

Women Creating Public Art and Community, 2000–2014

Anne Mulvey · Irene M. Egan

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Abstract This narrative describes a series of 15 short-term public art projects that were part of a program for women and girls in Lowell, Massachusetts, a mid-size city in the United States. The projects were designed to give public space to women’s stories and perspectives by exhibiting their creative art in response to suggested themes. A few thousand women and girls representing diverse age and cultural groups created art based on their lived experiences. The organizers of the program met people in comfortable settings, tailored their art-making approaches to particular groups, and used inclusive processes in developing and executing the program. Program successes and challenges were related to the organizational structure of the art projects, the annual themes and art media, the extent of outreach and support, the process of creation, and the impact of art exhibits. Using community psychology and feminist frameworks, authors reflect on the projects and their relevance across contexts, highlight key organizing strategies, and identify ways the project represents community psychology in action.

Keywords Public art · Community psychology · Feminism · Women

Introduction

Community psychology and feminist scholars acknowledge the power of the arts for individual and collective change. Both disciplines recognize that the arts can play a

unique role in challenging dominant cultural narratives, supporting empowerment, and fostering inclusive and socially just communities. Community psychologists Thomas and Rappaport have argued that the arts can be used to support “identity development and personal and social change” (1996, p. 17). Freedman, a feminist, has argued that “the creation of new forms of art that reflect women’s lives and imaginations has become critical to feminist politics” (2002, p. 358). Scholars from these fields describe the arts as a resource for individual and collective story-telling, healing from trauma, and for fostering inter-group dialogue on contested social issues (Ensler 2001; Ensler 2014; Freedman 2002; Mulvey 2005; Rudkin 2003; Thomas and Mulvey 2008).

Since the field began, community psychologists have recognized tensions between theory and practice and between professional careers and social action (Dohrenwend 1974; Mulvey 1988; Mulvey et al. 2003; Rieff 1975). Though discourse has evolved, conundrums associated with the power and privilege of community psychologists relative to disenfranchised communities have presented ongoing challenges (Dohrenwend 1974; Lykes and Moane 2009; Mulvey et al. 2000; Rieff 1975). Community psychologists have described the difficulties of collaborating across groups in culturally respectful and affirmative ways, calling for attention to the process as well as outcomes (Kelly 1979; Shpungin et al. 2012).

This narrative describes the origin and evolution of a series of 15 short-term public art projects created by women and girls in Lowell, Massachusetts. The projects were part of Lowell Women’s Week (LWW), a program held annually since 1996 in March, Women’s History Month. LWW “celebrates women—from the Yankee mill girls who worked 14 h days in the Lowell mills to the enterprising women of today who guide our city forward to

A. Mulvey (✉)
Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Lowell,
113 Wilder Street, Ste 300, Lowell, MA 01854-3059, USA
e-mail: anne_mulvey@uml.edu

I. M. Egan
Circle Home, Inc., Lowell, MA, USA

the young women who represent a future bright with promise and vision” (LWW Program 1996). Each year LWW has offered a mix of activities including cultural events, educational lectures, skill building workshops, and resource fairs. Annual public art projects have been part of the larger LWW initiative since the first project in 2000.

The authors are members of the LWW Planning Committee who have participated in organizing the public art projects since they began. We wrote this paper for three reasons: (1) to document the history of the LWW Public Art Project, (2) to consider how the public art project has embodied feminist and community psychology principles, and (3) to share lessons that may be useful to others developing community action projects. Although few of the LWW public art project participants were familiar with formal theories of community psychology, this project may be considered “community psychology in action,” exemplifying the goals, roles and change strategies of the field.

To develop this paper, we reviewed LWW committee minutes and reports, news releases, written calls for art, guidelines, newspaper coverage, photos of artwork, examples of artwork, exhibit programs, lists of participating groups, and written viewer responses to the artwork. Most of the materials used to develop this paper are housed in the Lowell Women’s Week Archives at the Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell (UML). We also drew upon our own observations and experiences as organizers and as participants.

The City of Lowell: An Ideal Context for Women’s Public Art

Incorporated in 1826, Lowell is a city of about 105,000 people. Because of its history and current cultural and political agendas, the city provides a setting particularly conducive for women’s public art. Known as “Spindle City,” Lowell was the first planned industrial city in the U.S. with large textile mills powered by water (Eno 1976; Weible 1991). The city’s motto, “Art is the handmaid of human good,” expresses an early ideal of providing a cultural life for the young Yankee women who came to Lowell to work in the mills (Eno 1976).

Lowell has been an immigrant-receiving city since its inception, with successive waves of immigrants and refugees arriving from around the world. In the mid-to late 1800s, many people came to Lowell from Ireland and Greece (Eno 1976). In the 1970s and 1980s, refugees and immigrants from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia settled in Lowell (Pho and Mulvey 2003). More recently, groups from Africa, the Caribbean, and South America have arrived in Lowell.

In addition to cultural diversity, strengths of the city include a tradition of partnerships among federal, state, and

local government agencies and other organizations (Bray 2004; Pho and Mulvey 2003). Lowell has reinvented itself several times. In 1978, for example, the Lowell National Historical Park (LNHP), the first urban park in the U.S. national park system, was established to preserve the city’s history and interpret women’s, ethnic, and labor history (Mulvey 2002; Pho and Mulvey 2003; Weible 1991). In recent years, Lowell has become noted for its affordable studio and living space and a growing arts community (Bray 2004).

