

Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project**Interviewer: Michelle Blacksmith****Interviewee: Ryan Grant****Date: June 22, 2016**

Q: Ryan, where did you grow up?

Grant: I grew up in Stratford, Connecticut--also, I guess partly in Bridgeport as well, with families in both cities. I also spent some time living in New Haven for I'd say about 6 years in my youth from age six to age twelve.

Q: Okay, tell me about your elementary and high school education. Where did you go to school?

Grant: I started going to school, I think I went to kindergarten at Birdseye School in Stratford and then we moved to New Haven where I went to Prince and Gold Schools, I think it was a combined school of Prince and Gold Street schools--they were being combined at the time. New Haven was going under some reconstruction during that time in the school system. Then I, after we moved to Stratford when I was about eleven or twelve years old, I went to Honey Spot Elementary school. From there I went to Worcester and then I proceeded to go to Stratford High School where I graduated from.

Q: Thank you, have you had any additional education?

Grant: I have gone to Housatonic Community College several times throughout my lifetime. I'm looking to go back this time and finally finish.

Q: How did you hear about the Arts Center?

Grant: I don't know if I heard about the Arts Center as much as I grew up in the Arts Center. It was a part of my natural upbringing. I don't remember being invited or brought to, I just remember always being there.

Q: So how did you come to the Arts Center?

Grant: My mother is an artist and she was an artist and teacher at the Arts Center, and so were many of her friends and colleagues who also--I didn't know them as anything other than family as well. So once again, I just grew up in the environment.

Q: Okay, how old were you when you began going to the Arts Center would you say?

Grant: I would imagine I was about three years old and--if not earlier--my mother was bringing me. But I think I was three when I became aware of being at the Arts Center. Then through a period of three to four years, being there and learning about some skill of my own.

Q: Do you recall, the Arts Center had two locations--one downtown in Bridgeport and the other one at the Gary Crooks Memorial Center (Community Center)--do you remember both locations?

Grant: I'm not sure what I remember clearly as far as locations. I do remember I was at the Gary Crooks Arts Center because I remember the layout. I remember where the offices were, the band rooms. I remember where the paper rooms were and the supplies were and the smell of it so I remember the Gary Crooks Arts Center in P.T. the most.

Q: And what kinds of things did you do at the Arts Center?

Grant: Everything and anything I could. I enjoyed learning how to do the sculpture, how to harden the clay, how to put it in the kiln. I remember being in the band room, there were two band rooms, one for acoustics and another for string instruments. I remember watching the older gentleman do airbrush, learning how to do acrylics and the difference between acrylics with oils. We did papier-mâché, we made masks, we did so many things beyond just drawing--beyond just what you think you would do at an Arts Center. We learned everything, so it was music appreciation, it was everything! Everything!

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about the other kinds of arts that were available besides visual arts? You just mentioned music--

Grant: Okay, yeah they had music, the music department, I don't think I remember his full name but I remember Ralph (Ralph Williams, percussion). Ralph taught music, he played music and there were instruments and not just instruments that you would normally see but instruments brought from like Africa and around the world. And he would show us the different types of instruments and how they were used, why they were used in different ceremonies. We learned a lot about--not just what they were but why they were and how the instruments would work together as well so that was very influential. I loved that. I love music like that.

Q: Who are some of the people that you remember at the Arts Center?

Grant: Oh, that's kinda easy. I remember Cindy (Anderson), Ben (Johnson), Wendy (Bridgeforth), Rich (Stamats), these are all people that I probably shouldn't have called by their first names but they were like family so I couldn't help but do that. Bill (Collins), a little bit of everyone. I remember just Ben Johnson having a big office. I remember next to the offices was Ben, then it was Cindy and then Wendy's office and I remember next door, Rich had the clay room. Oh my God, it was beautiful, and across from the clay room was where the music was and Ralph was--Bill was usually in the middle doing some kind of huge painting on canvases. It's a lot to remember. It comes kind of flooding in.

