

ALLEN COUNTY COMMON THREADS THEATER PROJECT CASE STUDY: ARTS COUNCIL OF GREATER LIMA

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PREFACE

What helps us make sense of history, of things we can't touch? When we're not standing, or floating, in the middle of it? Faith. Faith is about what you can't see. Memory. The image of that which is past, or gone. And maybe, just maybe as important—poetry. Art. Meaning that someone, or someones, conjure up—construct—to bring the chaos of memory, and the invisible threads of faith, into a room.

There is a poetry in the stories of everyday life that can escape the eye at first glance. We all have stories. Whether we're a person, a family—a community. How they connect, what they mean, what they say about who we are and how we live together...its easy to pass by the poetry. Just like a memory fades, or is re-remembered different as time goes by. Just like faith can be tested in quiet moments of reflection and loud moments of tragedy. There are, if the eye watches, and the ear listens, moments worth not missing. Voices worth not ignoring.

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances: Mirrors and Windows in Allen County*¹

In recent years, in Ohio's Allen County, issues of race, leadership, and water resources have divided city and county officials and residents. Lima, the county's largest city, suffered from loss of industrial jobs and declining tax base, shrinking population, and downtown and neighborhood decay. In the suburbs and rural farmlands, county residents mistrust city officials who control needed water resources and have made moves toward annexing the county in order to revitalize the city. Issues of race have persisted over many years between the largely white rural and suburban population and the significant African American population in the city of Lima.

The *Allen County Common Threads Theater Project* sought to address these issues. Building upon a successful 2000 event called *Common Threads* (based on a European community arts model), the Arts Council of Greater Lima, Bluffton College, and a steering committee of interested citizens set out to develop a second *Common Threads* endeavor. The goal was to engage a large crosssection of both city and county residents and leaders in dialogue about issues of "trust among leaders" and "respecting differences." With the support of Animating Democracy, the project revolved around an extended residency by Sojourn Theater and its artistic director, Michael Rohd. Over 14 months, company members met and interviewed 400 residents. Their

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts from the play, written by Michael Rohd, are drawn from the voices of community members who were interviewed by Rohd and Sojourn Theater.

words and perspectives fueled Rohd's script for the "poetic documentary" play, *Passing Glances: Mirrors and Window in Allen County*. Meanwhile, dialogue consultant Patricia Romney trained 40 local people in dialogue facilitation skills. Together they designed and facilitated community dialogues in relation to script readings of the in-progress play and later after public performances of it. They designed a culminating *Common Threads* conference involving over 200 citizens in seeing the play, discussing the issues, and forming action teams to address them.

Over 7,000 people from 15 of the 16 villages, townships and towns of Allen County were involved in some way in the *Common Threads* project. Although African American individuals were identified as new leaders through the project and many white residents expressed new understanding of issues of race, on the whole the impact on issues of race was seen as limited with continued hard work to be done. But the project took important and productive steps "along a continuum of action toward a more democratic community." *Common Threads* action teams are at work to improve relationships among city and county elected officials and have linked with the Chamber of Commerce to propose a citizen's long range community plan. The *Common Threads* dialogue process continues to be used in school and community settings supported by the cadre of trained dialogue facilitators. And, the arts are perceived as a way to address community issues.

This case study provides an in-depth view of Sojourn Theater's intensive community-based theater process. The company's dialogic research and creative development approach afforded an opportunity for diverse voices to be heard and built a foundation of trust and honesty for the project. The case describes the project's broad based community leadership—a core team of organizers and "sector leaders" who effectively linked to various



A script reading of scenes from *Passing Glances*.
Photo Credit: Dean Brown/The Lima News

constituents—as well as innovative media partnerships. The case also analyzes tensions that were constructively addressed throughout the project including: naming and framing the issue; negotiating insider/outsider concerns as well as the collaboration between artist and dialogue consultant. Finally, the case study looks at the challenges faced by the arts council and other community leaders to sustain the important forward steps made by the *Common Threads* project.

BACKGROUND

*I think there's a void
an absence
we're not fully maximizing
the opportunities we have as leaders
across race
across denominations*

*We have to quit
getting hung up on hang ups
that's the key*

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

The complexities and scope of the *Common Threads* project are emblematic of the tangle of civic issues from which it developed. Lima, Ohio, a city of 40,000 people in a county of 108,500, has lost 10,000 industrial jobs since 1960 and 29% of its population since 1970, largely due to the flight from the city of middle class white and black residents. The resulting lost tax base, decay of city neighborhoods, and declining infrastructure have exacerbated tensions between urban and suburban/rural citizens. This tension is largely apparent in the complete mistrust between city and county officials. The Mayor of Lima, Dave Berger, running unopposed for a fourth term when this project began, attempted to revitalize the city through annexation and new business development, but was unable to engage in productive dialogue with his rural counterparts, leading to inaction and further mistrust. Water became a prevailing metaphor for this estrangement, as the city had treated water, which the townships needed. When the Lima mayor made water a leverage point, county residents, believing the city was holding them hostage, further declined to cooperate. As city residents receive fewer services and county residents' water supply dwindles, each side views the other as insensitive and intractable.

Racial prejudice and mistrust simmer just under the surface, and frequently bubble to the top. Lima is now 26% African American and city residents, particularly African Americans, view county residents as racist and insular. County residents are increasingly reluctant to enter the city, which they perceive as unsafe. Following the Rodney King incident in California in 1993, which raised national issues about law enforcement and race, civic leaders initiated a Study Circles program focused on race and race relations. Organized through churches, the program engaged 8,000 youth and adults over a ten-year period and resulted in the training of numerous local facilitators. The Lima Study Circles project became a national model, and set the stage for the *Common Threads* initiative.

In spite of the success of the Study Circles, race relations and city/county tensions continued to fester throughout the '90s. As noted in an early document sent to *Animating Democracy*:

“Allen County workers were losing more and more good paying jobs, County and City elected officials were stalemated because of the conflicting interests of their constituencies, the City of Lima's population and tax base were decreasing with city services barely maintained, the farm community faced new problems of diminishing resources, and the community of color continued to have little access to the networks it needed to find employment opportunities.”

In 2000-01, some civic leaders convened to examine the impediments to economic development in the county. They identified racial differences and distrust of leaders, thus laying the groundwork for framing the issue for *Common Threads*.

Cultural Context

During this economically and civically challenging period, the Council for the Arts of Greater Lima (CFA) continued to administer artist residencies in schools and multi-disciplinary arts festivals and to promote historic preservation and the role of arts in everyday life. Increasingly, CFA began to view its role as that of a broker—an intermediary between artists and artistic expression and the civic realm. Certainly community engagement and issue-based artistic work was a priority for CFA when Martie MacDonell, its leader from the mid 1960's to 1985, was at the helm. From 1986 to 2000, MacDonell led another not-for-profit organization, American House, which explored Allen County's industrial, cultural and ethnic history through oral history programs, exhibits, documentaries, drama and other artistic means. After several other CFA executive directors came and went, CFA leadership passed to Bart Mills in the late '90s and MacDonell agreed to become an advisor to the board. MacDonell was the architect of the *Common Threads* project, and she would serve as its unpaid project director. Her investment of personal and professional resources in this project had significant impact on its overall direction and success.

Also part of the cultural landscape at this time was the large Veterans Memorial Civic and Convention Center of Lima and Allen County, located in downtown Lima. Because the Civic Center was built to offer programs of interest to all area citizens, its board and staff grappled with the issues of how and by whom it would be used, and how to sustain it financially. A small, but vibrant, non-professional theater community also struggled with insufficient visibility and shrinking resources.

