

## Understanding Perceptions of Community through Community Art and Storytelling from National Louis University's Rotating Art Exhibition

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## Introduction

In 2018, Illinois Campus Compact posed an idea to a group of AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) members to create a project at each of their University sites centering around the theme of community and inclusion. Each VISTA in the group was stationed either at a College or University's Community or Civic Engagement Center. National Louis University's Civic Engagement Center (NLU CEC) serves as the University's resource center providing opportunities for students to learn and serve which is a key part of NLU's broader mission of civic education, service learning, and community engagement. After conversing with my supervisor who connected me with Grishma Shah, a Community Psychology doctoral candidate with a great amount of experience in film and mixed media art, we decided the project would take the form of a Rotating Art Exhibition (RAE) called *Everyday Spaces: Depictions of Community*. RAE would provide a platform for artists in the NLU community to share their perceptions and feelings of community and inclusion, to have an opportunity to express themselves in a creative way, and to display Socially Engaging Art to the NLU Community.

The call of the Rotating Art Exhibition was broad in its nature: for anyone within the NLU Community to submit artwork in any form depicting what community looks like, feels like, or sounds like (or doesn't look like, etc.) to them. To reach all corners of the NLU community, RAE organizers coordinated with each of NLU's 6 campuses located all over the Chicagoland area to host the exhibition at each campus in Spring 2019 (i.e., Lisle, Elgin, Wheeling, Skokie, Goose Island, and Chicago Loop). We also organized a Gallery Day on Wheeling's Campus and Artist Reception on the Chicago Loop Campus. Additionally, in collaboration with the international organization the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), NLU work together with CSU Sacramento, Humboldt State University, and University of Illinois at Chicago/The American

Indian Center to develop an innovative arts-based session which took place at SCRA's Biennial Conference, "Making an Impact" in June 2019 at NLU. Each of the projects within the session help us gain a greater understanding of different perspectives of inclusion and the steps we might take to better support those within our own community.

### **Calling all Artists**

The primary goal of RAE was to be truly inclusive by connecting to NLU's entire community. This meant putting our efforts toward reaching as many individuals in the NLU community as possible in our call for submissions. We wanted to reach each of the 6 campuses, each college within NLU (National College of Education, the College for Professional Studies and Advancement, Kendall College, and the Undergraduate College), as well as students both online and on campus. We also wanted to have the opportunity for students, faculty, staff, and alumni to be a part of the project. With this as the foundation we built our project on, we then wanted artists to choose whatever art form they wanted to use to showcase their story and message. We began our call for submissions in the Winter 2019 term and also collaborated with the Spring Art Expo to generate student interest in sharing socially engaged art pieces with us in the rotating art exhibition.

Our call was heard and a diverse community of artists to participate in RAE was formed. The artists came from 3 of the 6 NLU campuses (11 individuals from the Chicago Loop Campus, 1 individual from the Wheeling Campus, and 1 individual from the Skokie Campus). There were 4 undergraduate students who participated, one of whom is also a PACE student, 5 Graduate Students, 1 Staff Member, 1 Adjunct Faculty Member, and 2 alumni of NLU. The forms of art submitted to the rotating art exhibition were also very diverse, in that we received 2 digital photographic pieces, 1 song, 1 poem, 2 drawings, 2 paintings, 1 pottery submission, 1 published

children's book, and 3 mixed media (combining 2 or more forms i.e. painting and construction paper and/or drawing) pieces. With a range of artists and art forms brought a wonderful variety of stories depicting community.

### **Rotate! An Exhibition around NLU's 6 Campuses**

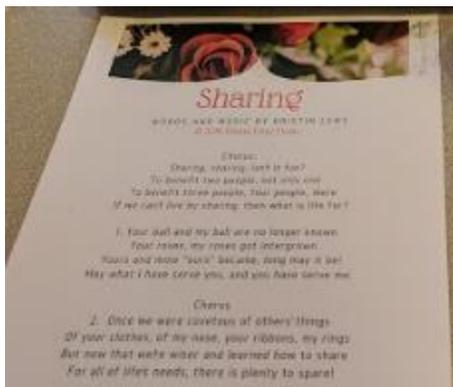
The exhibition debuted on Lisle's campus on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and ran at each campus for one week. Below are the titles, description of medium used, year created, artist's name, and the campus and college or program the artist is affiliated in.



