDWF and the community – one that, like any gift, can be appreciated and used, put into storage or recycled. It is our sincere hope that it will inspire the SDWF granting process and contribute to the growth of the conditions that vitalize the creative community of the San Diego region.

In a corporate setting, this report would be a prelude to a Summit – a major gathering of all interviewees and interviewers to move from images of the future to design and commit to actions to create it. In this community, there are many opportunities to connect, generate and move into action – as individuals, organizations and communities – to create the future we imagine. We hope that this report contributes to the collective energy to do so.

We believe that change begins with dialogue, welcome all those who choose to engage and hope that we will continue to move forward together to build this creative community.

## Many Thanks

To those women who volunteered their time to design, conduct and document interviews:

- Grai Andreason
- Vicki Baron\*
- Marlowe Berg\*
- Christa Burke\*
- Rene Cascia
- Kate Engler
- Denise Giusti-Bradford
- Jacquie Ibrahim \*
- Peg LeBlanc
- Gianna Mercaldo
- Karen Mercaldo\*
- Lucille Neeley\*
- Sigrid Pate\*
- Mary Ann Reyes
- Gloria Sandvik\*
- Victoria Saunders
- Felicia Shaw
- Elizabeth Smith
- Jeanne Stevenson\*
- Jeanne Waite
- \*Members of the San Diego Women's Foundation

For more information on AiPhilanthropy, please go to [www.aiphilanthropy.org](http://www.aiphilanthropy.org)  
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