Then there were their children as well. There were my cousins who are with me there, and people who became cousins because we all played there and learned there. So, yeah, there was a lot of people. People I don't know names of but I know faces. We pass each other sometimes on the street today and just smile because we remember the Arts Center.

Q: As you talk about some of the names of the people you remember there, some of the administrators, and instructors, do you have any personal stories about them? Or any impressions about any of them that come to mind?

Grant: Wow, that would take a lot of time! I've grown to know these people over the years so not just being a child but as growing into a young adult as well. I believe, well, I don't know-- a couple of stories—

I believe Rich--Rich Stamats, the sculptor and photographer, which I told you I didn't dismiss, but I knew him more as a sculpture artist back then. I didn't know more about his photography; I think I knew more about that as I got older. He played, he became Mickey Mouse for my 6th birthday party and I remember that he did magic tricks and from what I remember was that I didn't really believe in magic unless you showed me and I wanted him to turn me into a frog which thankfully he did not (LAUGHS) but that was really cool.

I remember Wendy and Cindy telling me I could paint along with my mother because I believed they were all great painters and I was always scared of painting. I could draw, and I could draw superheroes and stick figures and some superhero scenes, but I was afraid of doing anything beyond that. But they would hand me a paint brush and some canvas and allow me to actually paint straight onto canvas. Which was so inspiring and it helped my self-esteem, to think that someone allowed me and trusted me to create a piece of work and not just practice. They didn't treat me like a kid doing a child's piece of work they treated me like an artist, a young artist. Therefore, I was able to not only produce my first pieces of work, but I also sold my first piece of work at the Arts Center. That was really cool.

I remember a million stories. The stories about being let into the back room where we'd go get supplies and staying back there, it was almost like the shelves slid back and forth in different ways in order to get the supplies you needed. The room was full of supplies from floor to ceiling and to go back there and just slide on the shelves and go back and forth and the smell that would come up from the colored paper and the cardboard and the wood and the staples and everything that was there to put together your canvas or your materials, that was exciting as well, that you had access to that and all you had to do was ask.

Doing a sculpture for the first time, making my first cup, and not only making it but putting it into the kiln and waiting for it to come out and then be able to paint it and then gloss it and make it look glassy and not just like a little painted piece of clay, that was so cool.

Sitting and watching Ben Johnson draw and paint so seriously, he was a very serious artist who you kind of didn't get in his way, but he would talk to you. But it was kind of like you didn't ask him questions, you just let him talk while he painted and you'd learn a lot 'cause he'd talk through his technique and that was really good. That was interesting, along with like Ralph teaching music and you didn't really have to ask too much or you placed your hand on something and said "What is this?" and that simple question of "What is this" becomes a history lesson. It enriched my entire life. Yeah, it was beautiful.

Q: Do you consider yourself an artist?

Grant: Yes.

Q: So talk about how the Arts Center might have influenced you as an artist? Or your artistic process?

Grant: I believe I would not have considered myself an artist without the Arts Center. I would have been the son of an artist, always trying to duplicate what my mother did. However, I enjoyed my mother's work, my mother was an abstract painter and she painted some phenomenal work which I still remember. I don't have copies of it, I wish I did but I have memories of it, which is almost even greater so that's really cool. She did things not just painting, but she also did sculptures, not sculptures but carvings that's what they were. Carvings, I cannot remember the materials that were used but she would do a design on top of the carving and then carve out of it and then use it to make print designs whether on blocks or T-shirts or whatever. That was like an eye-opening experience because you learn that your art can go so much further than a page. There was more to art than just one--your piece of art can be so many different things. It can be a print, a magazine art, it can be so many different things. Art was in your future, it could be. The influences from the different many artists, and their different types

of art but also their appreciation of each other's art-- I remember it all, if not, probably those that I don't even know of-- But all of the artists in the Arts Center had works from each other, which I thought was amazing. And even growing up I would go to their houses and everybody had someone else's work in their place so it was enriching, it was enlivening, it was inspiring.