Because female millworkers were so important to the textile industry in early Lowell, the city’s educational and cultural organizations have focused on preserving and interpreting the lives of women from that period. Some of these women are positively represented in public space. One example is “Homage to Women,” a statue of female millworkers in a circle holding hands, that stands in front of the LNHP visitor center. Nearby, Lucy Larcom Park is named for a millworker who was an activist and writer. “Woven tapestry” was the metaphor used in special issues of this journal to represent commonalities of feminism and community psychology (Bond et al. 2000a, b). They were described as “resources or raw materials of different yet compatible textures [creating] a more enriched, more complex, and sturdier fabric than either alone” (Bond et al. 2000c, p. 587). We believe that woven tapestry is also an apt metaphor for the LWW public art projects and the city of Lowell, past and present.

The Structure and Evolution of Lowell Women’s Week

Origin, Purpose, and Organization

In 1996, LWW started as an informal city-wide collaborative after some years of related programming at the LNHP, UML, and in the greater Lowell community. The common ground for the program was a focus on women’s lives and cultures. The organizers shared a desire to offer culturally inclusive educational and creative opportunities, to encourage civic engagement, and to provide cultural products and public discourse by, for, and about women and girls. The organizers volunteered their time and created an open, informal group that welcomed other volunteers.

LWW has become more structured over time. Originally, one planning committee oversaw all activities collectively. The planning committee is now organized into smaller committees to work on special events, including public art. These smaller groups seek additional volunteers who have project-specific skills and interests. As with the planning committee, participation on the smaller committees has been voluntary. Although not required, most members of the smaller committees have served on the

larger committee. Most have been women in professional jobs in organizations focused on women's education and well-being.

Organizing Events

LWW events have been the result of collaboration between committee members and representatives from other organizations. LWW members have usually worked with representatives from other groups to create events specifically for the annual program. LWW has included some events organized by groups that would have happened anyway. LWW has also offered its own freestanding events with members of its committees doing most of the work. The LWW public art project is one of the freestanding programs.

Lowell Women's Week: Small-Scale Alternative Setting

Literature investigating small-scale women's organizations and alternative settings has documented that characteristics likely to facilitate community building and social change include small size, shared goals, relative equality among members, informal settings, and a precipitating problem (Acker 1995; Bond and Mulvey 2000; Ferree and Martin 1995; Reinharz 1984; Riger 2000). Reinharz (1984, p. 19) used the term "competent community builders" for women who successfully initiated collective change. Women like this work outside formal systems of power, define "political" and "empowerment" in alternative ways that incorporate mutuality and community, and create settings that value qualities associated with women's roles and the domestic sphere. The term "public homeplace" has been used for settings led by women that incorporate qualities stereotypically associated with the home including belonging, safety, interdependence, and emotional support (Belenky et al. 1997). Small-scale women's organizations are often informal and exist on the borders of public and private space.

The goals, size, informality, and relatively egalitarian structure of LWW are characteristic of successful small-scale women's organizations. For 20 years, LWW has operated with an open voluntary structure offering programs to increase women's skills, creativity, and interconnection. Many programs have specifically addressed problems that women and girls face including poverty, violence, relative invisibility, and social inequalities among groups. Networking and collaboration have been critical to LWW's success. The organization has not been political in the usual sense but in its concern for mentoring and empowering women and girls. A challenging goal has been to include members of all groups in Lowell. Some organizers thought that public art might engage more

community members, especially members of disenfranchised groups.

The Lowell Women's Week Public Art Project

Goals, Organizing, Themes, Outreach, and Participation

Goals

The Public Art Project has operated within the context of LWW. The project purpose was to further two interconnected LWW goals: (1) provide opportunities for women and girls from diverse cultures and life circumstances to express themselves and be formally recognized in supportive public contexts, and (2) encourage other community members to see and value the lives, cultures, and achievements of women and girls. Given these goals, our definition of art was intentionally broad. An underlying assumption was that creativity and imagination were valuable resources that all community members have. We believed that the arts were integrative and had the potential to incorporate physical, intellectual, and emotional experience. We also thought that art-making would be an embodied method for sharing stories.

Organizing

Each year women, most of whom were on the LWW planning committee, volunteered to be on the public art committee. One or two women volunteered to serve as the chair or co-chairs. Each project relied largely on the interests, energy, and resources of public art committee members who designed the project and chose the theme and medium. Committee members wrote the guidelines and invitations, conducted multiple forms of outreach, obtained resources, led art-making workshops, trained group leaders, handled publicity, and reported progress to the larger planning committee. Public art committee members also organized the exhibits and receptions. After the exhibit, most of the artwork was deposited in the LWW Archives at the UML Center for Lowell History. There were exceptions. A few participants have arranged to have their work returned and LWW has donated artwork (lap quilts) to non-profit organizations. Due to their size, the 2013 creations were returned to the groups who made them.

