



TAMARA HARKAVY: CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's, Jack H Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, where we're gonna have the pleasure of a conversation with Tamara Harkavy. Tamara Harkavy is the founder and former CEO and artistic director of ArtWorks Cincinnati, where for 25 years, she oversaw its growth from a small non-profit to Cincinnati's largest public art program through investments in creativity and teaching professional workplace readiness skills. ArtWorks Cincinnati has employed more than 3600 youth and 3200 creative professionals, and completed more than 12,500 public and private art projects. Tamara Harkavy, thank you for joining us on the podcast.

Tamara Harkavy: Oh my God, thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here and truly an honor.

JH: Why don't we start off with an introduction to ArtWorks Cincinnati? Tell us a bit about it.

TH: ArtWorks was born out of a need to employ and train teens back in 1995, '96 as we were looking around the landscape. And at that time, if you remember, there was really high unemployment, and particularly with teenagers who in the summer time, were looking for jobs and there just weren't any. So some of the tenets of how we started ArtWorks was we believed that employing kids and using the arts as a vehicle to teach them life skills, not just job skills, but hard and soft skills was the perfect way in for many, many kids. So we based ArtWorks on a great program that we had seen in Chicago called Gallery 37. When we went to Chicago in 1995 with a group of really great Cincinnati leaders, including the mayor and the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative, and a journalist named Laura Pulfer. And what we saw was they had created a program where they employed over 700 kids every summer. They set up tents outside and they made art. And they engaged kids in a way that they didn't even know they were getting really a deep dive into skills that would benefit them in their futures. Artists and creativity, especially in the early years of ArtWorks, was really not a valued attribute. Artists were not understood as contributors to our economic standing in a community, and artists also were always looked at as being on the fringe. So by uniting youth and

artists and putting them in teams, we began what I call this giant social experiment.

JH: I wanna pick up on a term that you've adopted and ask you to think about it out loud with us in terms of your work, but also in general... So much of what you're talking about is fueled by a principle, which is that creativity and art are civic engines. And so I wanna pick up on this term that I've seen you speak about called creative place-making.

TH: There's an artist out of Chicago named Theaster Gates and he did a TED Talk a while ago on the idea that all communities deserve places of beauty, places to gather, and that blight begets blight. And if you don't take care of your places and engage your community, you lose those places. In order to really address civic concerns and make our cities better places for human beings to live, we need to engage communities in neighborhoods and also engage artists who are incredible problem solvers and experts like engineers and government to create a place where if we're going to make our neighborhoods a better place, we bring everybody to the table. So creative place-making, which I think it was first coined as a saying in maybe 2010, it's a very new idea that has been practiced for years, for generations. Great urbanists like Jane Jacobs and Olmsted and William Whyte really were espousing these ideas, but somebody coined the phrase, and now it's stuck. And it makes perfect sense.

TH: So if you're going to work on a new streetscape or a park in a community, and you just come in with your bulldozers and tear down buildings and uproot trees without engaging the community, when that project is finished, nobody's gonna care. But where you get great buy-in is when you start to engage the community and bring an artist or a group of artists into the table and you build pride and inclusion and buy-in. And I think maybe even most importantly, when the project is done and you walk out the door, you have stewardship, you have people who want to use these spaces and care about these spaces and have made their own contribution to the realization of these spaces.

JH: Among the various ways you can do this, is there a special place in this mindset for murals?

TH: In 2007, the mayor of Cincinnati, his name was Mark Mallory, called me into his office and he said, "Hey, I just got back from Philadelphia, there are 3000 murals all over the city. I want ArtWorks to do this, and I want at least one mural in every neighborhood." And I sat there dumbfounded because to be honest, I hadn't seen a lot of good murals. But when the mayor asks you to do something you go, "Okay, okay," and then you figure out how to do it. So we left his office and we formed what we do really well...

TH: In everything we do, we formed a committee and we said, "Okay, let's tackle this. Let's tackle this throw down." And we learned by going to Philadelphia and talking to the folks at Mural Arts project and bringing what they learned back to Cincinnati, and then we do this thing called, we Cincy-fied it. We know what works in this town, it can be very

conservative, and it took a lot of proving that this could be a great thing. So as we moved forward over the years and we started to create murals, those murals started to make Cincinnati a different place, and it became a backdrop for a narrative about our history, they really did indeed turn blighted walls into beautiful walls. They engaged the communities that we were painting in. We were paying kids a living wage. We were paying artists a living wage. And we gained a lot of notoriety through these efforts. And I'd like to think that our murals really put Cincinnati on the map. Even though we have a super-rich arts and cultural sector here, they're so visible that people were coming downtown and coming to neighborhoods, and there just was this incredible amount of civic pride that followed the creation of the mural program.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: So before we go on to your next project, I wanna ask you to tell us, to drum up if you can from the top of your head, a single story an anecdote that captures the civic power of art.

