

Michelle Barnes, Co-founder and CEO Community Artists' Collective, interview Dec. 15, 2016
Rice University Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL)

I was born in 1958 to a very stable, well-educated parent family. It's just my brother and myself, and I was born in Austin, Texas, but moved with my family, when I was four, in the 50s as my father accepted his first professional position at Family Service. I've attended public schools in Houston from Blackshear to William E. Miller, Jack Yates, and the University of Houston and graduated from the University of Houston in 1970 and decided to make a commitment to a post-graduate degree at Prairie View in 2005. I'm an artist educator. I taught in public and private schools for about 20 years, and since 1985 have been co-developing and co-creating the Community Artist Collective to fill some voids that I saw in the community generally, especially as it pertains to underserved communities in the inner city.

I would say that I realized I was a creative being and enjoyed making things with my family, learning to sew from my mother, cook from my father, working on projects together at home, so that creative impulse and practice was there but undervalued. I didn't see it as a profession until I got to college, actually, and was taking some art classes as an elective at that point. University of Houston was new as a state school and was experimenting with developing its curriculum, and it afforded me the opportunity to navigate through the developing art department and realize that I really loved the creative process, understood some techniques and concepts conceptually that I had been applying since childhood. So, against the advice and expressed better judgment of my mother especially, I did make a commitment to a professional career, but I did take her advice and focus on education so that I could eat, as she said.

My experience in college was probably different than my peers. I wanted to go to a school that was affordable, though I had a scholarship to an eastern seaboard school, full ride. It just didn't make sense to go to a different environment, no network, when I already knew who I wanted to marry. I knew what I wanted to explore. I just wanted to go to college because that's what was expected of me from my family. So, I had a feeling that I was going to teach something. I didn't know what I was going to teach. I've known that I was teacher since I was in second grade and performed as a teacher in the role, in the play. That's when I announced that I was going to be a teacher. What am I going to teach? I don't know. It's kind of like a lot of students in business school who are going to be in business, but they don't know what kind of product or what kind of service they're going to offer, or a student in law school doesn't know what kind of law.

So, I was just kind of finding my way as colleges provide an opportunity for students to do, and art was an elective at that time, and I took a design class. So, I got information that I'd never had before about color, about positioning shapes, lines, objects within a space. So, I got information that matched what I was doing since I was child with the reality and theory of what makes it work on a surface, and then I took sculpture from Hannah Stuart, learned how to weld. I just fell in love with welding. I took watercolor from Henry Lanot. I took ceramics from Hughey Beckham. Each step was just so important and so impactful. I had art history from Peter Gunther, and it just opened up the whole world. Art history - I don't even remember what grade I made. It doesn't matter. It was just a great experience, and so I began to value what I was interested in and wanted to know more and then decided, with the encouragement of my mother, that I would teach art. So, fortunately, the University of Houston was just getting started, essentially, and provided this opportunity for me to explore. Many of my classmates, at Sharon

Capreva included, have gone on to be world renowned artists. I started late, but I realized from other experiences that I could provide a practical function doing other things that were art related. So, I'm still working on being a professional artist. My vision of myself was to make one-of-a-kind or few-of-a-kind garments, because I knew how to sew, I understood color better, and I'm still working on that. But in the meantime, I'm helping to fill some other gaps and providing opportunities for other artists, because I understand what is necessary.

I am rooted and invested in Houston. Not only because it's my home, the place that I've lived for over 50 years, but because, in spite of the fact that I have access to any place in the world, I'm inspired to do my work here and connect the work globally. It's only inspiration that keeps me here. Of course, there are experiences that I share with a lot of people here that are political, social, economic, cultural. I think that, in spite of the fact that it's the age of mobility and technology, that there is something important about being rooted and committed to a place.

For me, it's very important to be rooted in a place because of what I remember and reflect on that I experienced coming of age in this city in the 50s and 60s. So I have an image of pre-integration and post, and what we had that I've knitted together in my mind, pieced together before integration, during segregation, was a whole, livable community that was forsaken after integration, and I think that I'm doing what I can to foster the reestablishment of the livable, cultural community that was insular, that was supportive, that was the platform for thousands of African-American young people who were coming to age in their time after that, who long for the rootedness that there needs to be. So, I am planted in deep fertile soil and want to nurture, compost, make nutrients for the trees that are planted for the future in this place.