Public Art Themes

The public art themes have been simple and accessible enough to attract participants of diverse age, cultural, and linguistic groups, general enough to elicit varied responses,

Table 1 Lowell women's week (LWW) public art and program themes, art media, and locations

| Year | Public art themes | Program themes | Art media | Display locations |
|------|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| 2000 | 2000 Wishes of women... | Women in the new millennium: looking back, moving forward | Paper, paints, markers, crayons, collage | Streetscape downtown |
| 2001 | Because of her... | Every woman makes a difference: together we change the world | Paper, paints, markers, crayons, collage | Streetscape downtown |
| 2002 | Stepping into an uncertain world | Women across cultures: surviving and thriving in an uncertain world | Women's shoes, boots, boxes, paints, markers, collage | National park gallery |
| 2003 | Food: bake it 'til it's done | Nourishing our spirit: inspiring our dreams | Aprons, transfer photos, paper, paints, markers, collage | Streetscape downtown |
| 2004 | With these hands | Creating a just world: Voices, choices and connections | Gloves, paper, paints, markers, collage | Streetscape downtown, art store, LWW breakfast |
| 2005 | We all wear many hats | Hats off to a decade of promoting women's safety, prosperity and spirit | Hats, photos, paper, paints, markers, collage | Streetscape downtown, cultural center, university, LWW breakfast |
| 2006 | Power tools | Our common wealth: changing the state of women's power | Tools, photos, bowls, paper, paints, markers, collage | Streetscape downtown, LWW breakfast |
| 2007 | "Lifting as we climb" | Women of the world: "Lifting as we climb" | Ceramic tiles, paper, paints, markers, collage | Streetscape downtown, cultural center, LWW breakfast |
| 2008 | Roots of our strength | Women in charge: Strengthening our lives, communities, world | Unfinished quilt squares, thread, paper "quilts," paints, markers | Streetscape downtown, art museum, quilt shows |
| 2009 | Tomorrow's leaders | Women leading change in our hearts, homes and world | Unfinished quilt squares, thread, paper, paints, markers | Streetscape downtown, art museum, LWW breakfast |
| 2010 | Storytellers | Women's stories: crystallizing our role in history and our world | Unfinished quilt squares, thread, paper, paints, markers | Streetscape downtown, LWW breakfast |
| 2011 | A tapestry of women's strengths | Women's strengths: achievement, power and vision | Rolls of narrow paper strips woven through construction fencing, paints, markers, collage | Art gallery and studios, LWW breakfast |
| 2012 | All our voices | All our voices | Small books made of recycled bags, paints, markers, collage | Public library, LWW breakfast |
| 2013 | Working together, creating change | Working together, creating change | Life-sized plywood in shapes of women, paints, markers, collage | City hall lobby, Take back the night march, LWW breakfast |
| 2014 | Recipes for wellness | Redefining wellness: ourselves, communities, world | Cotton cloth, paper, paints, markers, collage | Streetscape downtown, national park, art gallery, LWW breakfast |

and focused enough to present a relevant message in publicity and presentation. Table 1 summarizes the LWW public art and program themes from 2000 to 2014. Several program themes referred to the home using words associated with domestic roles (baking, comfort food). Others celebrated women's individual and collective power (Every Woman Makes a Difference: Together We Change the World). The program themes highlighted the interdependence of communities, cultures, and generations, and affirmed women's strengths as change agents and caregivers.

Variety of Media, Participants, and Outreach Strategies

All aspects of the public art projects were described in an intentionally accessible manner to avoid the “but I'm not an artist” internalized strictures that many women and girls experience. Writing, fabric art, ceramics, painting, and other media were explored. Professional artists participated with women and girls who had no formal artistic experience.

When we, the authors, led workshops with community groups, we began by describing and showing a variety of approaches to the theme with simple examples and suggestions of how to get started. We described the project as being “fun,” “playing with materials,” having “freedom to create,” and offering opportunities to “participate with other women and girls” and to “see your work in a public display.” Although we made it clear that it was each person's choice whether to have her work in the exhibit, most chose to do so. For safety reasons, we suggested that, if a person wanted to put her name on the artwork, she only use her first name. Most chose to be publicly anonymous.

We and other organizers engaged our own networks and communities and reached out to others. The space, materials, and other resources that were shared made the projects possible. We relied on interconnected networks, used recycled materials, and tapped into previously invisible or undervalued strengths of community members. These strategies that embody ecological principles were low-cost, high benefit ways to strengthen communities (Dalton et al. 2007; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

Collective Art-Making and Public Art in Multiple Contexts

Here we describe four different annual public art projects and the contexts in which they occurred. We chose them from the projects with which we had extensive involvement. Each project has distinctive characteristics. Two were inspired by public events (2000, 2002), one was grounded in the work of a community-focused artist (2012), and the last was the only one that required collective art-making (2013).

2000: Public Art to Celebrate the Millennium

Context and Theme

The LWW planning committee decided to do the first public art project to celebrate the Millennium and attract women and girls who had not previously participated in LWW, particularly members of underrepresented groups. The committee chose 2,000 Wishes of Women as the theme. A professional artist on the planning committee who had a commitment to community arts volunteered to curate the project. Project guidelines invited women and girls to “‘make a wish’ in visual form for themselves, their communities, the country, or the world” (Wishes of Women Public Art Guidelines 2000). Participants could express their wishes in words, images, or both on any lightweight material. Most chose to use simple letter-sized paper. The wishes would create a “Streetscape,” a term that we adopted for exhibits in the windows of downtown stores. See Table 1 for the media used in the public art projects and exhibit locations.

