

Artist and Workforce Readiness

BCGA Arts Impact Story

Jason N.
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Jeff M. Poulin: BCGA Arts Impact is an audio series telling the stories from members of the Boys and Girls Club of America community about the power of arts, cultural, and creative programs around the world.

Hey there, Jeff here. As the CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Muncie, Jason's interview highlights the deep impact the arts have on young people and reinforces his **leadership commitment**. As a musician himself, his story illustrates the value of centering programming with **culminating experiences** centered on **youth voice**. A priority of his organization is to connect youth passions, particularly in the arts, to viable career paths. Through partnerships with nearby colleges and community businesses, they create opportunities for youth to learn from professionals, explore businesses, and understand how to build a career in the arts and creative ventures.

Jason leans into his own artistic identity by occasionally playing guitar with Club youth, creating intergenerational collaboration. Jason offers his perspective on exploring new music and how the arts can provide guidance for youth to discuss and process difficult topics they face on a daily basis. Check it out.

Creative Generation: Can you tell me a bit about your role and where your club is and what you do.

Jason N: So I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Muncie. My part in our arts programming is one where we do a partnership with our local Civic Theater. So I do a number of shows with them and then, and work to get our kids up on stage, but also to do some of the interconnection of the programs with the kids. So getting the kids involved in theater and reading, as well as we have a music program. I play a few different musical instruments. So I'll play with the kids on occasion.

CG: Oh, that's so awesome. You're like right on the right on the ground with them. That's amazing. Can you describe a bit more about the arts programs that your club has.

JN: So this year, we hired our own arts coordinator. So Miss Sydney brings in a lot more of the fine arts programming. So a lot of the painting. I think my favorite project of hers was one that she did for Black History Month, where all of the different art styles that she taught our children to painting, were based on black artists. And so a lot of it was just presenting them with an artistic style and showing them examples of that art, having the children create in that style. And then she would teach them about the artist, and how they grew up in the country and some of the issues there. So that was a wonderful program. She also has brought music to our elementary school students. So we have some ukuleles and some small player guitars, so that she's able to bring some of that music to the children. And then we also have for our teenage members, we partner with Ball State University, where they bring in a music studies class to teach our children how to play guitar, bass and drums. And then we built a recording studio in the pro program. So we have another class that comes in to teach them about digital recording, editing and production, which we are then hoping to build on to some of our kids who want to learn to be YouTubers or to do podcasting, or things of that nature. There's also the partnership that we've had with our Muncie, Civic Theatre, where we do two drama camps a year. So children sign up for that. On Monday, we do auditions for parts, start learning the play. And then by Friday, we are ready to go on the main stage with funders and parents to see our kids perform. I hope I haven't missed anything. The project, we're working on two projects right now, what is our next fundraising project is going to double as an art opening. So we are looking for an art studio in Muncie, Indiana, where we can have the children's pieces of art up for sale, as well as our dessert option. And then the other is we're partnering with our arts program to beautify the outside of our building. So the next wall will be a Jackson Pollock type mural on the wall. So using sponges filled with paints, and doing some active art, with our kids out there.

CG: Oh my goodness, that's incredible.

JN: I am a former preschool teacher. So art is one of the things that we did a lot of, and I was able to learn from my mentor about different artists. And then we found somebody who really knows what she's doing. And we've decided to invest in that. I know a lot of places are very hesitant to do that. But we've decided that one of the things that we need to do more with our kids is giving them appropriate outlets for their emotional needs or for their psychological needs. And as a 50 year old man, I have a difficult enough time talking about my emotions, and the arts are a wonderful way to give our kids tools that can help them appropriately express their emotions better.

CG: Wow. That's incredible. Yeah, and so many different avenues that you're providing as well in terms of theater, musical instruments, doing the production side of things. It's such a holistic skill set to build right?

JN: I'm just a musician. Never really mostly guitar, bass and drums. I play guitar and I play some tuba as well. I was a sousaphone player in high school. That was sousaphone was the

first instrument I learned how to play in fifth grade, and then moved over to the trumpet a little bit and kind of kept teaching myself instruments. But I learned later that if I had had any of the skills and recording, I might have actually made a living out of being a musician. Because that's one of the other things we work on in career development. When we speak with our kids, when I asked my teens what they want to do when they grow up, of course, they want to be, you know, a musician out on the front line, or they want to be LeBron James, there are so many careers that are on the other side of the microphone, doing the interviews and learning how to record and edit these programs and doing interviews, or doing the sports production from the cameras. And you don't have to worry about your knee. And you can be like me at five, seven and two inch or 50 pounds, and still have a career. But really just trying to give our kids more experiences, in whatever catches their interest.