Common Threads, Phases One and Two

Against this backdrop, Bluffton College developed the Allen County *Common Threads* project in 2000. Originating in Europe and brought to local attention by MacDonell, *Common Threads* is a process that stimulates community art-making to address area issues. In Allen County, *Common Threads* claimed the key civic issues recently identified by local leaders, restating them slightly as *respecting differences* and *trust among leaders*. With Bluffton College (a small, private college about 20 miles from Lima) as the sponsor, and Judy Gilbert, Assistant to the President of Bluffton College as project coordinator, *Common Threads, Phase One*, identified and exhibited the work of six Lima area organizations already engaged in community art-making that addressed issues of peace and diversity.

As an outgrowth of Phase One, MacDonell and Judy Gilbert recruited a steering committee of diverse arts and social service practitioners to develop Allen County *Common Threads* and plan a conference for the fall of 2001 to introduce the *Common Threads* approach to the larger Allen County community. Meanwhile, MacDonell learned of the Animating Democracy Initiative, and, seeing *Common Threads* as a launch pad, applied for and received Animating Democracy funding for *Common Threads, Phase Two*, to be sponsored by the Council for the Arts of Greater Lima. Continuing to work with the themes of respecting differences and trust among leaders, MacDonell, Gilbert and Mills recruited theater artist Michael Rohd and dialogue specialist Patricia Romney for their Animating Democracy project, which would feature an original theater production created by Rohd and his company. Building on the Study Circle experience, the

project would utilize Romney's skills to train local dialogue facilitators in arts-based civic dialogue. Rohd, founder and Artistic Director of Sojourn Theatre of Portland, Oregon, and Romney, CEO of Romney Associates of Amherst, Massachusetts, would visit Allen County multiple times over the duration of the project, and would be involved in the culminating performances and dialogues at the Civic Center and throughout the community in October, 2002.

In addition to Bluffton College and the Civic Center, the *Common Threads* leadership team recruited other partners for *Common Threads, Phase Two*. Both the City of Lima and the Board of Commissioners of Allen County came on board, a hopeful signal that productive interaction across the city/county boundaries might indeed occur through this project. Lima's daily newspaper, *The Lima News*, was also a partner.

Project Goals

In a list of goals, articulated at the outset of the project or emerging during early months of planning, project leaders proposed that

- Citizens of Allen County would view civic issues from multiple perspectives and increase their understanding of the two key issues: trust among leaders (rural, urban) and respecting differences (blacks and whites).
- Citizens not previously involved in urban or county-wide issues would have access to opportunities and events.
- City and County elected officials would engage in dialogue and discover common ground.
- Emerging civic leaders in Allen County would be identified and nurtured.
- Local residents would receive training in arts based civic dialogue facilitation skills.
- The Council for the Arts would build its capacity to raise funds for, and implement, issue-based arts projects among local and regional arts and cultural providers, artists and community development groups.
- Public awareness about the role of the arts in civic life would increase and residents would have access to resources and information through the media, a website, conference, and arts events.

THE COMMON THREADS PROJECT

Early Planning for Theater, Dialogue and Project Leadership

Rohd and Romney came to the project as newcomers to Lima but as experts in their respective fields. Rohd, experienced in engaging the community in theater-making, intended to interview local residents and create and perform an original theater piece that used movement and personal narrative to explore many perspectives and complicated questions around issues of leadership and diversity. Romney, skilled in a variety of dialogic approaches, would conduct pre- and post-performance dialogues herself and would also train local facilitators in order to build the community's capacity to continue arts-based civic dialogue. Romney would emphasize "listening with a sense of wonder," in order to suspend judgment and foster understanding that could lead to individual or collective action.

Because Rohd and Romney were outsiders, integrating them into the local leadership team was both challenging and stimulating. Early planning sessions in MacDonell's family room with Rohd, Romney, MacDonell, Mills, Gilbert, Project Coordinator Chris Rodabaugh and Theresa Henry, Bluffton College Multi-Cultural Director, were lively, provocative discussions as the insiders and outsiders negotiated their various understandings of potent topics such as race, leadership, power and city/county tensions. The insiders were living in the environment, in which incidents and tensions erupted regularly. The outsiders came with experiences and understandings from a broader perspective, and were often able to see clearly and name directly what was a tangled muddle for the Lima residents. This was true about the issue of race, which Romney and Rohd both saw clearly needed to be at the forefront. It was clear to Rohd, Romney and the local leadership team that they needed to seek more diversity (farmers, African Americans) on the planning team, and Rohd and Romney came to realize that the project was originally framed as an Allen County project so as not be seen as tilted toward the city's agenda.

Ready to Launch: Common Threads Conference and Animating Democracy Learning Exchange

Two significant convenings served as test ground and launch pad for the project. The first, the *Common Threads* Conference, was held at Bluffton College in October 2001. This conference was planned to bring together community members and civic leaders from the city and the county to learn about the *Common Threads* model as developed in Europe, view the six community arts projects and examine the issues of *respecting differences* and *trust among leaders* which had been identified earlier as impediments to economic development. In addition, MacDonell and Gilbert saw the convening as a transition to their Animating Democracy project, which would be called "*Common Threads, Phase Two.*" To that end, both Rohd and Romney presented at the conference to introduce themselves and their work to the community. Rohd developed four monologues about annexation, race, leadership and trust based on his first 20 interviews, and these were performed, reader's theater style, by four actors (two white Sojourn company members and two local African American actors). These were presented four times to audiences of 50 each. Following each monologue, audience members generated questions raised by the piece, and these were recorded for future reference. Meanwhile Romney presented her own session on dialogue where she modeled her techniques and approach, eliciting thoughts and images about Allen County from the group and emphasizing the importance of "curiosity" and "perseverance" during difficult moments. In terms of numbers, this conference was a highly successful event, drawing almost 450 people from Lima, Allen County and the Bluffton College population. At the same time the planning team became aware of some problems. In the minds of some participants, there were suddenly large expectations for what the project could achieve, while others expressed confusion about the project and its timeline. *Common Threads* organizers recognized that clarity of communication with the public would be a demanding and constant challenge.

By the time of the Animating Democracy Learning Exchange in Chicago in November 2001, and with the *Common Threads* conference behind them, MacDonell, Gilbert, and Mills were ready to do some solid planning about project goals, events and public relations. With the help of Lima resident Cathy Eldridge, a recent addition to the team, they developed the beginnings of a project work plan at the conference. Animating Democracy evaluation consultants were on hand to assist in the creation of an Outcomes Model with activities, short-term goals and outcomes and long term impact based on current conditions and needs (the goals as stated in the previous section derive from this Outcomes Model). The process of developing these planning documents in the synergistic environment of a national conference proved clarifying and energizing for the Allen County Team.

Expanding Participation and Framing the Issue

There's a feeling of mistrust. A sense that Lima and the county will act in a way that will help themselves—at the expense of anyone else. Human nature. Once you expect mistrust, you'll look for mistreatment. Add an actual history of mistreatment and you have the potential for a bona fide lens of anxiety.