Outreach and Publicity

The professional artist held free workshops where women created wishes using materials that we provided. The organizers, other planning committee members, and participants from the larger community made art together, shared stories, and got to know each other. To make the project more accessible and increase participation of members of diverse groups, public art committee members replicated these workshops with other groups. One of the authors conducted workshops in graduate and undergraduate classes. Graduate students then facilitated workshops with community groups as part of their coursework. Students conducted 13 workshops that were held at a homeless shelter, a residential substance-abuse treatment facility, a day care center in a low income minority neighborhood, public schools, and with community-based youth groups.

Planning committee members posted fliers around the city and publicized the project through their networks and in their workplaces. The local newspaper published an article about the project that invited the public to make wishes (Tuttle 2000). A color photograph of a wish drew attention to the article and public art project.

The Art and the Exhibit

Committee members collected about 2,000 wishes of women over a few weeks. The wishes were displayed in the windows of more than 10 downtown locations: a large bookstore, the national park, a restaurant, an artist gallery and studios, and at least three stores owned by women. Passersby on downtown city streets were drawn to the

wishes because they were colorful, short, easy to read, and included an intriguing variety of topics. Storeowners requested that the display be extended by several weeks. Some of the leaders of groups who participated reported that women and girls who created the wishes enjoyed seeing their work given prominence in public space.

The wishes had great variety: “I wish my sister hadn’t died,” “I wish someone else would change the toilet paper,” and “I wish for children of unwed mothers to have a wonderful LOVING LIFE!!!” Many wishes combined images, decoration, and text. “I wish I had more time” was next to a big clock,” “I wish women become self-sufficient in 2000” was with a picture of a woman holding two children, “I wish I were clean and sober” was written on lavender paper with stars and a purple and yellow border,” and “I wish the Catholic Church would wake up and ORDAIN WOMEN” was above two cherubs perched on a halo. “Home Sweet Home” was written in fancy letters above a detailed colored drawing of a lovely house and yard. Underneath, the artist wrote, “I wish I had a home. It’s not fun to be homeless.”

Many wishes were adorned with flowers, feathers, butterflies, hearts, stick figures, cats, and dogs. A staff member at the UML Center for Lowell History sorted the wishes into 30 categories. Frequently repeated themes included family, love/relationships, nature, peace and poverty/hunger/homelessness. Smaller categories included different ethnic languages, fear/safety, religion/faith, and sobriety.

Indices of Success

We considered the project a success because of the large number of women and girls who created art and of community members who viewed the display. The concept of making a wish was easy to understand and had meaning for all ages and cultures. It was simple to do, used accessible materials, and could be done quickly by individuals or as part of a group effort. It included the excitement of trying to reach the 2,000 goal together.

Taken together, the wishes created a collage of women’s lives and concerns and provided a positive picture of the diversity of women and girls in the city. Members of groups who were unfamiliar with each other shared their creations in a public setting and made visible the commonalities and differences in their lives. As community psychologists and feminists have recognized, the arts can be used to welcome and affirm the voices of those left out of public discourse (Enslar 2001; Mulvey 2005; Thomas and Rappaport 1996; Washington and Moxley 2008). Based on the enthusiastic community response to the public art project and the satisfaction committee members experienced organizing it, the planning committee decided to organize a second project and, ultimately, public art projects became an annual part of LWW.

2002: Public Art Responds to Trauma

Context and Theme

The first public art project celebrated a positively anticipated worldwide event, the Millennium. The 2002 project was also a response to a large public event, one that was unexpected and traumatic. In 2001, the World Trade Center towers in New York City were destroyed. As the planning committee brainstormed the theme for the next year, a committee member circulated a photograph by Susan Watts—a woman’s shoe in the midst of rubble—that caught our attention. The committee chose *Stepping into an Uncertain World* as the theme to “honor those women who ran and in memory of those who were unable to run” (*Stepping into an Uncertain World Public Art Guidelines* 2002).

Outreach and Publicity

Women’s shoes were the material base suggested for the project. Through informal networking, over 500 pairs of used women’s shoes, slippers, and boots were donated to be used by project participants. The professional artist who coordinated the exhibit held free public art workshops in her studio. Graduate students in one of the authors’ classes conducted workshops for women living in a homeless shelter, women in recovery from addictions and abuse, and youth groups.

The organizers solicited creative expressions from local professional artists who extended the outreach to broader networks. A number of artists from other states and regions participated. Twelve creations arrived from a nursing home in Maryland with a memo that said, “With an average age well into the nineties we enjoy our art classes tremendously. Your call for entry generated much discussion ... We all thank you for [the] opportunity to exhibit” (Adams 2002). Another creation arrived from New York City with the address attached to an unwrapped shoe.

The cover of the weekly magazine section in the local newspaper featured a color photograph of seven shoe creations in a large circle (*Shoes as Windows into the Soul* 2002). The lead article, “In Their Footsteps: Shoes Tell the Story of Ordinary Lives in the Public Art Project Celebrating Women’s Week in Lowell,” focused largely on the public art project. The cover and article generated citywide interest in the project (Tuttle 2002).