I have been somewhat connected, I hesitate to say, to Rice University since I was in high school. I remember applying for admission, which was denied. I'm not really sure why, but I have my suspicions. So, CERCL has created the opportunity to connect with Rice in a very positive way personally. I have a daughter who graduated in the PhD program from Rice, but, beyond that, CERCL and the Collective have collaborated beyond our decision to deposit our archive. We've worked on quilt projects together over probably, a 12-year period, so I was introduced to CERCL staff, Maya Reine and Andrea Matthews, early 2000s, when it seemed that our mutual interest in quilt making as a focus was the way to get to know each other. So that was our starting point, and we're looking forward to doing a lot more together, and we're exploring the possibilities in more in-depth ways now.

I think that Rice students and the general population, who's interested in organized efforts to value culture through the arts and other aspects of our cultural community, will find a treasure-trove in our archive. We have transferred almost 30 years of materials in picture, in letters, in articles, other papers that we think will be very interesting to researchers as they're coming to understand how the cultural community of Houston has evolved, and that the African-American cultural community has been integrally involved in the development of arts and culture, the arts and culture environment of Houston.

I hope that the legacy of the Collective that I represent as a co-founder of the organization is one of surmounting challenges, providing authentic information, reliable information, even though it's from a personal perspective. I hope that we'll contribute to the understanding that brings

people together in a common-ground process. I hope people will understand that we love ourselves, we value ourselves, and we offer our experiences when we come to any table in a very loving and helpful way. We value the kinds of things that don't show up on the ledger sheet, and in a capitalistic society and economy, that's challenging to quantify the intangible, the feelings, hopes and dreams that are expressed in our case because we focus on visual art that focuses on the visual arts. We collaborate with lots of different entities in our cultural community to present a united front, collaborating with performing as well as other visual arts entities, to present and make the best statements possible of our time. I think that the statement is particularly important to be made that we love ourselves because there is question about that. The media casts a different kind of image before the general public, one that we need to dispel or remind ourselves that there's more to us than what is portrayed in that manner. What I saw that propelled the development of the Community Artist Collective was that the children in the urban environment that I encountered as a volunteer at Shape Community Center during the summers was different from the environment that I was teaching in during the year. I worked in suburban schools. That's where I was placed by HISD. That's where I chose to work ten years later, when I decided to work at the Kincaid School. I wanted to make sure that children in the neighborhoods that I had grown up in had the benefit of my experiences and my enthusiasm for the arts, my knowledge about the arts. So, it was just as simple as that, wanting to share what I knew and loved about the arts with the people that I love. What the arts bring to the individual is an assurance of who they are and a value for they think and feel as a human being. It doesn't rely quite as heavily on the mental, as does medicine or technology or the intellectual, but yet the arts are infused with those aspects. The emphasis is more on the spirit, the spiritual, the emotional, the things that remind us how human we are.

I think that what we've lost since the late 50s, early 60s is the economic, political, as well as cultural priorities that sustain communities, generally. So without the businesses that young people can go to and be served by with their families or alone, without the nurturing of the teachers in the schools that were in walking or biking distance from where the children lived and the parents worked, without those entities in place, places to play, the places to gather without fear, and to exchange in transactions, whether they're verbal or monetary, in safety – there was diversity in that that we learned about. A value for the differences, because we shared a common background, existence. As Houston has grown, we've lost sight of that process and how important it is, and layered onto that is Houston's drive by the developers, I think, and the politicians that are connected to them, to keep things changing, to keep things new, and keeps things fresher, not valuing the essence of what is important in those communities, the stability – and at the same time the people who are in communities don't get to contribute in this prevailing construct of development in the development. They're just pushed aside. So, if our communities historically all over the city, the African-American communities, were as stable as Sunnyside, were as stable as maybe Acres Homes, or historic Independence Heights, and had the infusion of that historic, economic piece, the communities would be much more vibrant, and Third Ward wouldn't be in the peril that it's in. There are vague, inconsistent glimpses, and I'm really looking for evidence that our communities are being revived.