So now I don't consider myself as just an artist who draws or paints like his mom or who would like to paint like his mom but I can sculpt, I can play a little bit of music, I can do art appreciation, I know the color wheel and color scheme like the back of my hand. So it was really great. I have an eye for photography now, which I never had before and now as I get older and more relaxed into my life, I look back at the things that I learned at the Arts Center and I want to kind of bring them out now--which is great.

Q: Thank you, so you talked about the impact the Art Center had on you. What impact do you believe --if any-- do you think the Art Center had on the Bridgeport community?

Grant: Wow. I run into some people from the Art Center who I did not necessarily know by name but by face, either being in the same class or even just being in the Arts Center at the same time and knowing the atmosphere together. But having that background, you come across people who just smile and are like "remember when". Remember when art was free, remember when expression was free, where you had no fear of putting your thoughts down on canvas or on paper or on a sheet of music. To build something, to be able to make something outside of your living situation because many of us kids lived in single parent homes or we had a lot of hard times, living with not a lot of money, you know, but you didn't know you were poor when you were doing art. It never mattered. And art was always honest, no matter what was going on in life, art was always honest. You could put your heart down on it so as young people we shared each other. We shared each other's minds and our hearts and our ideas, we came together as a unit, as a community where I don't see that happening too much as of today. I think there is a loss of that communication, that hands on, that getting together in the same room and experiencing the same things. I think that we are very much more disconnected now and we need arts to pull us together.

Q: So when did you stop going to the Arts Center, and why?

Grant: I believe it was when we moved. I think we moved in and I don't know --life just changed. Personally for us life changed and I think I heard things about funding and things going down and not able to maintain the artists that were there. But yeah, I do remember my mother being one of the artists there who tried to keep the Arts Center open and was willing to go there on her own time and do whatever they could to continue to give the community the art and the service that they were giving. But like all things it came to an end. I just remember being a cut-off time where things just really changed from being, I mean life did change, it didn't end but the freedom of doing art, so much art, it just didn't--it wasn't the same. It never was the same.

Q: Let me ask you, do you think that Bridgeport would benefit from a re-opening or a re-creation of the Arts Center?

Grant: Yes, most definitely. Art ties people together, it ties people to themselves, it releases yourself. Art is freedom and so many people these days are trapped and so many dire situations, heart-breaking situations. You see around the corner the Kennedy Center has their artwork up, I cannot walk by without appreciating their art. It brings a smile to my face and it inspires me to do something different. It brings color to my day, it makes me think and when you talk to a young person about the arts and they can't wait to put their ideas on paper, but to have it for free, or to have it at least for low cost and to have it in a community where a lot of suffering is going on--to have art in the middle of a community like that, the explosion of joy that could happen would be amazing. Yes, we could definitely benefit, we need it, it's not just about benefit, we need it. Art is like a total resource that we should not be without.

Q: One of the things that some other interviewees have mentioned to me is a sort of community feel or family feel when it came to the Arts Center and that the instructors certainly gave that off. That people received it and gave it back, do you think that that's true?

Grant: I do, I do, even from when I look at photographs, which kind of jog your memory sometimes, and I remember the Arts Center wasn't just the Arts Center inside, it was the outside

too. It was the cookouts, it was the comradery, it was the playing outside, it was the making friends from across neighborhoods in town which you normally wouldn't make friends with. There was no division of the East Side, the West Side, none of that was going on what-so-ever. Color was not a factor, race was not a factor, it all blended. The color was in the art, the difference was in the art and we shared those differences so it was really cool. I think that the community feel, like I said, I knew all these people by their first names and not because they were friends or co-workers of my mother but because they told me to call them that, and in doing that they leveled the playing field. It was kind of like not being in a classroom situation where you have "Mr. so-and-so" teaching you this and you have to behave and be quiet. You have this first name, Sally, Sue or Bob, who call you by your first name, and they want to share their information in life with you and it just made it a lot more freeing and opening so yeah--

Q: So please talk a little bit more about how you think that kind of approach would impact a child.