Art with Shoes

Women and girls drew and wrote on the shoes with paints and markers and attached objects such as photographs, ribbons, and mementos. There were stories about sneakers worn on political marches, “leg braces worn as a child,”

and “strappy sandals and sexy high heels” (Mulvey 2005, p. 31). One of the authors drew thin vertical lines around a fancy gold shoe over the words, “Women’s shoes ... prisons we choose ... endangered ‘feetsies’ ... common BONDage.” The article in the local paper highlighted “... shoes with glitter and lace, shoes with buttons and bows... —ouch!—spiky heels, shoes that tell stories and shoes dedicated to the memories of special women,” and noted the variety in the exhibit, “You’ll see shoes that celebrate life and its funny, sad, wonderful moments” (Tuttle 2002, p. S2). Many pieces incorporated the American flag and other patriotic symbols. Some art was related to collective grieving and some to healing from personal loss.

The Exhibit and Viewer Response

A professional artist on the committee and an artist who was a friend of hers designed the exhibit. While not as public as the windows downtown, the display space was spacious and accessible, a former mill building visited frequently as part of the LNHP history tours. The designers created a setting that was inviting, surprising, and compelling. They divided the space into different-sized areas, incorporated spot lighting, and grouped together creations with similar themes. They attached a large white cloth (19' × 4') on a wall visible from the gallery entrance, provided colored pens and markers, and invited viewers to respond to the exhibit. (A second cloth replaced the first when it was full.)

The responses of the viewers to the exhibit became part of the public art. Many viewers praised the exhibit using words including “cool,” “moving,” “powerful,” “fabulous,” and “amazing.” Several viewers thanked the artists. Some of the artists thanked the organizers or their group leaders for the opportunity to participate in the public art project. Viewers drew shoes of many sizes, shapes, and colors, often with comments. Some people loved shoes, loved shopping for shoes, and couldn’t have enough shoes. Others thought that women’s shoes were “constraining” or “painful.” There were repeated themes. Several people drew peace symbols or women’s symbols with comments about peace, women’s rights, human rights, social justice, or activism. There were stick figures, animals, flowers, and hearts with names and words of appreciation and love. Several people expressed the benefits of “walking in someone else’s shoes.”

Indices of Success

We believed that this project reached several important objectives. New networks of women participated. The theme attracted over 500 women including donors of shoes and artists. The exhibit design was compelling. The exhibit

planned for a month was extended to over six months. Creative responses of the viewers to the exhibit increased participation and became part of the public art. Opening and closing receptions were well attended. On September 11, 2002, the exhibit closed. Probably more than any of the other LWW public art projects, Stepping into an Uncertain World represented diverse voices and perspectives in public space and illustrated interconnections of the personal and political.

2011: All Our Voices

Context and Theme

In 2011, the authors asked a friend of ours who is an artist for advice about how to design a simple yet compelling public art project for 2012. She had run bookmaking workshops in schools and with community groups and had done community arts projects in Lowell. She volunteered to help, saying that she was at a point in her career when she wanted to “help others feel the power and peace and energy I feel when I am working in the studio” (Gaylord 2012a, p. 17). The project was developed with enough time to apply for and receive funding (\$2,900) from the local cultural council.

Outreach and Publicity

Because the artist handled the art-making, public art committee members could put more time and energy into outreach. We developed an expanded list of community groups and invited their participation using a number of methods. Several groups new to public art joined us including an art group at a cancer center, a group serving women with HIV/AIDS, a church group of elderly women, a neighborhood group, women living in a residential addiction treatment facility, and a group for developmentally delayed women. A number of groups that had participated before did so again. The public art committee invited community group leaders to a train the trainer session with the artist who also demonstrated the project on a YouTube video (Gaylord 2012b). About 40 group leaders participated. They left the training with simple instructions and two plastic boxes for their group: one with scissors, markers, paints, and glue sticks, and the other with recycled materials for collage.

Identifying leaders of groups whom we wanted to reach and working closely with them were pivotal to the success of the project. Often there was an obvious alignment between the public art theme and the mission of an agency or program. When there was not, talking with the group’s leader to identify how the public art theme was relevant to their goals encouraged participation

and increased mutuality and a sense of community. Using Reinharz's (1984) term, many of the group leaders could be considered "competent community builders."

The Art and the Exhibit

Participants were invited to create a small eight-page booklet by folding and cutting a recycled grocery or shopping bag. They were asked to write, "I am..." on the cover, and then to creatively continue the statement inside the book with words or symbols or both. They used markers, paints, small flat objects, torn wrapping paper, and other materials, many recycled. The books explored every facet of identity and activity: "I am a cancer survivor...", "I am composing my life's symphony...", "I am a mother and a daughter...", "I am a quilter...", "I am furious...", and "I am missing you...". Some books were very simple. Others were embellished with intricate detail. Several were written in languages other than English. The artist attached the finished books to ribbons hung on a freestanding clothesline. The exhibit stood in the city's public library near the main staircase during the month of March.

Viewers' Responses to the Exhibit

A reception with book-creators, their friends, and the public celebrated the books and those who created them. During the reception, materials and supplies were available for people to add to the exhibit. Several did. A guest book was available for viewer comments. The leader of a literacy program who participated in the project wrote:

What a wonderful experience this was for all our adult moms who are learning to speak English! It was fascinating to see how they all viewed themselves and the words and pictures they selected. But by far it was when they read their stories that you saw the depth of this project. They found their voices loud and clear! (All Our Voices Guest Book 2012).