#### **60632 - Digital photographs created March 2019.**

Taylor Bowman, Chicago - Education

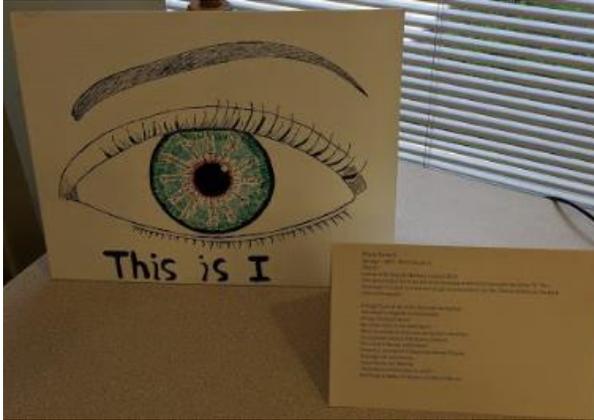
When I think of what depicts a community, I think of the places within that community as one aspect of depiction. The places within that community thrive because of the people who support them. Brighton Park is a rich neighborhood. Not in the sense of being affluent, but because it has homes, new, old, abandoned, has a community and worship area, and has direct access to other areas of the city because of the L Train that runs through the neighborhood. Brighton Park is a piece of Chicago's past, present, and future.



#### **'Sharing - Song**

Kristin Lems, Skokie - ESL/Bilingual Education

I wrote it for children when my children were young, but I have used the song with teachers many times. I teach teachers in the College of Ed.



**This is I - Canvas with Sharpie Markers  
created 2019**

Maria Lomeli, Chicago – MAT –ELE Education

This piece tells a bit of my life story by using words that start with the letter "I". The challenges I've had to overcome to get to this point in my life. This is written on the back side of the canvas:

Brought here at six as an Innocent Immigrant  
Educated in English via Immersion  
Always feeling Inferior  
But deep down I was Intelligent  
Went to college to Improve my family's situation  
To succeed I always felt I had to Imitate  
For a better future, I did Invest  
However, money isn't happiness but an Illusion  
Through ups and downs,  
I have found my Identity  
I now have an Intention to teach  
And hope to make an Impact on others like me

Dr. Stacey Dixon

Chicago - Director of Student Veteran Support Services

Lifetimes

Mixed use of watercolors and acrylic.

The paintings are done faceless. It can be anyone's story of struggle and survival in a family life.



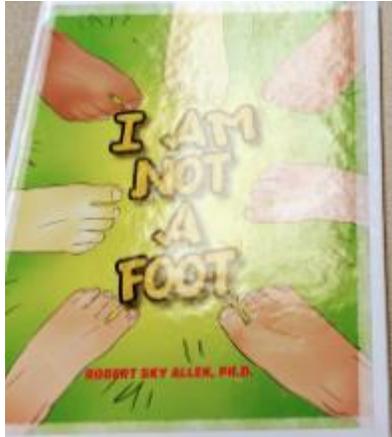
**Missing - Canvas, acrylic paint created in  
2019.**

Samantha Rocha, Chicago – Pathways

For our Final Project, we were supposed to pick a social issue that we believe in/wanted to bring more attention to. At first I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But then, one of the most important people in my life came to mind. My best friend Kayden. Kayden is a transgender male and he has gone through a lot of things in his life. That is why I wanted to dedicate this art

piece for him. I wanted to bring attention to the unjustified deaths and violence people in the LGBTQ community go through. This issue is very important for me because I want Kayden to

live in a world where he doesn't have to worry about something to happen to him because of who he sees himself/was born like.