Grant: Oh! Wow! I think that children are often made to feel that they have to be put in a certain place. They have to be quiet, they have to sit down, they have to not be in adult conversations. A lot of things I think that adults think are beyond children's understanding. I think that we forget that we were also children ourselves. Children are just young people with young minds and depending on what we give them, that's what they soak in and if we don't give them the right things, the good things, the freeing things, the abilities to be creative, be themselves, to be understanding and tolerate other people and other--what am I trying to say? Other races, other people with other looks, you know, I think we have a lot of separation today with cellphones and internet--And these are great things in technology; however, they cause a separation in the community where we don't see each other as much. We don't talk, we don't share our ideas because we are afraid so often of being judged. When you have a room full of adults who show that they aren't afraid of being judged and they're not afraid to show what they feel inside which is their art, they are not afraid to show you music and art and sculpture and writing things and readings that come from different cultures, and they share that with you as part of your entire history and not just your immediate history, it informs you and builds you up. It makes you bigger than you are, it makes you want to research your world around you.

Too many times I've noticed that where I have been given an atlas, or been shown the globe, and been told to paint something from that country or to pick out an instrument from that country and if you were to go and ask the kids today to pick out things, and I don't mean all kids of course, but I've worked in social services and seen children who do not know that New York City is the farthest place that they can go. They don't know that you can get on a plane and go anywhere, you can get on a bus, you can go inside your mind and go anywhere. You can get books on tape, you can read anything and see art. You can go to a museum and experience the world. They are not getting that as much as I did and I think it holds you back, it holds your spirit back. If you don't have anything to look forward to, then why look up.

Q: Would you talk a little bit about the art that you do currently, whatever media that might be.

Grant: Well I think that with my background in the Arts Center, I see this coming back. My inspirations are coming back from the Arts Center and I'm feeling free again to experience what I did before. In many of my adult years I held back by working in the 9-5 and again going within side myself and not sharing what I did when I was younger but now as an adult, art is coming back in Bridgeport as I'm saying. We have a new art store so I'm so excited. I am going beyond myself, I am allowing myself to be that kid again so where I have spent most of my years doing drawings or figure drawings or doing some design projects for maybe my job or some online things for different projects, I'm going back now and doing landscapes. I've taken a paint brush and taken some tips from Mr. Bob Ross from PBS. I am following whatever I can. If I don't have the materials or can't afford them I go to the Arts Center to make my materials, which is sometimes what we had to do, you know, if you didn't have something, you learned how to make it.

I love sculpting, I would love to get my hands on mounds of clay and do something now. Recently I did a support group where we made masks out of papier-mâché which was really interesting and I had to call my mother to find out how to do that again so that was really cool. So I mean I'm up to doing a little bit of everything. Right now I want my art to be explosive, I

want my art to be in 3D. I want to take my art beyond the page and the canvas and maybe do some dioramas or some 3D art to actually share with people as gifts. Who knows what, maybe I'll make a living off of my art finally, which has been my passion from when I was a child and it's coming back now so. My art right now is in writing, is in dreaming, is in living my dreams beyond paper and to see where it goes. I'm not really sure yet.

Q: Well, you mentioned a support group and I would like you to share if you would how your art and I happen to know that you have a writing gift, you have an oratory gift as well as visual arts gifts and how have those skills and talents helped you or helped to inform the various jobs that you've had over the years?

Grant: All right, so a quick background: I've been an educator, crisis and specialist case manager to the homeless and to those been affected by HIV, STDs and just experienced loss of housing and joblessness. I worked in a homeless shelter for about eight and half to nine years where I was allowed to run a group to inspire the people who seemed like they, I don't want to, I want to put the right phrase, they're hard to reach, they're very hard to reach, they're almost unreachable. And what I did was basically was, not what I did, I mean let me bring that back, what I have been allowed to do through my learning is to be myself. My background with the Arts Center, my background with having an art background, having a mother who was open to different experiences and allowed me to also be that same way-- and to try to bring that to other people. Not consciously cause I didn't know that until later on in life but I've always had a drive to just allow people to be whoever they are and I just accepted them for what they are and me, sometimes I'm a little crazy if that's the word people are going to use, and that's ok.