Although less detailed, all of the comments in the book were positive. They included, "Loved hearing what women and girls think they are," "Truly beautiful display," "Lovely and interesting to see all the different selves expressed," and "I would like to thank all [of the] women's voices."

Indices of Success

We considered the 2012 public art project a "perfect storm" of positive conditions that began with the unexpected offer of help from our friend who had personal interests and professional skills that aligned with the public

art project. Her offer, our desire to compensate her for at least some of her time, and the number of group leaders who joined us all contributed to the success of the project. Almost 300 women and girls from diverse groups and cultures made books. Comparing an earlier, more complex bookmaking project with seven people to the public art project, the lead artist concluded that, "All Our Voices was about giving a larger number a smaller, but no less valuable, experience" (Gaylord 2012a, p. 17).

2013: Working Together to Envision and Create Change

Context and Theme

In 2013, we welcomed new members to the public art committee. One of them had experience working with visual art forms and another facilitated a rape survivors' support group that incorporated art-making. Brainstorming about possible projects, someone suggested that the project literally and figuratively represent the program theme, Working Together, Creating Change, by requiring that one piece be done by each participating group. Life-size plywood figures of women would be offered to groups to create art that represented changes they envisioned or were working toward.

Outreach and Publicity

Several organizations expressed interest in the project, but lack of funding and logistical issues almost resulted in its cancellation. The project required large and relatively expensive pieces of plywood (\$250–300), a truck to transport them, and special skills and tools to cut out the figures. At the last minute, the university contributed funds for the materials, the national park provided a truck, and two young women from the local vocational technical high school cut out the figures with the help of park maintenance staff. After the supply of plywood forms was exhausted, groups who wanted to participate received large pieces of plain brown paper with instructions to begin by drawing a life-size outline of a woman on the paper.

The Art and the Exhibit

Groups used paint, fabric, collage materials, photographs, jewelry, wigs, words, and other materials to express their visions of creating change. More than 100 women and girls, in groups of two to more than 20, participated. They created 16 pieces on plywood and six on paper. Although there were only outlines of two different women on the wooden forms, the finished pieces were very different from each other. Table 2 describes 10 creations that were chosen

Table 2 Examples of 2013 public art titles, organization types, descriptions and excerpts from artist statements

| Title | Organization type | Medium: description | Artist statements |
|--|---|---|--|
| Hope for new beginnings | Domestic violence art group | Paint: figure wears large tree with long roots against sky, sun, moon, heart with positive words. Reverse side shows images and words related to abuse | [We depict] woman as mother, teacher, nurturer... surrounded by signs of life and hope as women move from... abuse to... safety and hope for themselves and their children |
| Acre girl | Community development and housing organization | Mixed media: figure is dressed in colorful neighborhood maps. Reverse side has residents' signatures on black background | [The] project represents all of the people who come together as part of [our] community... and the community we serve |
| More than a woman | Program for girls and young women | Mixed media: figure is wearing collage of color photos and text. Reverse side depicts a young woman wearing athletic clothes and sneakers (done with paint) | [T]he girls... [highlighted] their identity beyond their gender. One side represents... the thoughts of teens and the other the likes and ideas of the younger girls |
| The gift of recovery | Residential treatment program | Collage: figure is covered with broken bottles, needles, and drug paraphernalia in dark colors. Reverse side is covered with positive images in bright colors | [We show] drug and alcohol use and the perils and losses it brings [and] the healing process... as women reconnect with themselves, their families and their communities |
| Working together through art to beat cancer | Art group for women with cancer | Mixed media: figure has blue hair, Robin Roberts' face, peach colored skin, and is wearing a pink blouse, tulle skirt, and colorful jewellery | [We] created this [with] a group process. We... brought... ideas and collage materials... and took turns adding our ideas |
| Woman of faith | Church-based drop-in center for people who are homeless | Collage: figure is covered with puzzle pieces of religious symbols and images from nature | [We believe] He is the piece that makes us whole |
| Mulheres unidas contra violence domestica e sexual | Women's group for Portuguese speakers | Collage: figure has braided hair wearing photos of many women of different cultures with text in Portuguese and English | Despite race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, faith, domestic and sexual violence [does not] discriminate... Together we can... be part of the solution |
| The female fight: sexual and gender Identity | LGBTQ community college group | Mixed media: figure wears messages of equality on white clothing. Arms and legs are covered in photos in a spectrum of colors | [We] recognize the women who have fought hard [for] our LGBTQ community past, present, and future |
| Text and context | Friends, artists | Mixed media: full-bodied naked woman is covered with symbols and quotes from the artists and others. Reverse figure is painted purple with Lowell women's week and its logo in lavender and white | This piece evolved as a dialogue between two artists [regarding] the treatment of women's bodies in popular media and culture versus [how we] claim and create our own identities as women |
| "No longer submit" | National urban park | Collage: figure shows female millworkers, red bricks, and a large quote: "In the strength of our united influence we will no longer submit." | [We] show the struggles and solidarity of women who worked in Lowell's textile mills |

to illustrate the variety of creations and participating groups as well as excerpts from artist statements taken from the Working Together, Creating Change Exhibit Booklet (2013). The creations are listed in the order that they appeared in the booklet.