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

Back in Allen County, MacDonell and her team had a work plan and an outcomes model in place, but they were facing some tensions. There were serious issues on the table, and decisions to be made. The Bluffton *Common Threads* conference had brought questions and dilemmas to light that would become the focus of intense conversation and problem-solving efforts in the months ahead. Key groups were underrepresented at the conference. The absence of rural and township residents was apparent. According to Mills in an email to the leadership team on November 11, county residents knew that city residents were pushing annexation, and they didn't need a conference or an arts project to express their views on this topic: "Don't go sneaking around worrying about how you're going to get me to talk. Come out here and ask me what you want to know," said one.² Mills also reported hearing that city and county residents don't yet understand what *Common Threads* or this project is really about. He stated: "I think the urban/suburban issue is, at its core, about race." African American participation in the conference was not as high as expected either. On the day of the conference, funeral services were scheduled for one of the revered members of the community of color, and many of the African Americans planning to attend the conference saw the funeral as a higher priority. The team needed to address how to get that population meaningfully engaged in future activities.

So MacDonell and the team set out to expand project leadership and participation. They wanted to be as inclusive as possible, and to recruit and get buy-in from groups that had not been well represented at the conference, including rural farmers, suburban residents, city and county officials, and African Americans. The leadership structure that finally evolved was a series of concentric circles. In the middle was the core team of 11 people, including those already involved, which expanded to bring in Martin Stephens, an African American employed at the Ford Company, and Jay Beggs, a leader in the farming community. The next circle was made of Sector Leaders, 20 people who were opinion leaders in various sectors in the county and who would function as advisors. MacDonell used her long-time connections to draw in people and get commitments to the project. Finally, in the most outer circle were the residents at large who would be tapped by the various Sector Leaders to be interviewed by Rohd or to participate in dialogue activities conducted by Romney.

In addition to worries about inclusion and representation, the group also deliberated about the project's ultimate goal: Was it action and change or knowledge and understanding? MacDonell wrote that a goal would be "...not to necessarily act, but to know. Wouldn't that alone be progress in Allen County?" But Romney told the team repeatedly that, based on her conversations at the conference and with African American residents of Lima, including core team member Theresa Henry, she thought the black community wanted change (particularly in the areas of jobs and empowerment) and was tired of just talk. Could the project be considered a success if people's understanding and awareness increased but nothing really changed? This question would recur over and over throughout the duration of the project.

² Unless otherwise noted, the quotes and comments that follow are drawn from a series of email and phone conversations between team members from November, 2001 – January, 2002.

Meanwhile the core team continued to struggle with framing and naming the issue that would drive the work forward. Rohd and Romney asserted that *respecting differences* was a euphemism for *race*, and other team members worried that *trust among leaders* was a euphemism for *annexation*. MacDonell feared that to name the issue of race directly would keep rural people out; already some feedback from the monologues at the conference was there is too much about race. MacDonell wrote to Romney: “This is not strictly a race relations project. If it becomes that we will lose the perspectives of several important sectors in Allen County.” Romney argued that NOT to name it directly would cause blacks to withdraw in frustration. She advocated for naming racism as one important focus within the many differences the project addressed. The question of *trust among leaders* led to a discussion about power. The team asked itself: Are we really talking about power? Rohd expressed his notion that whites always feel their inherent power is threatened when non-white voices are featured in a work of art. Mills wrote, “How can people currently in power promote dialogue about the power structure without drawing distrust from those who perceive themselves as powerless?”

Again, MacDonell was cautious. She believed she was speaking from experience, having been involved with race and diversity issues in Lima since the early 1960s. During the Civil Rights struggle in Lima, she served on the board of Mizpah Community Center, where African American families rallied to protest inequity in the schools for their children, and confronted racist white parents and school administrators. She believed project success required broad participation from diverse constituencies, including some of those same conservative, racist populations that had remained unchanged over the 40 years since the Civil Rights days. And she worried: “...the power metaphor might not make it in this conservative, Midwestern environment—people would shy away...Trust/distrust is an easier concept...” At the same time, she was very aware that the result of a successful project might be a shift in power from her group (upper middle class white residents), where she believed new effective leadership was at an all-time low, to a new generation of leaders, probably African American. Of this possibility, she wrote, “Perhaps the answer is for those people who are seen as the power structure to step aside and let the leadership arise from those unheard voices.” This is an acknowledgment from the architect of this project that while its public success may hinge on a delicate dance of language, true success could indeed result in real power shifts within Allen County. So *respecting differences* and *trust among leaders* remained the named public issues, but behind the scenes and in small groups, talk of race, racism, power, city/county interdependence and annexation came out into the light.

Theatre and Dialogue Processes

Rohd and Sojourn company members conducted extensive research into Allen County. According to MacDonell, they were sent subscriptions to local newspapers, maps, demographic information charts of the political structure, videotapes of *Telling the African American Story in Lima*, and other documentaries. Then, in February 2002, Rohd and Romney both returned to Allen County for a series of kick-off activities leading toward the creation of the production and the design of dialogue training and events. Thirty-four people, including *Common Threads* conference participants and the newly constituted Sector Leader group, attended two theater and dialogue workshops conducted by Rohd and Romney. To model his process, Rohd led some role-playing and conducted an interview to demonstrate how he draws material for the play. Romney engaged the group in dialogue activities, emphasizing listening for understanding, and led some follow-up discussions with questions raised at the conference. In addition to the workshops, Rohd and Romney were both out in the community with Rohd conducting interviews and Romney making contacts in the black community. The decision was made to

introduce the broader community to the project at a Work-In-Progress event at the Fairgrounds in May, which would include both a theatre performance and dialogue.

Several tension points emerged leading up to this May event. The first concerned broad participation. Although the Sector Leader group had good representation, there were only four blacks and two rural residents at the February workshops. Second, Romney continued to push for clarity: Did the Sector Leaders know which sector they represented and was it clear to them what their jobs were? Who would fill the role of the local dialogue facilitators, and with whom would they facilitate dialogue?



Michael Rohd performing excerpts from *Passing Glances* at the Lima City Council Chambers.
Photo Credit: Todd Campbell/The Lima News

In addition, tension between MacDonell and Mills emerged. Although Mills was now executive director of CFA, it was MacDonell, as project director, who had the vision and also made the day-to-day decisions. Mills expressed concern that MacDonell would try to exert control, even over the final content of the script. MacDonell felt that Mills could not remain “neutral enough” to be effective with all constituencies. For the most part, these points were all aired and discussed by the core team, including the perception on the part of many that “three white girls are running the show” (a reference to MacDonell, Gilbert and Eldridge).

Artistic issues also came forward. Working in the form he has called “poetic documentary,” Rohd expressed repeated caution about the potential for exploitation of people’s stories. At the same time, it was becoming apparent that as he conducted more and more interviews across city/county boundaries, more and more people became interested in and invested in the project. As Rohd proceeded with interviews, he took care to ensure that voices that were not normally part of public conversation on civic issues were present, strong and varied. He told the team that while the final piece would not advocate politically for a particular point of view, neither would it be neutral: “If half the voices are from non-dominant culture, dominant culture sees a surprising shift from majority to shared status.”

In that vein, Rohd began to express concern about his hosts’ comfort level and reaction to the theater piece he was creating. He worried that MacDonell wanted balance and neutrality in the piece that could not be present when all voices were brought forward. In March, he reported on a conversation with Brian Miller of the NAACP: “The black community is being squeezed economically in Lima and their cries for change must be addressed if Lima is to be ‘saved’ and if the city and rural residents are ever to reach a mutual understanding.” Martin Stephens agreed: “These (racial and economic) issues have to come to light if any progress is to be made. If one group does not know what the other thinks or is feeling an assumption is made that all is well.” Rohd believed that if the piece were to catalyze authentic dialogue, this point of view must be expressed, even if it would be hard for some to hear. At the same time, Rohd was also making inroads in the rural and farming communities through his interview process. Rohd knew some of the material he had was challenging for both the rural and urban sides. People were speaking frankly about racial fears and stereotypes, about economic decline and poverty.

