



WELCOME TO HIGH DESERT PLAYBACK

Hey Friend, happy September!

It's been a minute since we last connected and I want you to know where I have landed since I (sadly) left One Hope Financial Institution (OHFI) last month.

I have returned to my theater roots! And of course, as a serial entrepreneur, I had to start a new venture. I am the Co-Founder and Executive Director of High Desert Playback—a small business that makes theater for social change.

Have you heard of Playback Theater? It's an improvisational art form practiced all over the world. In playback, audience members tell stories from their real lives and actors and musicians play those stories back on the spot. At High Desert Playback, we consult with non-profits, local government entities, and other social impact organizations, using the art form to mobilize and amplify their social change efforts.

Through playback theater, we are able to facilitate community outreach, engagement, dialogue, and celebration in ways that help organizations bring folks together, deepen connections, build trust, gather stories and feedback, address challenges, and determine the path ahead towards greater impact.

I am wondering if there are ways that this work might align with your goals at ORG. Perhaps...IDEA.

What do you think? Are you interested enough to grab coffee (on me!) and explore if there is something here?

WHAT IS HIGH DESERT PLAYBACK?

High Desert Playback makes theater for social change in New Mexico. Our multi-racial, queer-centered ensemble “plays back” the real-life stories of our audience members, igniting community dialogue, cultural healing, and collective liberation.

Playback theater is an interactive form of improvisational theater in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot. Created in 1975, playback theater is now used in over 70 countries around the world to help build bridges across differences and to honor the human condition. High Desert Playback is the first professional playback theater company in New Mexico.

Based in Albuquerque since 2023, we work in communities throughout New Mexico. High Desert Playback is a Black/queer woman-led social enterprise and a fiscally sponsored project of the New Mexico Foundation.

WHO IS BEHIND IT?

Although High Desert Playback is a new entity, we are not new to this work.

High Desert Playback was founded in 2023 by Lynn Johnson and Allison Kenny. Since 2002, Lynn and Allison have built their lives together as a married couple, co-parents, and business partners dedicated to the arts and social change.

A playbackeer since 2007, Allison has performed with Living Arts Playback Theatre, San Francisco Playback, LAPLAYback, and Oakland Freedom Theater—where she was also a co-founder. Allison has studied playback theater in Los Angeles, India, Mexico, and with the Centre for Playback Theater in New York. She is a certified playback theater instructor and on the path to become an accredited trainer. She has worked with playbackers around the world who have used this art form in support of racial justice, Palestinian war refugees, as healing for victims of domestic violence, and for the purposes of anti-bullying education in schools, and so much more.

A highly sought-after speaker and facilitator, Lynn has worked at the intersection of social impact, entrepreneurship, and arts + media for well over two decades. She has founded and successfully led several social ventures dedicated to storytelling and culture building through the lens of gender and racial justice.

Currently, Lynn works as CEO of Hella Social Impact, a women of color-owned consultancy that helps organizations show up for racial justice. She is also a member of the Dismantle Collective, a Black-led, POC-focused social enterprise that builds and supports models of what we know our economy and ways of being will and should look like.

In 2019, Allison and Lynn (along with Sangita Kumar) co-founded Oakland Freedom Theater—a playback theater with a similar mission—in Oakland, CA. There, we brought playback shows to businesses and non-profit organizations to complement their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. In this work, we would get feedback like:

“I am so inspired by the space you all create and the space you hold for others. That room was full of so much beautiful humanity.”

Just as we were building momentum, the Covid19 pandemic hit and changed everything, including our home. We moved from Oakland to Albuquerque in November 2020. We decided to continue the work we started here in our new community. Since January 2023, we have held monthly playback theater workshops for the community in Albuquerque that have been incredibly successful and well received. From these participants, we are hearing things like:

“This experience was healing, powerful and tangible. And I felt like the experience of being seen and heard and validated that we co-created will have a healing ripple out into the larger community.”

“We are so lucky to have a Playback theater company in town!”

WHY PLAYBACK THEATER?

The goal of High Desert Playback is to use the art of playback theater to mobilize, catalyze, and amplify the incredible racial and social justice work that already exists throughout the state.