The artwork was displayed in the lobby of Lowell City Hall for the month of March. Flyers outside the building and banners inside the lobby announced the exhibit. The figures were placed around the lobby in groups of two or three. The creations made on paper were hung nearby. Large signs provided additional information and listed the names of groups who had created art and organizations that had supported the project. In addition to the creations described in Table 2, three affirmed cultural diversity, two focused on healing from gendered violence, one depicted a heathen, and another a person who appeared to be transgendered. Community psychology students also created pieces. One group incorporated symbols of powerful women from the past including the poet Sappho. The other group depicted Rosie the Riveter with messages about ways that, “We have the power and willingness to create changes, and to make the world better” (Working Together, Creating Change Exhibit Booklet 2013).

Indices of Success

We attributed the great interest in the project to the alignment of the theme with the mission and goals of many of the groups. The project resonated particularly with groups who had been stigmatized or traumatized in embodied ways including women survivors of rape, women recovering from domestic violence, and women battling addictions. We believe that the collective support and anonymity of collaborative art-making were less intimidating to some participants than working individually might have been.

As the center of local government and a symbol of democracy, Lowell City Hall was an apt setting for the Working Together, Creating Change exhibit. Public symbols of power are more often associated with men than women (Freedman 2002; Guerrilla Girls 1998). Many of the art-makers had relatively little privilege and had experienced major life challenges. City Hall was a place where, under ordinary circumstances, many of the art-makers might have felt out of place.

Many exhibit booklets were taken during the exhibit suggesting that passersby engaged with the exhibit. Several people wrote positive comments in the exhibit guest book (the book was missing by the end of the exhibit). Through the exhibit and a reception attended by over 50 people, some of whom were project participants, the individual and collective stories of members of several underserved groups were publicly shared and affirmed in a valued community setting.

Discussion

Looking back on 15 years of the LWW public art project, we believe that the annual projects have been successful. At least a few thousand women and girls of diverse ages, cultures and experiences made art on themes related to their lives that were shared with the larger community in valued public space. Taken together, the projects offer examples of how creative expression may enhance personal experience, encourage dialogue across groups, promote civic engagement, and create community.

Since the public art project that we described occurred within supportive contexts, questions may arise about whether it is relevant to art projects in other contexts. We believe that it is. Some of the planning, outreach, small group processes, and networking that we used could be adapted to fit other contexts, groups, and issues. Each community has overlapping networks, organizations, and leaders as well as untapped resources, recyclable materials, and deficits that could be transformed into assets. Each community has its own unique diversity and beauty. Every person has a story and creative potential.

We offer four lessons that we learned through organizing and participating in the public art project with the hope that they may be useful to others. The first three lessons are relevant to organizing community action projects generally. The last lesson focuses specifically on using the arts for community building and change.

The Power of Past and Present Contexts

The public art project taught us not to underestimate the power of context. The project highlighted the importance of using opportunities that exist within the multiple contexts in which a particular community project is nested. In our situation, the city of Lowell had a tradition of honoring women, a rich heritage of immigrant history, and a culture of collaboration. The university, community college, national park, and various community agencies all had some staff who appreciated diversity and cared about the well-being of women and girls. These elements made Lowell a community where public art had a particular resonance. Contextual factors vary from community to community. Understanding how particular contextual factors may be used to engage individuals and groups is critical in developing and sustaining community projects.

Organizational Structure Affects Participation, Resources, and Sustainability

Another lesson that we learned was that the LWW organization influenced participation, resources, and sustainability. The fact that the public art project existed within a

largely volunteer organization, operated within a non-hierarchical structure, and was loosely affiliated with formal community institutions both helped and hindered the project. The alternative setting encouraged friendship, creative project development, and community building. Affiliations of many LWW members with formal organizations that had compatible missions provided access to some, if limited, resources.

As a non-institutional group, the LWW public art committee has been committed to open inclusive membership, minimal hierarchy, and collaborative decision-making. The operating structure enabled a flexible approach and a nimble response to the needs of the project and participants. On the other hand, it also presented challenges such as the lack of assured membership, mechanisms for accountability, and continuity of resources. Like other grassroots groups, the public art committee experienced both the deficits and strengths of organizing itself in this way.

Disenfranchised Groups Require Special Outreach

We learned that if we were serious about engaging members of disenfranchised groups, we had to use contextualized outreach strategies tailored to the particular group. What this meant took different forms depending on the group purpose and culture as well as the phase of the public art project. We used culturally sensitive, age appropriate materials as much as we could. While ongoing collaboration spanning planning, art-making, and the public exhibit was the ideal, it was only partially realized. Effective strategies included going to community groups, accommodating their time preferences, providing and delivering materials, leading workshops, offering free training and technical assistance, and meeting in comfortable settings. The most important strategy was working through leaders who were trusted by their group. All of these strategies helped to offset power dynamics, increase mutuality, and foster a sense of community.

Creative Expression and the Arts Span Personal and Community Experience

The final lesson that we learned was at the heart of the public art project: Creative expression and the arts are powerful underused human resources that have the potential to repair and strengthen individuals, groups, and communities. In the words of cultural activist Jane Sapp (as cited in Belenky et al. 1997, 2000c, pp. 235–236):

Wherever it is that art takes you to, it is a place that enables you to take risks that you would not take ordinarily.... It is that place in which intellect and

feeling or passion have come together in a way to forge something new, something bold.