While Rohd hoped that continued open communication during the rehearsal process would lead to gradual buy-in from all parties, he worried that MacDonell or someone else might find some material too challenging and press him to tone it down. Also, there was the question of who

ultimately owned the artistic product. For these reasons, Rohd and MacDonell agreed to draw up a letter of agreement that would spell out roles, responsibilities, authority and ownership. Through a series of communications over time, they worked through the critical element—that of Rohd’s artistic freedom. The following excerpted exchange exemplifies their struggle:

- MacDonell:* I understand the new work will be your property, but that you will give us permission to use it for educational purposes
- Rohd:* This is right...
- MacDonell:* I know we will be communicating almost daily about the script...
- Rohd:* It won’t be every day...I will need some space and time...I will be having conversations with you on the other side of creation rather than in every moment of creating...
- MacDonell:* Yes, I understand and respect the creative process...the question I can’t answer in my mind is what if someone in the core leader group objects strongly to something in the script...?
- Rohd:* There is a huge chance that it will happen if we are truly working with diverse people with differing perspectives and opinions...
- MacDonell:* ...Yes, and the hope is that everyone does learn from one another...
- Rohd:* It comes down to partnership and trust...in the end, I have to have the final say...you will have a voice, but not the final one.

In the end, the Letter of Agreement formalized agreements and understandings that developed over exchanges such as this one. Again, the team’s ability to directly probe issues and concerns emerged as its strongest asset. Project leaders were consistently courageous about persevering through these periods of confusion and discomfort.

Leading up to the Work-in-Progress presentation, Rohd continued interviews and script development. Sojourn Theatre Company was in residence for eight days leading up to the event, engaging with community members in interview and workshop formats. Concurrently, Romney developed a training curriculum and worked with 44 local dialogue facilitators over two eight-hour days. Some facilitators were new to dialogue work, while others had come through the Study Circles process. In addition to conducting formal, public training, Romney was a force behind the scenes in the community for dialogue-in-action. She had illuminating conversations with Reverend Fails about the black community’s need for jobs and empowerment, which she passed on to the team. She coached MacDonell through a tense incident with Brian Miller, head of the local NAACP, concerning some potentially offensive images in a school mural. She helped clarify and solidify the roles of the two African Americans on the core team, Theresa Henry and Martin Stephens. Stephens, who had his own story to contribute to the play, also felt he could be objective about the black experience in Lima, and recognized the importance of listening and dialogue before planning for change and resolution.



Michael Rohd and company members from Sojourn Theatre in *Passing Glances*.
Photo Credit: Todd Campbell/The Lima News

Partly because of their unique skills and partly because as outsiders they were viewed as objective, Rohd and Romney were each highly effective in engaging with community members on a deep level. These community connections surely contributed to the success of the Work-In-Progress event in May. One hundred people attended an evening of supper, dialogue and theater. Before the performance, people sat at round tables and were guided by the newly trained facilitators to respond, round-robin style, to questions such as: “When I think about Lima and Allen County, I hope... I worry....” The 45-minute choreographed performance took place on platforms in the fairground’s open warehouse. Audience response was positive. People clearly saw and heard themselves and the voices of their neighbors. Post-performance table dialogue included questions such as: “What did you find most intriguing?” “How would you like to see the performance and dialogue work move forward?” Elements identified as needing attention were the uneven skills of the facilitators, lack of time to pursue all questions, and the challenge of capturing the table talk. Overall, the Work in Progress event succeeded as a “dress rehearsal” for the culminating theater and dialogue events coming in October.

Bringing it All Together

By early fall 2002, gear-up for the October events was intense. Three public performances were scheduled for the Civic Center on October 11, 12 and 13—the first to be part of a day-long *Common Threads* conference, and the others public performances. Dialogue would occur at the conference and in conjunction with all performances. Tickets to performances were modestly priced at \$5 and, to ensure access to the broad community, a complimentary ticket system was developed, utilizing the Sector Leaders.

Dialogue training

Romney was in town for three days before the culminating activities to conduct dialogue facilitation training for the core team and the sector leaders, as well as other interested residents. This training consisted of a variety of dialogue exercises for conducting arts-based dialogue with small groups, including practice with both the Public Conversations model for dialogue on difficult issues and Liz Lerman’s Critical Response approach to dialogue about a work of art. Beyond the actual training events themselves, Romney’s approach was “...to carefully and fully as possible ‘co-construct’ the dialogue methodology and practice with the people on the ground in Lima.” Romney worked closely with Judy Gilbert and Cathy Eldridge and credits them with much of the success of the dialogues.



Dr. Patricia Romney leads members of the community in one of the dialogue facilitation trainings.

Script development

Rohd and the Sojourn Theatre Company were in residence continually from mid-September on, and they had benefit of a large, fully equipped home owned by MacDonell to live and work in. Altogether, they were in Allen County a total of 50 days over 14 months, and they reached 400 people in 290 different contact events. Script development continued, giving way to selection and shaping. (Rohd had far more material than he needed or could use). Rehearsals ensued; design and technical decisions were made. (Sojourn brought designers and technicians to Allen County as well). *Passing Glances: Mirrors and Windows in Allen County* evolved as a collage of

monologues, scenes, tableaux and movement. By creating composites, cross-cutting and juxtaposing words and images, Rohd's script deftly gathered the many threads in the complicated Allen County tapestry. Audience members would see and hear themselves in the piece ("mirrors") and would get glimpses into the lives of their fellow citizens ("windows").

Not surprisingly, water also became a powerful metaphor. MacDonell states that Rohd was inspired to pursue the water metaphor by the sight of a farmer drinking and washing from a trough of clear water while looking to the sky for rain. "Water would be a motif in this work," she said: "no rain, too much rain, water as a political issue, water as a symbol of cleansing oneself... water as a religious symbol." At one point during the performance, instead of using umbrellas to protect from rain, actors turned them upside down to catch the water. At another point, actors stepped out from the protective circle of the umbrella and into the falling water.

We weep water, we sweat water, we bleed water, and in Allen County we argue water...the quality of water—not great. The quantity of water—not enough. Wondering about water—still here...water has been an issue for 15 years...water—water—water—one day at a time, one drop at a time.

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

The abstract set consisted of modular units augmented by projections on the upstage wall of words and images, including photographs of Allen County. Music underscored and commented on the action and images. The company of nine actors (including Rohd) wore neutral street clothes so as to portray a variety of Allen County residents. The layering of non-verbal passages and "poeticized" language with technical elements such as lighting, projections and sound contributed to the work's artistic power.

Barnstorming

In order to promote awareness of the project and attendance at the Civic Center performances, a series of twelve "Barnstorming" performances took place in eight rural and urban settings across the county over a period of two weeks in late September and early October. In keeping with the barnstorming tradition of traveling from place to place, making brief stops to do promotions or presentations, small groups of cast members visited locations ranging from churches to Lima city council chambers to a VFW hall and the Allen County farm bureau. The church barnstormings were unique in that they happened during the regular Sunday morning services, reaching whole congregations. Performances at four Catholic masses reached 2,500, and one, during intermission at a gospel concert in a black church, reached 800.

At each stop, a selection of three or four monologues tailored to the specific audience was read, followed by brief dialogue conducted by Rohd or trained local dialogue facilitators. In all, over 3,800 residents were exposed to the project through the barnstorming. The barnstorming was a strategic opportunity that afforded participants the chance to engage in an "intragroup" conversation about these difficult issues with people like themselves. While it is impossible to know how many of these people attended a full performance at the civic center, it did create "buzz" about the project in the community.