TH: Fifth Third Bank has a blank parking garage facade that is in the center of downtown. And the president of the bank came to me and said, "Hey, what would it cost to paint a mural on our wall?" On this giant, giant wall. And we said, "Well, let's sit down and talk about it. And we gathered the group of representatives from the bank and our team, and they said they wanted it to be patriotic, traditional and non-risk-taking. And we took it as, "Oh my God. We're gonna have to paint an American flag in the center of downtown across from the Contemporary Art Center. That's never gonna fly with us." So we started looking around and we started talking to this Eduardo Kobra who is from Brazil, and he brought us a design idea, which is Neil Armstrong. After his career as an astronaut, he was on the faculty of the University of Cincinnati. And funny enough, he was also on the board of Fifth Third Bank. And if you're anywhere where you can Google this, you will see that the finished mural is this 3000 square foot image of Neil Armstrong in living color, and it is by no means traditional.

TH: It's not conservative, and at the end of the day, it is a statement about how the bank took a risk with us and how the community came out to celebrate this famous astronaut who did unbelievable things. And so that's an example of the unexpected happening... One of the most touching moments, I think I had while I was working in ArtWorks was I

was giving a mural tour to a bunch of dignitaries, which is how we would get our money for the next year. "Let me take you and show you what these kids are doing." And there was a young black kid who was working on a mural in Northern Kentucky. And I said, "What time did you get to work today?" And he said, "Well, I got to work at 6 o'clock. It takes me an hour and a half, 'cause I have to get on the bus from my neighborhood, and then I have to go downtown, and then I have to transfer two or three times to get to my work site." I was almost crying because this kid was so engaged and loved his job so much that he put himself out. I'm sure he was exhausted by the end of his work day, 'cause you're working in 90 degree weather, 100% humidity. But that's how much he was committed to what he was doing and what he was giving back to the community.

JH: That's great. So tell us a little bit about your work with Jewish Cincinnati that you're looking forward to doing.

TH: When Israel celebrated its 50th anniversary, I got a call from the Jewish Federation and a friend of mine named Kim Heiman. And she said, "Tamara, we're gonna do something in celebration of Israel's 50th birthday, and we wanna do something around arts and culture. Would you join the group?" And I said, "Yes." And what we ended up doing was creating a garden of peace in the Cincinnati Zoo, and it's... How many years ago was that? 20 years ago, maybe, something like that.

JH: Yeah, 20 years later.

TH: It lives there today, and it's a beautiful historic walk through that represents a dig, a tale. And we created it with groups of kids and Cincinnati artists all coming together for this gorgeous Leave Behind, and I think we must have engaged a good 10 or 15 artists to work on this project. So, from that, every time the Jewish community is looking to do something that involves creativity and the arts, they call me and I got a call recently to join what we're calling Jewish Cincinnati Bicentennial, and I'm gonna co-chair this with my good friend, Kim Heiman. And our goals are to have a year-long celebration that talks about the contribution of Jews in Cincinnati, starting with the rededication of the Chestnut Street cemetery in the West End, which has been overlooked and untended for years and years, decades probably.

TH: So, there's some investment going back into that neighborhood, that community to revitalize the cemetery. But it really will be a year-long celebration of the contribution of Jewish Cincinnatians and Jewish living in our city. And you know, of course, that you sit in L.A., when you're in L.A., as one of the arms of HUC, which this is the birthplace of reform Judaism. So, we are reaching out to all manner of... Tons of different sectors of our city, for instance, some of the really cool initiatives is a partnership with the Cincinnati Museum Center, which will have an exhibit of Jewish Cincinnati. We're gonna be working with... Do you know Joan Nathan, Jewish Cooking in America, that amazing cookbook.

JH: Yeah. I do, I do.

TH: I don't know that we're gonna get Joan Nathan here but, we would really love to do a couple of Jewish cooking classes and do it in service to some of the food kitchens because food insecurity is at an all-time high. I could tell you 10 of the events that are going on but I'll leave it at the idea that as we continue as a community to make an impact in our community, we also wanna make sure we continue to tell our story and show how Jews have made Cincinnati a better place.

JH: Well, that sounds like a great note to end the conversation on and to wish you a lot of success in that endeavor, not unlike the great successes you've achieved with ArtWorks Cincinnati. Thank you for the pleasure of your company and learning about your incredible work.

TH: Thank you very much.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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