CG: Wow, that's incredible. Also, like the ability to say like art is a pathway for me, yes, art is feasible. If it's something that excites me, it's worth my time. And my effort. Yes,

JN: It's both feasible as a career. But it's also feasible as a hobby, that as we grew up, I think a lot of people don't think about tying time, work -life balance together, when they're starting with things. And that we all have difficulties at work or at or at home, that the ability to express yourself artistically. I don't get paid for any of the art I do. Either acting, or musically. I do it as a hobby. I do it as a way of bringing together other people or bringing people into the clubs. It's great if you can get paid for it. But it's also very cathartic, even

CG: If you can't write, and like what a lesson and like wellness. Yes. And in choosing yourself. Yeah, well, and emotion is a very difficult thing to explain.

JN: Right? If you can show it in another way. That's a good way of getting it out.

CG: Do you have a favorite memory from your experience?

JN: You know, I think I think for me was when we actually started the music program when we started it with Ball State University. And they brought out some ukuleles. And then we tried to expand that out a little bit more, because what a 13 year old child from inner city Muncie wants to learn how to play the ukulele. So we had some guitars brought in. And I was sitting down. The kids knew I played guitar, but they had never seen me before. And I had a guitar in my office, I looked down, I'm a lefty. So my guitars are backwards and upside down. And, and, you know, we were kind of jamming out a little bit and then one of the kids, he's doing it wrong, he's doing it wrong. He's got it upside down. And being a guitar player, I have a number of I've just gonna say too many, but I don't think that's possible. I have ones I don't play. We'll call it that. So I do have some guitars there because we do have some children who are left handed, or want to learn that way or, or just think of it that way. But really, it was that opportunity to sit down with the kids who were learning and playing with them. And the excitement on their face when I'd be playing the guitar, and then they would move over to the drums and just start kind of backing that up was wonderful.

CG: Wow. Wow. And I like organic communication. Yes. And creation and collaboration. Yes. Like no matter the age and amount of a relationship. That's amazing. And lastly, what impact do you think the arts have on youth? I know you answered a little bit of it. But a bigger question. Yeah,

JN: I think it's, it's, it's another way of, of, of blending voice to people. I mean, if we look at some of the most impactful statements on not just emotion, I think the emotion side is where I tend to think of it because that's something I have a difficulty with. But if we look even at as a political statement, going back is, you know, into the 50s and 60s with the folk and protest music to the 70s with songs like Imagine, to the 80s with gangster rap, and on through today. It is simply another way of giving our young people a voice in whatever way they want to do it. Whether it says comedy, I'm a big Weird Al Yankovic fan, or I am also a hip hop fan of nerdcore rap and it is basically you know, people rapping about comic books and Dungeons and Dragons. For those who don't know You look like you're nodding. So you may know, from nerdcore, right? Yes. But down to the gangster rap to the NWA is to, you know, the protest raps that were very big in the late 80s and early 90s. It's just another way of giving voice. Without it. Hopefully being too confrontational, it's still getting the point across. I'm old enough to remember, NWA was very controversial. But it was a way of speaking the truth. That might not have come across in the New York Times, I bet. And it's an it's an it's an entry for, especially nowadays that kids can speak out about all of the things that have been going on with them, whether it was COVID, about cannons, or talking about, you know, racial inequities. That all of those things, sometimes they're very hard to put into words. And then if you're looking at a three and a half to four minute rap song, which nowadays with the technology, you can record a mix by yourself at home and put it on a Spotify and get that message out to other people. I just think it's such a wonderful way of different voices. I'm not a fine artist, but there are people who can just make amazing statements with complexity, with a painting or with a sculpture. And that's just another outlet for our kids to grow and share what they see that, you know, we 50 year old white men don't always see ourselves.

CG: Thank you. Wow, that was incredible.

JN: Thank you. I'm, I'm glad you're doing this because I think Hartsburg coming from I'm originally from the northeast. And so when school budgets are difficult, our programs are often cut very quickly. And as a former early childhood guy, you know, the drawing was a way of teaching kids how to hold the pencil. And so getting the different ways of getting art programming out to our kids is an important thing. So thank you for sharing this with the rest of the world. So maybe they take an idea away from this. Feel free to share my ideas with everyone.

CG: Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing some time with me.

Jeff M. Poulin: Thanks for listening to BCGA Arts Impact. This episode was produced by the team at Creative Generation: Katie Rainey, Valerie Killebrew, and Emma Lamberti. The series executive producer is me, Jeff M. Poulin. The cover art is by Bridget Woodbury. Music from Scott Waltz. A special thanks to the series contributors and the staff at Boys and Girls Club of America for their support.