All the little mom and pop operations in the '50's are pretty much gone. In the '50's, we had mom and pop, we had chickens, pigs and cows. We don't have that anymore. We have specialized operations...There's a very small number I would classify as full-time farmers. Others...have a real 40-hour job, then they come home and farm.

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

Dialogue in action

Just prior to the culminating activities of Oct. 11-13, issues emerged about the marriage of art and dialogue. Because Romney was not part of script development and rehearsals, she had not been in Allen County as the piece evolved. Now, three days out, she was here and she needed to settle on a format for the dialogue in conjunction with the public performances. There were two issues brewing. Rohd wanted the dialogue to happen in a space other than the theater, which he felt would be intimidating. Furthermore, he discovered during the development and rehearsal process that the 90-minute running time he had originally envisioned would probably be insufficient. A longer running time, intermission and the need to move people to a different space could render the audience's time commitment to between three and four hours, which several people on the core team (including Romney and MacDonell) thought was too long.

With so much at stake, and in the heat of technical rehearsals, tensions bubbled up. Romney, Rohd and MacDonell approached the problem from their different vantage points. Through some tense conversations, they worked for resolution. Rohd understood Romney's concern that the dialogue could be pushed back too late in the evening, detracting from its effectiveness. Romney understood Rohd's reluctance to make last-minute cuts to the show, thereby eliminating key viewpoints contained in the piece. In the end, the team compromised. Rohd did some trimming; Romney and MacDonell decided the post-performance dialogues would be optional, and people who wanted to end the evening after the performance would be able to do so. The core team also decided to hold the dialogue sessions in spaces adjacent to the performance hall rather than in the performance hall. They agreed on a short transition period so audience members who chose to stay for dialogue could have a snack and a drink and get situated. Rohd, MacDonell and Romney now agree that had budgets and schedules permitted Romney to be in town more frequently, a fuller collaboration between artist and dialogue specialist could have resulted in easier and earlier resolution to this dilemma. Romney still wonders how much more they would have collaborated if there had been more time. "The work evolved so separately," she says. "In one sense it was so big it needed to."



A scene from *Passing Glances*.

Photo Credit: Todd Campbell/The Lima News

Culminating conference, performances, and dialogue

With the pieces finally in place, the Allen County *Common Threads Theatre Project* arrived at Friday, October 11, 2002, with the day-long *Common Threads* conference at the Civic Center, attended by more than 200 Allen County residents. Conference attendees came from 22 employment groups and 11 geographic areas, including Bluffton College students and faculty, social service providers, representatives of the media and local officials. There was good representation from the African American community, but the farming community was underrepresented. MacDonell, Gilbert and Eldridge co-facilitated the event, with Romney leading the dialogue activities. With attendees seated at round tables, MacDonell and Gilbert provided background and project history. Romney introduced the World Café model, which was chosen upon the recommendation of Judy Gilbert. The World Café structure and process was a good fit because it accommodates large numbers of people while also permitting them to mix. It also includes acceptance of stated agreements on process and procedures, prepared

questions for participants to respond to in round-robin fashion, a timekeeper and a recorder. For this event, tables were covered in newsprint and markers were provided, encouraging participants to make notes, drawings or doodles about what they were hearing. These would become records as participants moved from table to table throughout the day. The first round of questions included: What has been discussed on city/county issues? How has this project affected the community?

Mid-morning, the entire conference moved into the theater to view the first full performance of *Passing Glances: Mirrors and Windows in Allen County*. Excitement about the performance was palpable in the audience.

Participants returned to the conference space, joined now by Rohd and cast members and guided by Romney. Dialogue was framed using the central metaphors in the play and issues *Common Threads* intended to address. Romney and Gilbert asked participants: What in the performance you have just seen most *mirrors* your life in Allen County? What opened a new *window* into someone else's experience? What are the connections to the themes of trust and respect? What connections do you find among us and our observations and discussions? What potential actions are emerging? Tables were asked to reach consensus on one or two issues raised in the performance they considered most important. Guided now by Eldridge, people reported on their findings, which included the following topics: race, diversity, breaking down stereotypes, government leaders talking to each other, black entrepreneurship, and using arts in schools with youth. Each table was then assigned one issue, the tables were labeled and attendees moved to the table housing the issue they felt most passionate about. Discussion about each group's chosen topic ensued. In these new groupings, 16 issue/action teams were formed and named by the end of the day:

1. Breaking Down Negative Racism, Sexism and Classism
2. Bringing Diverse Peoples Together
3. Collaboration of Faith Institutions Toward Social Change
4. Community Development and Metropolitan Government
5. Early Childhood Education in Schools Regarding Non-Violence
6. Education/New Job Opportunities
7. Elected Officials Dialogue
8. Empowerment through Sustaining *Common Threads*
9. Housing and Homes
10. How to Get the Public to the Decision Making Table
11. Next Generation Friendly Community
12. Return of Black Entrepreneurship
13. Sister Neighbors (like Sister Cities Program)

*The thing that really got my attention, though
Happened about 6 months ago*

*I was pulling into the company parking lot
And just behind me
On the road
There was an accident
Not a huge one, but folks were hurt
It was serious*

I was the first person on the scene

*I helped someone out of a car
I called for help
I went into the road and directed traffic around the wreck
The cars
In the middle of the road*

*I took control of the scene
I did what needed to be done*

*All this in a couple minutes
So, pretty quick, there's another guy
A co-worker of mine
Who comes out to help
A white co-worker
We're both directing traffic*

*Police start showing up
Company folks start showing up
Paramedics*

*Every person that comes
They go to my co-worker
Not one person asks me what happened
Even after he told them I was here first
Not one person comes to me*

*They all go to him
Like he's in charge*

Like I'm not there

*—Excerpt from *Passing Glances**

- 14. Using the Arts to Teach Respect
- 15. Widen Diversity
- 16. Youth Rehabilitation and Activities

At the end of the conference, there was a surge of energy about the creation of the Action Teams as vehicles for community organizing and communication. Although the Action Teams would be refined and combined over the next several months, their actual creation was an extremely positive outcome that was reinforced by the written surveys conference attendees filled out: 97% of the survey respondents indicated elected officials need to take part in more conversations like these; 73% indicated they felt more likely to get involved in civic issues. Organizers were pleased that 96% indicated they had a better understanding of how the arts could be a catalyst for public conversation.

The two public performances and dialogues were also highly successful, and very different from one another. In each case, the core team and sector leaders planned pre-performance events

hosted by key constituencies designed to attract their friends and neighbors. Saturday night, October 12, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), a black sorority, hosted a reception prior to the show. Orchestrated by core team member Theresa Henry, this reception was critical to spreading word about the performance in the black community, and, in fact, Saturday's lively and appreciative audience of 550 people included about 150 African Americans, who were particularly responsive to the pieces on race and class. MacDonell reported that a middle-aged black woman sitting in front of her told her companion, "This is exactly like it is for black folks here—just exactly." Martin Stephens concurred: "The performance reflected the voices of the black community. What is, is." About 100 people stayed for the post-performance dialogue, which was guided by Romney and her locally trained facilitators and utilized a format and questions similar to the ones used at the conference. After some initial reluctance to move from the drinks and snacks to the dialogue, people were engaged at their tables.