The creative process has an alchemy that engages people. The arts can facilitate dialogue on relatively invisible or volatile issues, discourage negative judgments, and engender understanding. We believe that creative engagement may alter individual and community perceptions and open up possibilities for multi-layered change.

Balancing Human and Material Resources

We found that a public art project does not require much money. Although a grant could buy an artist's time, more sophisticated art materials, more advertising or a more elaborate exhibit, we produced our projects with small amounts of funding, in-kind contributions, and recycled or borrowed materials and equipment. To sustain the projects, we needed people with the right mix of skills and schedules who were willing and able to share the workload. Professional artists who had experience and interest in community arts were critical to sustaining the project. They had skills and resources that others did not have and worked with their networks to attract other artists to the project. Community psychology graduate students were valuable contributors to the projects as organizers, trainers, group facilitators, committee members, and art-makers. New members of the planning and public art committees over the years helped to reenergize and refocus the projects. The time and energy that women invested were the project's most valuable resources.

We observed that there is a relationship between the design, materials, and accessibility of a public art project and the number and diversity of participants. When the art was designed to be simple, it was easier to interest groups. Simple projects required less expensive materials, many of which were donated or recycled. For more complex projects, the challenges of training, obtaining supplies, and working out logistics were more difficult, but the results were more sophisticated and more likely to draw people to the exhibits. Each year committee members made decisions to balance these factors.

Although some women and girls created their art individually, most pieces were made in art-making workshops at sites around the city. Providing comfortable space, a nonjudgmental welcome, intriguing or just new materials, and more inspiration than instruction were all helpful. We believed that it was important for the leaders of workshops and groups to participate as well.

Exhibits and Receptions Play Key Roles

The art exhibits and receptions had a much greater impact on the art-makers who attended than we had expected. We

were focused on presenting women's stories and perspectives to the larger community. While the public's response was usually positive, sometimes powerfully so, the response of the art-makers themselves made us realize that the exhibit and reception should be integral parts of the project. We were told and observed that to see one's own work displayed thoughtfully with the art of others and receive positive comments from family and friends was a moment of affirmation. In a public art project with African American women who had been homeless, Washington and Moxley (2008) found, as we did, that participation in a reception was an unexpectedly important, positive experience for the artists. In addition, groups from different parts of the city who do not usually interact socially with each other were able to appreciate each other's work and to celebrate what everyone had created together.

Conclusion

Art-making in response to a theme provides a common focus and encourages risk-taking on the part of the art-makers and understanding on the part of witnesses. There is room for a full range of human experiences including those that are difficult and painful as well as those that are celebratory and playful. The process of making art in community breaks down walls between professional roles and lived experience and encourages a sense of community among diverse cultural and status groups. Mutual sharing and willingness to take risks within supportive settings are important, but rare, ingredients for building safe, equitable, and loving communities.

The collaboration of many individuals, small groups, and large institutions fostered and sustained the LWW public art project. Among those who made and displayed art in these projects were professionals, staff members and volunteers from social, civic, and educational organizations, and women and girls receiving services. Many participants did not often interact with each other, but through this project they came together in small informal settings and made art based on their lives and visions for the future. Other community members viewed the creations exhibited or experienced them indirectly through media reports, bringing positive public attention to the lives of women and girls. Thousands of community members, many of whom were members of disenfranchised groups, participated in some way. The theoretical frameworks of community psychology and feminism place value on increases in communication among diverse groups. In the moments that art was created, displayed, and viewed, power differences among those who participated were minimized, communication was increased, and many people saw their communities in a more inclusive way.

The LWW public art project has created safe settings for women to make art together, and then brought their art and stories into welcoming public space. As organizers, we experienced the benefits of this project personally. As we told our stories through making art in the workshops, we took risks when we revealed aspects of who we were and allowed the spontaneity of the process to lead us to unexpected ideas and emotions. Our stories were strengthened as they overlapped and intersected with stories of women and girls different from and similar to us. Witnessing their creativity and hearing their powerful, moving, funny, and sad stories, we experienced resilience, beauty, and power in many textures, colors, sizes, and shapes, including our own.

The project has been extraordinarily satisfying for us. Witnessing women young enough to be our granddaughters or from cultures and languages different from ours slowly or quickly pick up a pen or a piece of heart-covered pink tissue paper or stickers or a high heeled shoe and engage with the materials they chose to create something of their own has reenergized us many times. For Irene, renewed energy grew out of sharing the richness and diversity of women's stories and witnessing the transformative impact of art-making on individuals and communities. For Anne, the project brought to life feminist community psychology uniting theory and practice and allowing her and many of her students to fully participate in communities that valued the thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of all members (Mulvey 2005).

In closing, we return to the "woven tapestry" metaphor used to represent the intersection of feminism and community psychology (Bond et al. 2000c). Each year since 2000, women and girls in Lowell created and exhibited a "community tapestry" of diverse colors, designs, and textures. The art-makers explored, transformed, and wove together their stories to enhance, enlarge, and strengthen the social fabric. Creating art and community, we believe that the Lowell Women's Week Public Art Project exemplifies feminist community psychology in action.

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