

NEWSLETTER: Brooklyn Arts Council – September 2007

Clinton Hill-based non-profit freeDimensional was founded by a group of Brooklyn artists who were all also involved in the international human rights movement. Collectively, through their work around the world in Africa, South America, Asia, Europe and America, they saw firsthand the impact of war, censorship and human rights violations on fellow artists, citizen journalists and human rights defenders. These groups were often the first people targeted by oppressive regimes, facing censorship, political imprisonment and the threat of violence and death.

FreeDimensional's founders recognized a huge problem. So much is lost when the lives of people who speak the truth about human rights violations are disrupted. For artists and activists who have the tools and skills to move others, survival often trumps their important work. Seeing this urgent need, freeDimensional also saw what seemed like a natural and simple solution: partnering with artist's retreats to provide temporary safe haven for asylum-seekers.

FreeDimensional Executive Director and founding Board Member (and Bed-Stuy resident) Todd Lester says, "Historically, there's been an ad-hoc network of safe haven at artists communities for censored and persecuted artists, but never a formal administrative process for placement." Artists communities have space and are eager to host artists needing safe haven, but lack the resources to screen potential residents. The artists themselves need immediate help and may not even know this temporary shelter and workspace is available to them. This is where freeDimensional steps in, receiving referrals from human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders, and quickly accommodating artists facing dire trouble.

The results have been powerful. In just a few short years, with no paid staff, the freeDimensional grassroots collective of artists have had tremendous impact. 25 artist's retreat centers around the world are now hosting artists, human rights defenders and citizen journalists. Further, these talented people are working as artists-in-residence, creating new work and connecting with the local communities.

FreeDimensional is simultaneously working on a grand global scale and an intimate local level. Through freeDimensional, the Senegalese human rights attorney turned artist Bara Diokhane lived for a month on Empty Vessel, a 63 foot wooden boat parked in the Gowanus Canal that serves as a not-for-profit performance space. Throughout October 2006, Bara used the space as a studio, transforming it into an exhibit that made connections to the people who flee Senegal by boat, seeking economic opportunities elsewhere. Bara is now serving as an artist-in-residence, teaching art at a high school in Bed-Stuy.

FreeDimensional is housed at the Pratt Center for Community Development, who donated free office space for a year. Since the vision of freeDimensional is to "create community space for free expression" all over the globe, they are working hard to have impact in their own community. Todd Lester says, "Brooklyn is the crossroads of the world. Here, we have the ability to engage the community in global issues, which are similar to the challenges faced locally."

This means doing things like placing international artists in local schools to connect environmental justice abroad with issues like poor air quality in Central Brooklyn. In addition, freeDimensional has partnered with the Bedford Academy High School in Bed-Stuy, creating a program called Syndicate 19, named after Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to free expression. Among other things, students write a column which appears in Our Times Press.

Despite its grassroots nature, or perhaps because of it, freeDimensional has been able to partner with numerous local and international organizations. It is working to make Brooklyn a "Cities of Asylum" site, to provide a longer term home in Brooklyn for writers that have been censored abroad. They also help distribute independent and socially oriented films that might not otherwise be seen. With a tiny staff and limited financial resources, freeDimensional has clearly achieved a great deal. Given the huge amount of asylum seekers who need assistance so they can tell the world about oppression and inhumane living conditions, chances are freeDimensional's impact will continue to grow.