Because farmers don't work on Sundays, the matinee on Sunday, October 13, was geared to the farming and rural Allen County residents and township officials. Through the connections in the Sector Leader group, the president of the Township Trustees and Farm Bureau officials issued invitations to Sunday "dinner." Ninety farmers, elected

officials, township trustees and their wives attended the noon meal. During "dinner" Romney guided the tables to engage in conversation about prepared topics. While some tables seemed confused and hesitant about addressing the questions, other tables had lively discussions. At the 2:00 performance, attendance swelled to 400. The audience was somewhat more subdued than the night before, but response was positive, and 84 people chose to remain for the post-performance dialogue. In fact, both post-performance dialogues exceeded attendance expectations; clearly a significant percentage of the audience chose to extend their experience by participating in the dialogue.

*There is a lot of satisfaction to be gained
from burying something in the ground,
watching it grow, taking care of it—
But the real gamble
A farmer's friend or foe
Weather
Weather, and time
Cause when you're planting
If that soil is too wet
Or too hard
You lose
And if it doesn't rain when you need
You lose
We do not control the circumstances
of making our product
In a world that is all about delivering a product
But when its time to plant
Time to harvest
It doesn't matter what else is going on
My world can't wait
When it rains, it pours
—Excerpt from *Passing Glances**

Media involvement

Media involvement in this project was very strong, and contributed to public awareness and a sense of momentum and excitement. *The Lima News* was a model media sponsor. It had just completed a feature series on race relations and wanted to extend its reach in this area of community life. The editor was impressed with the goals of the project and saw it as a link to the paper's work. The editor also wanted to train the newspaper staff in the dialogue process in order to assure that all perspectives would be heard in roundtable sessions they regularly host on community issues, so that they might write balanced feature series. *The Lima News* published 37 feature, editorial and news articles from October 2001 through December 2002. They also published monologues from the script, and kept a photographic record of the project. Further, *Lima News'* editor became an advisor to the project, and two *Lima News* employees received dialogue facilitation training. The depth of the paper's involvement was a surprise to project leaders, as the *News* was not known for community involvement or civic journalism, and is a politically conservative institution. MacDonell credits Judy Gilbert's mutually beneficial approach to partnership development as key to the success of the *Lima News'* involvement. Television and radio were also involved. Clear Channel Radio Lima and Fox TV Lima collaborated to produce and air excerpts from six monologues on the subjects of race and class, farming and political leadership.

Each monologue opened and closed with a description of the *Common Threads* project, and they were aired to coincide with the publication dates of the *Lima News* print stories. In this way, awareness about the project extended to Allen County residents who did not attend barnstorming events, dialogue activities or performances.

ISSUES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Naming and Framing the Civic Issue

The process of naming and framing the project's civic issue was difficult because embedded in that naming were all the nuances and complications of community life in Allen County, where *respecting differences* and *trust among leaders* were seen by many as euphemisms for annexation and race. Ultimately the questions became: how do we draw people into a project if they perceive, rightly or wrongly, that it is not relevant to their lives? Whose stories get told? And who decides? While MacDonell and other core team members were concerned that rural residents would not engage in a project about race, African Americans insisted it had to be addressed directly. At the same time, county residents challenged city residents to be up front about using water as leverage for Lima's need to annex the townships in order to increase its tax base. In the end, the decision to retain the milder themes of *respecting differences* and *trust among leaders* probably did result in more participation from rural and county residents. Some on the core team believed African Americans would participate no matter how the issue was framed because the fate of the city so directly affects their lives. Ultimately, consensus among core team leaders is that although African American participation in the project was strong, their involvement and the depth and retention of that involvement was not always satisfactory.

There is no question that the way the issue was framed and who extended the invitations affected broad participation across sectors at public events. Exceptions were the barnstorming performances, which were presented to captive audiences. In fact, these mini-performances and dialogues enabled blacks, city dwellers, civic leaders, suburbanites and farmers to enter the

project in the company of people like themselves, no doubt helping people to feel honored and safe. In the end, this was a factor in the success of the subsequent heterogeneous groups.

Insider/Outsider Project Leadership

Among the core leaders, the dynamics between the insiders (MacDonell's team) and the outsiders (Romney and Sojourn) was sometimes uncomfortable on both sides. The insiders worried that the visitors didn't understand their community ethos. In describing the evolution of her relationship with Rohd, MacDonell stated: "...we both started out a little wary about where we might have big differences. I saw myself as the advocate ...(for) the community, and worried about putting Allen County in his hands, knowing that we would be left with the results of his work after his departure." The visitors viewed relationships and issues through objective eyes, and were sometimes able to see dynamics that residents didn't or couldn't acknowledge. MacDonell was concerned about balance in the final piece; Rohd expected it to have a point of view and wanted control over its artistic evolution. Soon, it became clear to MacDonell that "...*Passing Glances* would indeed center on racism as the pervasive thread that runs through all the issues of leadership, trust, history..." She also stated: "...the artist's point of view pointed to the elephant in the room." In the end, the insiders, both audience and project leaders, grew to trust the outsiders. This trust was also expressed by the people whose stories were told onstage. One rural resident said, "If someone *local* was up there on stage saying true but painful things that were hard for me to hear, I would always wonder what he had against me."

Outsiders' sensitivity was demonstrated continually, particularly about the relationship between MacDonell and her on-site team ("the three white girls"). Rohd and Romney made efforts to include them in ways that would support the authenticity and success of the work. Romney, in particular, found ways to respectfully utilize the skills and experience that Eldridge and Gilbert brought to the project, most publicly in her design of the co-facilitation model for the culminating *Common Threads* conference. Theresa Henry and Martin Stephens agree that as an outsider, Romney was especially effective bringing forward the voices of black leaders and in clarifying their roles. She also played a critical role as "coach" and "mediator," with community members and core team leaders.

Aesthetic Issues

It was clear from the beginning that Rohd's aesthetic and his approach to artistic creation would have a huge impact on the project's outcomes. His signature form of "poetic documentary," in which real people's stories and experiences are "lifted" into the realm of poetry, connected powerfully with many who encountered it. This was true in workshop settings where he modeled the interview process in a role-play as well as at barnstorming events and staged readings and in the full performances. When people see and hear their own words and experiences presented "poetically," they are moved to open themselves to the different experiences and perspectives of neighbors and strangers. Part of the power of poeticizing language and experiences is in the selection and use of metaphor. Rohd's use of artistic metaphor, such as water, drew people in, enabling them to experience and confront difficult topics with a sense of wonder. At the same time, metaphor had a distancing effect—because it is symbolic and often non-literal, people could imaginatively entertain an idea they might resist in the everyday world.

A related artistic learning occurred around the question of whether or not a work of art could be "neutral." In the beginning, MacDonell and others hoped for a balanced piece that would

represent all viewpoints even though some of these viewpoints could offend some audience members. They saw this as crucial to enlisting broad participation. Rohd quickly realized he could *not* be neutral, and that while he would not take a side on any issue, his approach would be “voicing that which is usually unvoiced.” He was bolstered in this discovery by Romney, who maintained that one could be “multi-partial;” that is, on all sides at the same time.

In the end, Rohd’s piece achieved a finely tuned nuance of multiple viewpoints that was the truth of Allen County. Audience members often expressed surprise as they experienced a reality for blacks or for farmers that was unknown to them, but only a few were disturbed or insulted, and many came away enlightened.