**I Am Not A Foot - Children's picture book, published in 2019**

Robert Sky Allen, Chicago – Community Psychology PhD Graduate

We are more than just the sum of our body parts, which I hope will be an empowering message for children.



**Thai Pot - Clay Pottery created in 2017.**

Shaina Lesniewicz, Chicago – Pathways

Thai culture is not known too well in the United States. My grandma is one hundred percent Thai and my dad grew up there. I never really got in touch with the Thai part of me, but lately I've been more interested in it. I believe everyone should get in touch with their ethnicity and embrace here in the US to have diversity and inclusion here.



**Community Resilience in Chile - Construction paper, rope, confetti, cloth, and hemp created in 2016**

James Moore, Adjunct Faculty – Wheeling

Created at Universidad de Santiago for a study abroad trip on community resilience and torture.

The task in creating it involved using materials from available at an art class and using the items to express our feelings on witnessing sites of torture

and community efforts to heal from those experiences.



**A Final Goodbye - Drawing with pencil and colored pencils created in 2019.**

Luke Larocca, Chicago – PACE Student

Since High School I have been a huge fan of The Walking Dead. I love its characters so much. I felt sad when Andrew Lincoln left The Walking Dead for his family. I decided to make a tribute to him and his character along with three other characters I loved so much. Rick Grimes became a huge part of my life along with Norman Reedus's as Daryl Dixon, Madison Lintz's as Sophia, and Chandler Riggs as Carl Grimes.

This show really means a lot to me. It became a part of me and I would be lost without it. I hope people can find the beauty and meaning in this artwork when it's displayed.



**There is Still Time - Cardboard, paint, paper and black marker created in 2019.**

Zaira Perez Limon, Chicago – Pathways

I created this piece because it was an assignment for my art class. The assignment consisted of creating a piece of art addressing a social issue. I decided to do my artwork about climate change because it's an issue that our society has nowadays and nobody does something about it. Also, I chose this topic because many people still believe that climate

change has no role in incidents or disasters that are happening nowadays in our world. The message that I want to transmit with my piece is that humans activities are damaging our world, and everybody can change this situation. I want my audience to understand that we can protect the environment if we change our lifestyle. I consider that my piece represents this situation well because it shows different human activities that are affecting our environment, and also the statement that I have in my piece help to make awareness. I would like that my piece goes around the different NLU campuses because I believe that everyone can contribute to this issue and I want people from different ages to be aware of the effect that our activities have on the environment.

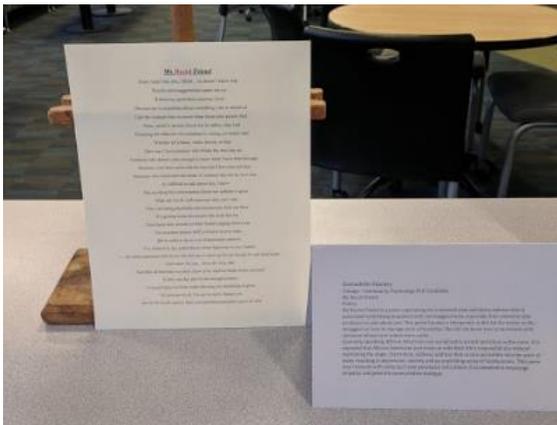


**Unmuzzled - Acrylic painting originally created in 1999 and modified with word art with permanent vinyl in 2019.**

Dollyster Knox-Coleman, Chicago – Community Psychology PhD Candidate

Unmuzzled represents a personal journey of unpredicted circumstances surrounded by stigma and stereotypes. Unmuzzled denotes a description of hurt, guilt, pain, injustice, rejection, persecution, shame, and exclusion. Unmuzzled characterizes that through inspiration, focus and a change in lifestyle behaviors, uncovers years of silence. Unmuzzled highlights self-actualization and an earnest desire to overcome adverse childhood

experiences (ACEs). Unmuzzled is a discovery of how years of living a daunting plus size life be situated transformation into to living a FAT (Focused At All Time) life! Unmuzzled personifies that we (human beings) are all different and should be respected and treated without bias and judgement, despite our unique characteristics and body forms.