We partner with other artists, activists, local governments, businesses, and community organizations for the purposes of:

- **Community Engagement** - Playback theater brings folks together to identify and address the challenges, opportunities, and issues that affect their lives. This type of community engagement is key to creating strong, connected, inclusive, and resilient communities.
- **Facilitated Dialogue** - Witnessing each others' stories in a structured and loving way builds our empathy muscles and strengthens trust among folks. Our performances provide a solid foundation for communities working to deepen their connections with each other and their shared understanding of social issues.
- **Issue Analysis** - Effective policy formation requires that leaders fully understand social issues from the perspective of folks in their community. By providing a stage for folks' stories, we use playback theater as a tool for the qualitative data gathering and issue analysis that policymakers need to better serve their constituents.
- **Ritual and Celebration** - At its core, playback theater is a celebration! Our shows are an opportunity for folks to come together, share their stories, learn about each other, and forge a sense of belonging.

A participant in a recent community workshop described playback theater as “an expressive use of empathy as a tool for story-retelling and trauma first aid.” This aligns with our experience and the intentions of playback theater as an artform. Jo Solas and Jonathon Fox, co-creators of the global playback theater movement, cite psychodrama as well as oral storytelling tradition and ritual as the inspiration for the work. Mental health professionals all over the world engage in playback theater because of its unique ability to make audience members (as well as the folks who perform the art form) feel heard and validated so immediately. Healing happens in

community, especially for those of us most marginalized by systems of oppression. Playback theater creates the brave container for collective healing and liberation to happen.

We could just keep our work in a black box where it is only accessed by paying the cost of admission. Instead, we also bring our theater out and into the community where it can make a real impact. In addition to our theater shows, we perform in schools, churches, community centers, and local businesses. We perform in the places where people already live, work, and play. We believe that theater and storytelling are essential elements of community resilience in that our stories have the power to shape who we are and what we will become. Bringing folks together in cultural spaces reconnects us with each other and our love for our shared community. It reminds us that we are our community's most valuable assets and inspires us to collaborate and create the spaces we want to be in.

In June 2023, we performed for a group of about 30 middle and high school aged youth as part of Girl Scouts New Mexico Trails Summit on Belonging. Our performance highlighted moments from their lives where they felt included or excluded. The show was followed by a workshop we facilitated focused on social and racial justice. It was awesome. The scouts were engaged and delighted. The program director called it "AMAZING" and one of the girls referred to her experience as "magic."

ABOUT OUR 2023-2024 SEASON

The theme of our 2023-2024 season is "Sanctuary" - creating and activating space for healing, safety, and connection. Our primary focus will be uplifting and centering the stories of LGBTQIA2S+ folks—especially BIPOC folks—in New Mexico.

At this time when the lives and experiences of the trans and queer community are under attack all across the United States, New Mexico itself is becoming a place of sanctuary. With the passage of the Reproductive and Gender-Affirming Health Care Act, Gov. Lujan has strengthened New Mexico's already established reputation as a "gay-friendly" state during a most crucial time.

But just because a law exists, doesn't mean that all spaces in New Mexico are safe for marginalized folks. In our 2023-2024 "Sanctuary" season, our goal is to perform playback theater shows across the state that give queer, BIPOC, and other marginalized folks the chance to tell their stories and be heard. The audiences will be made up of allies, activists, and neighbors who want to work together to make their communities safer and more inclusive for all its residents.

Belonging in ABQ

As part of exploring the theme of Sanctuary, we are partnering with Downtown Albuquerque Mainstreet Arts and Culture District to perform a series of interactive experiences in downtown spaces centered around people's stories of belonging and inclusion. In each 90 min experience, audiences will share their own stories of times they felt included or excluded in our city. In addition, we will create facilitated opportunities for folks to get to know each other and discuss their ideas, hopes, and dreams for a more inclusive Albuquerque.

HOW TO CONNECT

Interested in partnering with High Desert Playback, contact Lynn Johnson at lynn@highdesertplayback.com

To make a donation (thank you!), please visit highdesertplayback.com/donate

For information about learning from or performing with us, please visit highdesertplayback.com/contact

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