*An autopsy makes you reconsider differences—
when he opened the body of a white man and a black man
he was changed...*

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

Finally, discoveries in the artistic realm were also revealed through the process of crafting the letter of agreement between Allen County *Common Threads* and Sojourn Theatre. Eventually, the agreement codified the understandings at which Rohd and MacDonell arrived after the arduous process of written and face-to-face communication. In addition to delineating details about payments, schedules, roles and responsibilities, the agreement also examined the notion of artistic responsibility and ownership. As its creator, Rohd would own the final product, but *Common Threads* retained rights to future uses of the script, royalty free, for educational purposes. Rohd would ultimately make all artistic decisions about the content of the piece. The mutual understanding and agreement to which these partners arrived is testimony to the trust that developed over the months of the project.

Artist and Dialogue Specialist Collaboration

Romney’s and Rohd’s project roles vis-à-vis one another were not always clear. In the beginning, Romney expressed her hope to be involved in the interviewing, and even in the script development. Rohd does not recall a conversation about that level of collaboration, and he believes they had a miscommunication on the issue of her role.

Also, there were points during the project when Romney questioned her role—why was a dialogue specialist needed when Rohd himself often facilitated dialogue about his work? For his part, Rohd expressed concern that Romney, coming from a non-arts background, might inadvertently neglect aesthetic issues when crafting dialogue questions. At the same time, each was playing a significant role in the community during the development phase. While Rohd conducted interviews for script development, Romney met with civic leaders and coached MacDonell through relationship-building on the core team and in the black community. But the collaboration between Rohd and Romney was not as obvious as the one between Romney and MacDonell or between MacDonell and Rohd, and was probably an underlying cause for the tensions that emerged over the show’s running time and the impact on the dialogue format. From MacDonell’s perspective, “Michael was challenged by the fact that someone other than himself would be developing and leading the dialogue...[but] As they became familiar with each other’s work, the trust between them grew.” Ultimately, the lesson is that clarity about roles requires continuous and careful attention and honest communication as problems emerge and unforeseen situations develop. An additional lesson is that collaboration necessitates that people work in time and space together. Due to budget and various schedule constraints, Rohd and Romney were not often in Allen County together.

Sustaining Arts-Based Civic Dialogue

This project also holds lessons about the issue of the institutional capacity of under-resourced cultural organizations to conduct and sustain the work of arts based civic dialogue. The capacity of CFA to manage the *Common Threads* activities was always in question. MacDonell stated: “I have learned that, from my experience, ... arts organizations with long-standing community development missions are the best organizations to do arts-based civic dialogue, but the paradox is...(they) seldom have the financial resources and the human capital to fully pursue this work.” In fact, according to Mills, CFA succeeded in managing the original *Common Threads* project because MacDonell had the vision and devoted herself as its volunteer project director, providing essential leadership, a tremendous amount of time, and even personal financial and in kind resources.

Absent the infusion of outside grant funds and the skills and tireless dedication of a volunteer project director, a project of this scope and complexity is going to be difficult for the struggling arts council to sustain. MacDonell, Mills and the *Common Threads* team addressed this issue as they searched for ways to sustain *Common Threads* as an affiliate of CFA, but not dependent on the Council indefinitely for human and financial resources. There was much discussion during the course of the project on where *Common Threads* would “live” after October 2002, when MacDonell, Gilbert and Eldridge would step away from the forefront. Although Mills believes that CFA now has greater access to more sectors of the community, the council may not have the human and financial resources to pursue future projects, let alone to administer *Common Threads* on an ongoing basis. As he now states, “...[*Common Threads*] grew in scope well past our ability as an organization to manage it...*Common Threads* continues, but largely outside the mission of the arts council.” At the same time, MacDonell reports that CFA is having money problems, and Mills is now functioning as a volunteer. She also mentions, “We have started conversations with Artspace Lima (a visual arts center) on an affiliation— either complete merger (with CFA) or something else. The reason is we cannot financially support two big arts agencies in a town with diminishing resources.” Talks are also underway with Allen County United Way about taking on the *Common Threads* project work.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Arts-based dialogue in Allen County, Ohio was clearly an experiment that took major effort from all parties involved. Martie MacDonell believes the on-going issues the project took on will take years to resolve. Her view is that the intent of this project was “to simply take a few more steps along a continuum of action toward a more democratic community.” She saw four major gains:

- Several thousand diverse citizens came together to think and talk about the issues of race and trust among leaders.
- The *Common Threads* dialogue process continues to be used in school and community settings.
- *Common Threads* action teams are at work to improve relationships among city and county elected officials and have linked with the Chamber of Commerce to propose a citizen’s long range community plan.
- The arts are perceived as a way to address community issues.

Seven thousand people from 15 of the 16 villages, cities, and townships in Allen County were represented in the *Common Threads* project. Following the October 2002 events, there was a shared feeling that Allen County was poised for forward motion on a variety of issues. The degree to which this would happen, according to core team members, would depend on establishing and maintaining key relationships across barriers (city/county; black/white), and people's willingness to work for greater understanding.

What follows are outcomes and impact for which there is demonstrated evidence:

City and county elected officials participated in the project and are now talking to one another. New civic leadership has emerged. Each of the Action Teams has a chair or co-chair who stepped up to the challenge. MacDonell reports: "The term 'civic dialogue' has entered into the community's vocabulary, now used by public officials, NAACP leaders, economic development professionals, arts groups and educators..." She also reports that the NAACP president recently sought dialogue in a meeting with a white sheriff over the alleged beating of a black man, and the two men have developed a productive relationship. Martin Stephens and his wife have taken on expanded community roles. He writes: "In addition to what I was already involved in, the County Commissioners invited me to be on the board of the Veterans Civic and Convention Center... Cleo is now involved with the Ms. Bronze Pageant (scholarship competition) and is co-chair of Diversity Council where she works." And Brenda Ellis, an African American woman who was a key participant in *Common Threads*, was one of three finalists for the prestigious Athena Award from the Lima Allen Chamber of Commerce for her work to help women reach their full potential through the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and other significant work with women in the community of color.



Members of the community participate in dialogue after seeing *Passing Glances*.
Photo Credit: David Massey/ The Lima News

Greater understanding of differences did occur, although this was difficult to achieve and hard to measure. MacDonell writes, "We assumed this project would be far easier than it was...Another assumption was that the majority of residents of Allen County would take an interest in civic discourse about compelling issues that affect us all. We now have experience with the fact that many turn away from confronting deep questions, content to have unexamined perspectives." Still, over 90 percent of project participants who completed a survey said that multiple perspectives that came forward in dialogues added to their understanding of each other and the issues. There is also evidence of attitude shifts among some community members as, through performances, dialogues and Action Team activities, residents began to view their problems and issues from multiple perspectives. Examples are the white farmer who said after a barnstorming performance at the farm bureau, "You got us right so I have to trust you got the others right also," and the rural white woman who said, "To be perfectly honest, my husband and I and our friends thought there was too much about blacks in the play. Where do these blacks come from? We have never heard of these dissatisfactions, and we worry that blacks in the audience will get wrong ideas...maybe we feel this way because it is the first time we have heard this...Maybe the next time it won't be so hard." Theresa Henry states, "For those involved...I think they are more aware of race issues and concerns now."

Citizens are taking action through the sixteen Action Teams created at the Common Threads conference. By May, 2003, nine teams were fleshed out and functioning:

Bringing Diverse Peoples Together chose to return to the Study Circles model to continue to examine race relations.

Collaboration of Faith Institutions for Social Change fosters collaboration among youth groups of various faith institutions.

Community Development is researching effective economic development in other cities like Lima.

Elected Officials Dialogue meets monthly for breakfast.

Housing and Homes has created modules on the theme of “shelter” that were displayed in the Lima Town Square.

Next-Generation Friendly Community wants to create a *Common Threads* Youth Conference.