### **My Racist Friend -Poetry**

Garnadette Stuckey, Chicago - Community Psychology PhD Candidate

My Racist Friend is a poem expressing the emotional pain and heavy sadness that is associated with being inundated with microaggressions, especially from someone who professes to care about you. This poem became a therapeutic outlet for the writer as she struggled on how to manage such a friendship. She did not know how to be

friends with someone whose core values were racist.

Generally speaking, African Americans are socialized to accept racial bias as the norm. It is expected that African Americans just move on with their life's responsibilities without expressing the anger, frustration, sadness, and fear that occurs and settles into the spirit of many resulting in depression, anxiety, and an unyielding sense of hopelessness. This poem may resonate with some and raise awareness with others. It is intended to encourage empathy and generate some positive dialogue.



## **Cloud Gate- Multiple Exposure - Digital Photography**

Collette B. Rogers, Chicago – Graduate Student in Ed.D. Higher Education

The Cloud Gate Sculpture aka the "Bean" is one of Chicago's iconic outdoor art commissions. I captured this photograph at sunrise with a group of Chicago photographers with whom I met through a photography Meetup. At any time one visits the "Bean", one will find a gathering of diverse persons thrilled to capture the images of their reflections in the art. People connect at this place and marvel at the beauty of the Bean.

## **RAE REEL**

As we neared closer and closer to the end of RAE and toward the SCRA Biennial Conference, it was clear we had achieved our goal of creating a diverse inclusive community art show available to be viewed at each campus. It also became clear when meeting the artists either at the exhibition or in person, that each artist had a great message or story behind their piece. We determined we wanted to take RAE one step farther and create a "RAE Reel." The invitation the artists to participate in the RAE Reel was completely voluntary, but our hope was in doing so, we could create a qualitative study capturing a deeper understanding of the human experience and what makes up a truly inclusive setting. For the reel, we asked the artists to record themselves answering the following questions:

1. This year's Civic Engagement Project at NLU is a SIX Campus Rotating Art Exhibition with the theme of Community & Inclusion. Please tell us why you submitted this specific artwork for the exhibit.
2. In your words, tell us the story behind your artwork and the message the artwork is conveying.
3. What does Community & Inclusion mean to YOU?
4. If the NLU experience was a chapter in the book of your life, what would YOU call that chapter and WHY?

After receiving the recordings, we edited the recordings together and overlaid them with music clips. We chose images of their art and added simple transitions to them and combined them with the audio. After combining all the pieces together, we had our reel! The link to the RAE Reel is available here: <https://youtu.be/CvcMIDkg6fU>

We chose to submit the Reel as our contribution to the SCRA Biennial Conference. In addition to the reel, other projects presented and discussed within our session were a PhotoVoice Project illustrating the challenges non-traditional and transfer students face when integrating academically and socially in their four year colleges, a discussion on music programs for student veterans, and a discussion the ways in which arts and music are embedded in the American Indian community in Chicago.

### **Community Art and Social Justice**

From what began as a flexible, open-ended assignment, developed into a project deeper and rooted in social justice. As Nick Schuermans suggests regarding public or community art fosters public education, “Public pedagogy stimulates geographers to reconsider the role of the artist or curator. Instead of a ‘spokesperson’ giving voice to particular interests, the artist is considered an ‘educator’ who engages with audiences and settings of the artwork in interactive and complex ways” (Schuermans, 2012). The artist is the expert of the narrative being told by the art. In RAE, the narrative of each art piece educates the audience on how they have come to know community. According to Rappaport, “a community cannot be a community without a shared narrative” (Rappaport, 2000). This shared narrative comes from those who share common stories about, “where they are from, who they are, and who they will, or want to be, are a community” (Rappaport, 2000). The common thread among the RAE Artist is their connection to NLU, and while the art depicted in the exhibition does not display what community feels like