One of the most recent incidents involved a focused attention on making financial deposits at Unity Bank. My father helped to, well, he invested in that bank many years ago, along with some of his friends. I still bank at Unity Bank, and I'm glad to see that other people are

increasing the viability of the bank. The only black-owned bank in the state. So, now, Unity Bank will have to make a commitment to make those resources available. They can't just hold on to them. They've got to be willing to take a risk, a measured risk, but a risk none-the-less on people who come to them and apply for a loan for a business or to improve their home or to build a home, and it can't be such an arduous task that it's a turn-off to young families who want to participate in the redevelopment of our historic neighborhoods.

The Community Artist Collective has four primary programs. There's education, which is our core value. The organization was founded, after all, by two trained arts educators, Dr. Sarah Troddy and myself. Exhibition, because as an arts entity that's what the general public expects an arts organization to offer. Community development that includes public art, publications, cultural historic preservation, and tourism sustainability and entrepreneurship. Now, of those four programs, which I think are very important and are part of our infrastructure in a development sense, education is foundational. I think we have made the most impact through education because it's the best way of assuring that there will be artists and audiences for future generations, people who appreciate what they're viewing and understand how the design of a work of art manifests itself visually, as well, in terms of performing. So, music has a design component. Acting, dance, we're all connected because, not only from the design aspect, but from the source, the impulse. Art is, after all, autobiographical, and a lot of people don't understand that, so when I mentioned being authentic, it means being true. The artwork should truly reflect the artist, and we can count on – that's why the arts are so important – we can count on the manifestation of that artist's self in the artform. Art is very much a legitimate source of information. There is visual literacy. There are ways that the human being synthesizes life's experiences that roll out as blues, as gospel, as quilting, as cooking gumbo, or frying that chicken. We've got all the elements. We've just got to value the artist's decision, the creative person's decisions as to how that is presented. We have to trust that they are sincere about what they are doing and sharing. But it's so hard to explain how important this opportunity is to feel confident about sharing in these different ways when the policy makers are expecting it to be in a white paper or referencing iconoclastic information that's somebody else's stuff. So, if we don't value the way we communicate with each other historically, this oral stuff that somebody else has translated, and, hopefully, it's translated accurately, transcribed accurately, a lot is lost of what we value and how we have made it over on the spectrum, just a blip, everybody's work is important, okay? And historians, researchers from our community who've got various experiences all over the globe, will put things together the way that they will put things together, but we want to make sure that, in no uncertain terms, we have been doing what we can to foster the creative process, that creative impulse, without making any judgments about it. That's why we have focused on emerging artists, artists who have been creating a long time but maybe have not had a platform to show and share their work, so our exhibitions support that. If people want to know more about the creative process, our education program definitely supports that, children, adults, family groups, social groups, at any point, because learning is life long, and we want to manifest that, model that.

Our community development programs hopefully make the arts even more accessible, so that, for people who haven't found their way to our location or our collaborator's venue, they can see, they can experience the arts, just in their daily coming and going, through events and festivals and public art, and what they get their hands on in terms of a poster or some other publication,

monograph or something. And then entrepreneurship because artists are business people. They are producers, and we want artists to be even better at their business. So I hope people will recognize, I hope that our efforts are broad enough, not so boxed-in as categorically art that may not match people's perceptions but are practical in their lives. We provide practical experiences for people, especially those who have not been engaged in the arts before. Our primary reference point, unfortunately because we don't know very much about African culture, we don't know enough about African culture, but we're learning, but in Western culture the arts have an elitist, ancillary, non-essential kind of focus until an artist who's been producing for a lifetime and died, the work just becomes, over time, immanently more valuable. Well, that's kind of a discouraging picture. I think the arts are more essential, as I said before, the arts, that creative impulse helps us, reminds us, how human we are. So the arts are based on feelings as well as experiences, and someone's experiences may not be shared broadly until they're discussed or presented, put on the table some kind of way. So, when someone looks at artwork, they are engaging indirectly with the artist producer. They're in dialogue, and the most ideal dialogue is more directly with the artist, and that's why I love working with emerging artists, living artists, so that they can be engaged in the dialogue, so that they dispel the notion that artists are happiest just squirreled away in a studio breathing linseed oil or clay dust, and they're not really engaged in the community that they represent even or that they want to extend to.

