

## Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District

### INNOVATION

In late May and early June 2020, as peaceful protests were met by armed resistance, and escalated into violence, we had performers scheduled for our June virtual events. As events unfolded, we reached out to our performers to assess what they were feeling—did they need a platform to perform? Did they want to cancel? After reaching out, we quickly realized that none of them had the heart to perform, that their feelings were too raw and they weren't immediately certain what they could or would say.

During our brief hiatus, we recognized that acknowledging the shared trauma of our participating artists and the arts community at large required a more explicit programmatic connection to the healing work of our partners on behalf of social justice across the city.

Street Show Artists Unite for Justice became that connection. We quickly identified organizations working at the frontlines of justice in Minneapolis, many of whom were current partners downtown. We reached out with an idea—we would provide their names and missions to our Street Show artists to select from, and the artists themselves would decide who would receive matching donations from the DID in support of their work.

This allowed for artists to direct investment to the organizations they felt were most productively advancing the cause, and even though most artists were facing extraordinary economic hardships already due to the pandemic, they would have an opportunity through our donation to support important social change efforts in the city.

### OUTCOME

Street Show virtual programs featured 56 unique performances and performers that streamed on Facebook Live and YouTube from May through December 2020 for more than 26,000 views. The program reached 12M through these and other social media platforms, for a market value of \$110,000. All of these folks (and the Gem performers) learned more about the Street Show program and the donor social justice organizations.

The program highlighted eight premier locations from across the downtown district. Venues were thrilled to see positive activity downtown and their unique places featured, including several rooftops, a couple of stadiums, the Crystal Court, Brits Green and the Lock & Dam. The high-quality shows, video and photography kept the experience of downtown performance alive even while people were unable to attend live shows. The program strengthened our relationship with the venues, the artists and the organizations, and we are looking at more opportunities to partner in the future.

As we look at returning to the streets in 2021, the downtown and performance community will have a greater knowledge of the Street Show program, and we intend to maintain the social justice component. The program has long been dedicated to building a stronger downtown street performance culture, and we hope to encourage more generosity in audiences by matching tips with DID donations to the artist-selected social justice organizations. Seeing how the program worked, additional organizations have stepped forward to participate as well.

### EXECUTION

We began with live performances from "wherever they were to wherever you are." As we understood better the streaming technology and digital platforms, we got better at it and saw more possibilities. We moved to a few featured outdoor rooftop performances, adapting with Covid-19 safe practices. We insisted that all non-singers wore masks, and everyone practiced safe distancing, including the venue hosts to the production crews. We worked with a lean videography team and insisted on no audiences, honoring the choices of our artists and production teams to be present and create something special for the folks not in the room.

Artists were able to perform in premier locations that maybe would not have been available to them, and get paid at a time when shows and tours were largely cancelled and many performers were struggling. Everyone participated because they felt it would be special, and they had a desire to share something positive, healing and real with the larger community.

It was a terrific bonus that some of the venues and partners made it possible for jumbotrons and billboards to be programmed so that the performers could see their names and their chosen social justice organizations “up in lights.”

## **REPRESENTATION**

Street Show is an intentionally inclusive program representing a wide diversity of artists and genres. This happens by partnering with curating organizations with deep connections to local performers. Because of their existing relationships, and the opportunity to see their performances authentically support social justice organizations, we had our most diverse array of artists yet. (40% were BIPOC or gender non-conforming.)

This was true especially for the Gem Shows, which featured more popular, locally well-known performers, who may not be interested in performing on the street typically. When Nur-D says, he chose zAmya Theater production because “I too have been homeless,” and “they help those folks to find their voice and experience art,” it demonstrates how artists lead healing during community trauma, and as culture bearers, they can represent the breadth of community if we help provide the platform. When in the wake of the trauma of 2020 he can tag his performance on Twitter with #blackboyjoy at seeing “Nur-D” on the US Bank Stadium jumbotron, and when you see joy throughout his performance, you know how much it means to him and to community.

Additionally, the Gem show venues were selected to represent nearly every district in the downtown area.

## **REPLICATION**

As previously mentioned, many districts have performance programs, and the additional layer of intentionally partnering to support our social justice ecosystem is 100% replicable. The partnership between districts and the non-profit organizations in their cities working in support of justice can be leveraged for better outcomes for all. We were intentional in reaching out to the organizations; many of them were longtime collaborators, which made many of the asks easy. Once others saw the program was legit, it made the case for itself.

Every downtown has its own Gem locations. As we saw the remarkable video content produced by cities across the county in the wake of the pandemic featuring stunning but also empty and desolate streets, we knew we loved the drone shots but wanted to bring the joy as well.

The Street Show Artists Unite for Justice model ensures the promise of an inclusive downtown is not an empty one, and showcases our vibrant artist communities, the resiliency of our people and places, and all of our efforts toward equity, even as we experience community trauma and Covid-19 lockdowns. We will be back, and better in the long run, in cities all across the country.

## **COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY**

As an extension of our regular street performance program, digital programming in the time of Covid-19 was the obvious step. Making the adjustment required flexibility, to repurpose budgets intended for in-person events, and acknowledge limitations. We quickly learned about digital streaming and platforms, but we had artists who were stuck at home and eager to play.

But once you have a world-wide social justice movement explode in your city, finding the next right move is challenging. Supporting equity is essential, but tokenism abounds and artists are keen at spotting inauthentic gestures. It needs be real. What can you do?

You can put it in the artists’ hands—by recognizing the way they have led (most noticeably in visual art, but also performance arts), and by granting them a platform. This way, you can preserve your organization’s integrity and intentions.

Finally, a key organizer in this work was staffed out at 50% of her time to an organization supporting recovery of Minneapolis’ hard-hit south side. That required a new level of partnership and staff sharing within our organization. This work would have been impossible without it, and we were able to recognize a new level of collaboration and resiliency within the organization.