at NLU, it is revealed in the stories and messages that NLU has played a role in shaping their thinking of what community and inclusion means. To many of the artists, NLU serves or has served in some way as a catalyst for allowing their voice and perspective to be heard, in more ways than solely an art exhibition. The exhibition was able to showcase this fact. While the art pieces that make up RAE are all different and tell a different story or message, each artist was hoping to educate the audience on a topic close to them. Just as each artist is an educator, each piece of art itself is “Socially Engaged Art” (SEA). Making art is a socially engaging act.

“When we make a socially engaged artwork, we are not just offering a service to a community (assuming it is a service-oriented piece); we are proposing our action as a symbolic statement in the context of our cultural history (and/or art history) and entering into a larger artistic debate” (Helguera, 2011). Helguera goes on to say, “Both social work and art practice are based on the postmodern perspective that it is the perception of facts, not facts in themselves, that matter... In art, the awareness of others’ perceptions is valuable in that it gives the artist tools to upset expectations either in positive or negative ways.” (Helguera, 2011) The artists of the RAE executed this by offering their art to be engaged with the rest of the NLU Community. Each artist offered a short description framing the intention of the art, but it is left to the audience to make their own interpretations of the piece and come to their own conclusion of the art. Within RAE, artists engaged and enlightened their audience on a variety of topics including but not limited to immigration, climate change, youth advocacy, empowerment, racism, and community resilience. From here, we also provided an opportunity for the artists to share their story or message, through a storytelling artists reel.

### **Reflection/Conclusion**

The project as a whole told us a great deal about the sense of community and inclusion at NLU. The majority of artists have used NLU as a catalyst to gain support to fulfill their dreams and to give them as an opportunity to share a story or perspective that the community might not have otherwise heard. While none of the pieces told a story of community at NLU directly, many of the stories told were impacted by NLU because it was where they have been able to grow and do more for the other communities, they're a part of. Many of the pieces were either made during their time at NLU (i.e. Sharing Song), or tell us a bit of their story of how and why they have arrived at NLU (i.e. Unmuzzled, This is "I"), and a couple were made prior to coming to NLU as well. The lesson of RAE teaches us that we are all, and are allowed to be, a part of many communities. A sense of community or inclusion can be grown in one community and shared with another; and can be felt, and strengthened, by having the opportunity to share perspectives.

We were able to do a lot with what we learned from RAE. We shared RAE on a variety of platforms, of course at each campus while the exhibition was going on. We were able to share an evening on NLU's Chicago Loop Campus conversing with Artist Reception, and we were able to share the RAE Reel at the SCRA Biennial Conference. We also shared updates from RAE on our Instagram page and uploaded the Reel to our Facebook page. We hope that this article will also be a way of sharing our story and serve as a framework of how to continue the practice in years to come.

This was the first time I took the role of a co-curator for an exhibition. I had previous experience helping to host a Gallery Night. The biggest difference between these two projects was the duration of time each were up for and in turn how much more preparation goes into planning a six-location exhibition. Gratefully, Grishma's talent and experience in hosting exhibitions and background in film making allowed us to not only achieve our goals but add to

them by incorporating and artists' reel. We also had a great amount of support from individuals at each campus when we would tell them our idea. The faculty and staff of NLU was extremely supportive in getting RAE off the ground whether pointing us in the direction of who to for room reservations, who to collaborate with, or who sending out promotional material to at each campus. The goal was always to go to all campuses which I was extremely happy it was able to work out consecutively. The reel was not an initial plan but seemed like a natural fit to what we were hoping to promote, and I believe it outlined our message more clearly. I was grateful we were able to incorporate this into the plan and was extremely grateful of all the artists' support and trust to hold on to each art piece for two months. Overall this process taught me about perseverance and the power art has in telling stories of the community we live and serve in.

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