The creative impulse is a natural impulse that's squashed in our society. In the public schools that I'm focused on personally and professionally, the children generally do not have opportunities to express themselves constructively during the curricular day. They're not learning about poetry. They're not learning to sing, to play an instrument, to know about color theory, or to pick up a paintbrush, and certainly, with rare exception, are they encouraged to make a mess with clay. So, we've got a lot of work to do, big voids to fill, and it cannot be said that we haven't done our part in our time, so, future generations of young people, older people who'd like to be involved in this work, there's plenty of room, more to do.

I think that the value system that emphasizes the practicality of art was instilled in me by my mother. The more exploratory aspect of my interest in art came from my father. My mother emphasized that I might not be successful as a professional artist because the arts were not viewed as essential, and that point has been reiterated by other people over time in our community. But art is in everything, the shoes that we wear, the forks that we use, picture framing, architecture, the way we set our table, the way we decorate our homes, the way we put our wardrobes together, everything is art related, but people don't understand that that's what it is. They just think nah. So that a bowl, a pottery bowl, can serve a function, the table is built to serve a function, but it can be beautifully designed. It doesn't have to be rough cut. It doesn't have to be polished. It doesn't have to be painted, unless the artist prioritizes those aspects. It's a very interesting concept. You know, the crafts and "fine art" are at odds with each other in this society. The crafts embellish functional objects or create functional objects. Fine art has been used to decorate and embellish in other ways. Crafts are relegated to primitive people. Fine arts, including painting, photography, are put in association with upper class, so I'm trying to fuse those, blur those distinctions, find the common ground. It's all rooted in love of people. You want people to eat better, live better, enjoy life, share experiences? There's an art to that.

One of the biggest challenges that I have at this point, after 30 years of co-creating the Community Artist Collective, is conveying how essential the administrative pieces are. Funders want to support short-term projects. As a co-founder of the Collective, I'm interested in the sustainability of the Collective. I want to be able to hire people to do the work. We have a very small budget. I don't know enough about building an organization, building a business, to figure out – and evidently, neither does our board at this point – to figure out how to sustain our organization, how to grow our organization so that it can be an economic engine that will serve our community in practical ways. We want to be able to hire people, to coordinate and otherwise facilitate our programs. We have offered programs of excellence from the very beginning. Generally, not by ourselves but in collaboration with other entities, and frankly, that's how we've gotten as far as far as we have for as long as we have, and we're going to continue. We were talking about collaborations before it was a buzzword, but raising money is still a rather foreign concept to our community, our cultural community, at this point.

Valuing the work of the African-American community, to the extent that we're better funded, is a major challenge, and I hope it'll be resolved in my lifetime. I don't know what the – whether the terms that educators are encountering now sound like teacher as facilitator, teacher as coach, rather than an authoritarian figure bestowing wisdom. I think that educators, especially in the arts, well maybe in other fields too, must recognize what the students know innately but may be afraid to share – support them in sharing, support them in recognizing and valuing what they know and an interest in knowing more, and connecting what they know to other things and interests. I think that educators sometimes box themselves in to a subject without seeing any application beyond the classroom. Knowledge has to be good. That's the practical side again. Knowledge has to be applicable and good for some thing which the teacher may not know but has to have a healthy enough ego to understand. Teachers are preparing the students, as teachers in my generation did before me for my generation, prepare our students for a future that we can only imagine, if that.

We don't really know what the children are going to encounter, but they must be prepared by being confident that they can learn, that they can do, they can perform, they can create, they can navigate, and they can live, and it doesn't have to be a squalid existence. I'm annoyed by the future that I see. I was listening to a program on the radio on the way over here, and, as I was parked, it just kept rolling. That had to do with these proposed vouchers. We want the best education for the children possible. One of the commentators reminded us that it's a civil right, and I immediately thought it's a civic responsibility. It goes back to the infrastructure again. We have got to support all the children getting the best education possible, not only the rich children, who have many options to go to the best schools mostly because they're right in their own neighborhoods, but poor children need to be supported. Poor families need to be supported in the decision of making the best education possible for their children in spite of lack of transportation, lack of uniforms, lack of money, lack, lack, lack. In spite of all of that. I'm very concerned that the responsibility isn't taken more seriously by the general public. The children are still our future.