Widen Diversity strives to extend cross-cultural understanding to Muslim and Jewish communities.

Youth Rehabilitation and Activities completed a pilot project to increase at-risk youth awareness of public services available to them.

As of May 2004, three action teams have demonstrated the most positive results for Allen County. In the fall 2003, The Housing and Homes Action Team completed the Shelter Project, which was a school-based initiative that partnered the Lima Schools, the Lima Area Women’s Crisis Center and other social service agencies to create 12 house modules expressing multiple perspectives on the concept of “shelter.” These art works were on exhibit in Lima’s Town Square and were auctioned off, with proceeds going to the participating social service agencies. A second action team, Elected Officials Dialogue, hosts monthly breakfast meetings for elected officials in Lima and Allen County to build relationships through informal conversation. This group recently celebrated its one-year anniversary. The most significant success is the Community Development Action Team, which has tackled economic development in Allen County, and recently completed a research phase and brought a community planner from the Ohio State University Extension Service on board to do planning and make recommendations. The Chamber of Commerce is interested in this work, and the Team is successfully solicited participation from both city and county officials. A summit meeting was held for all elected officials in June 2004, and the *Lima News* is giving the effort extensive coverage. Most importantly, government officials have agreed to *consider* implementing the recommendations growing out of this planning. As MacDonell put it, “*Common Threads* has finally been legitimized.”

In the short term, the greatest impact on race was among those directly involved in the project, but key issues for African Americans were not affected by the project. There are differing views on the project’s impact on race relations and in the black community. Some core team members perceived it to be minimal. According to Mills, “...I don’t think the issue of race was affected in any way, positive or negative. If anything, we suffered some from an ‘enough talk already’ kickback.” Romney concurs in part with this assessment, and she questions the depth of the involvement of African Americans. She clearly recalls that for blacks, the main issues were jobs and empowerment, which, in her view, were not sufficiently addressed during the project. Henry agrees with this assessment and says she thinks race relations are “about the same.”

On the other hand, Rohd asserts “I’ve never done a show that was so embraced by a non-dominant culture community, specifically the black community... remember some in the white community felt the show was way too much about black people and their problems.” MacDonell points to a small but positive development in interracial collaboration when she writes, “Our (*Common Threads*) database is so good that the president of the local chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha...has asked for a copy of the *Common Threads* ‘community of color’ list. She tells us it is better than the AKA list.” Stephens asserts, “Overall, I think there was a slight improvement, but only for those who were involved in or attended some of the performances. Current economic conditions continue to be a roadblock for improvement in race relations.”

I’m a young Black man who, you know, is positive, I come to work every day. I opened up my own business. I’m not out there shootin’ and killin’ and whatnot and people need to see that cuz it’s not fair when I go to Wal-Mart and you got these women who are lookin’ at me, or avoidin’ me and whatnot cuz I’m a young Black man with braids. When you see me out there and you see my braids—don’t be scared of me cuz I’m just as scared of you as you are of me, you know what I’m sayin’? I just think we’re misunderstood. And I just wish people could see on a broader scale, you know what I’m sayin’... the more positive side?

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

Arts and non-arts people gained an appreciation for using arts as a catalyst for dialogue and social change. One elected official said, “Theater gave us a way in where we didn’t have one before.” MacDonell reports surprise at the continuing “...power and resonance of *Passing Glances*. Almost every day I hear someone refer to a phrase or an insight in the work they are still thinking about...” Mike Huffman, Fine Arts Coordinator for Lima Schools, was inspired by the project to focus on issue-based arts in classrooms. In tribute to the power and effectiveness of the “poetic documentary” form, Huffman engaged Rohd and Sojourn Theatre Company to return to Lima in May 2004, for teacher training and school residencies.

Common Threads’ goal of building local artists’ capacity for civically engaged art proved more difficult to realize. It was disappointing that only one local actor participated in *Passing Glances*. Auditions were well-publicized and held for two nights, but no local actors showed up. Rohd believes this reflects some resentment at the outside artists within the local theater community. People felt excluded by the commission of an outside playwright and professional company. And, for some local university theater people the poetic documentary form was unfamiliar. MacDonell cites one conversation where a retired theater director found the work “sociologically interesting...but not theatre in the sense of the well-made play, so why call it theater?” These dynamics between mainstream, traditional forms of theatre and community-based and civically engaged work will be challenging for *Common Threads* and CFA if this work continues.

Citizens trained in civic dialogue facilitation are at the ready to lead future events. Scaffolding for civic dialogue in the future was built by this project. Forty-four Allen County citizens are now trained in dialogue facilitation from a variety of sectors including former



Common Threads Conference.
Photo Credit: Todd Campbell / The Lima News.

Study Circles facilitators, social service agencies, schools, universities, churches, African American service groups and the Allen County Leadership group. Trainees set up practice sessions and attended refresher training. Currently, several of these local facilitators are working with Action Teams or in schools on *Common Threads* related projects. Unfortunately, Lima's mayor's plans to revive the inter-racial Study Circles has not materialized due to lack of funding.

The artist and dialogue practitioner experienced growth and insights in their work. For Rohd and Sojourn, the project had a huge effect on company morale and company bonding. Rohd also cites the following impact on him and his company: "...learning and growing with our process and methodology; having the opportunity to explore this style of new work development; community engagement and production away from our home base, and over such a length of time—all this gave us a real gift- depth, collaboration with partners who treated us well, and who we respect... our work since is deeper, and builds on successes and lessons from Allen County."

Romney learned first-hand how powerful art can inspire and affect conversation and dialogue. Mills and the CFA were challenged to examine not only the institution's internal capacity for the work, but how the civic nature of *Common Threads* going forward was in alignment with the council's core mission. Those questions are still being pondered.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the size, scope and complexity of the Allen County *Common Threads* Theatre Project, the impact on Allen County is impressive. There were over 20 formal performance and/or dialogue events over 12 months, and numerous other small, informal gatherings, interviews and conversations. Thousands of people were affected directly, and many more through extensive media and public relations coverage. The project tackled some of the most intractable issues of our time: racial divisions, the decaying urban core, the challenges of farm life and the dearth of effective political leadership.

With such high ambitions, the record on outcomes achieved is understandably mixed. Certainly people are talking to each other across sectors, and there is some observable shift in attitudes on these topics. The formation of Action Teams is a practical step in moving from shifts in understanding to change. Art is now seen as a powerful way to draw people together around difficult issues. Many more people in Allen County have experienced some form of civic dialogue, and a cadre of citizens has been trained to facilitate these conversations.

However the challenges that endure will make it difficult to maintain forward motion on both the civic and artistic fronts. Racial tensions and rural/urban strife are still in evidence in Allen County, and although many people have deeper understandings of these dynamics, these are national problems with deeply rooted histories and murky futures. Allen County is to be applauded for taking them on; in the face of such difficult dilemmas, it is what citizens and artists in a democracy can and must do.

What can poetry offer us in times of challenge? Can it help us solve an argument? Can it help us see each other in a new light? Can it find a word that rhymes with annexation, and in so doing, remove the tension of an issue forever. Maybe...Maybe not. But can it give us a sense of things larger than ourselves? Larger than our own perspective? Can it make us consider why things are as they are?

Faith. Memory. History. We all swim in a sea of our own experience. Poetry like tonight's puts the seas of many into one ocean...Up here. What does poetry mean to us? Images. Movement. Music. Words...the words of a white farmer performed by a black man... the story of a black woman told by a white man. Poetry is permission to let daily life and identity have surprising meaning. To change... Even water...

—Excerpt from *Passing Glances*

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