But I was given the opportunity to run a support group with about 25 people who were homeless who were dealing with dual diagnosis of mental health and addiction. One rule I had for coming in the door, and I made the rule up on the spur of the moment, was that I would not be myself. I want to be someone different, I want to be as much and have my potential unleashed and the only way that I could do that was to get out of myself. And so I changed my name and I made myself a name card and put it in front of me and all of the clients knew who my real name was but when they came into the room I'd introduce myself as this is who I was and I told them that I

needed everyone to go back outside the room and when you come back in you can choose any name you want for yourself and any life that you want for yourself. Choose any background you want for yourself. When you come back inside I have notebooks, sketchbooks and all kinds of art materials for everybody to use, there are no instructions except for to have fun and show me who you are and your art. And if you did not want to do it we would ask you to speak because that's another form of art as well.

So that group of wow, that group opened up. There were people who did not speak, who spoke. There were people who did not take care of themselves very well who decided to come in fresh and clean for the group and their different names. There were people who put their dreams into that room afraid to tell everyone else in that room what they wanted to do. There were women who were abused who brought open their abuse in the homeless shelters. There were men who lived a life of addiction who wanted to be great fathers and adopt kids because they couldn't take care of their own before. They did this through papier-mâché art, through construction art, we painted on the walls, we did things with Styrofoam, we put things together. We did whatever we could do. If there was a paper cup and you wanted to make something with it, you just did it and then we put your art up. And if it was private art, if it was writing or something we could record, then that would go into a file cabinet. I would let them know, "only you and I have the lock" (laughs) because that's very important. If someone trusts you with their private art, then you must keep it private. But it has allowed me to be a better person to other people. It allowed me freedoms that I didn't know that I needed. It allowed me to give that self--I want to say I'm a vessel--I hate to using the "I" word because I get caught up in that but I think that I have been a great vessel for other people and I have allowed for other people to be themselves and to create and be imaginative.

Q: So if you were able to, if you were given all of the resources necessary to have an Arts Center in Bridgeport today, how would it look, what would it offer?

Grant: What would it offer? How would it look? It would be in the center of town to take away the barriers or sides of town. I don't like our sides or different sides being separate, first of all. What would it look like? It would look like what we'd want it to look like. I think we'd start off

with a building of maybe a clean slate, I heard somewhere before, I'm not sure who said it but they said that young people sometimes do graffiti on buildings but they don't see the soul of the building. They don't see it's life. What if we gave that life to the community, to paint the building, to create the building of what they wanted it to be instead of asking someone to create a place to invite people to. Have them create the doorways, have them create the pictures around the windows, you know, whatever it is. To the top of the building, how are we going to do it, we have amazing artists in our city so it could be done. It would look like a huge open space with doorways to other spaces such as music and different particular arts to learn which may take some privacy or behind closed doored rooms to learn. I think there should be open wonderful spaces of people already into art, doing their art, those that are selling their art or using their art or using their art for whatever reason to be seen in the middle of the floors as inspiration. You have to walk around art, I think art should be not necessarily stuck on walls, but art should be placed in the middle of floors or hanging from ceilings. Art should be in the windows, art should just be, it should just be. Yeah.

Q: So is there anything that you would like to say about the Arts Center that you haven't already said or that I haven't already asked?

Grant: Um, wow! That's kinda heavy, that's kind of like saying something about family because that's the family that I learned, the family that I grew up with, the family that taught me so much, they have never left my imagination or my mind and I can recall each one of those people that I have spoken about to my head without a second thought. Their children and I are still friends. Those that we don't see often but are still close in some way, we never lose that closeness. I just, thank you for the foundation, you can't build without a great foundation and the Arts Center was a great foundation for me. I'm still building, so I guess thank you, yeah, that's what I'll say for the Arts Center--thank you. And can we have it again? Please?

Q: Thank you very much.