

DCA PROGRAM SEEKS TO DEFINE AND ENGAGE CULTURE IN MORRISANIA

Art program seeks to define, engage culture in Morrisania

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Part of the assessment process is mapping out Morrisania, which WHEDco continued to do on a block by block basis.

By Sarah Valenzuela

On Thursday, February 8, the NYC Department of Cultural affairs announced a program, Building Community Capacity, would launch in three additional neighborhoods citywide.

One of these neighborhoods has been selected right in the heart of the south Bronx, in Morrisania.

The program's strategy was to use cultural nonprofits and community-based development organizations to strengthen the role of culture in neighborhoods through the arts, according to DCA.

“A vibrant cultural life is essential to healthy neighborhoods,” said Tom Finkelppearl, DCA commissioner.

WHEDco and DreamYard Project Inc, who’ve worked together before in Morrisania, were the two grantees selected to work jointly on this project in the Bronx.

As part of the first phase of the program, the two organizations will do a neighborhood asset and cultural inventory, and conduct a research-based cultural assessment in collaboration with local artists, youth and other community members.

The assessment will showcase the diversity of the different cultures that make up the neighborhood, and the story and state of the arts in Morrisania.

“It’s not just finding places of beautification, but to bring communities together at the same time so that this is a stakeholder lead process,” said Tim Lord, co-executive director of DreamYard.

DreamYard is an arts and social justice program in the borough that partners with families, youth and schools to help build successful future leaders through the arts, according to Lord.

“This could have just been survey driven research, but we wanted it to also be a creative one,” said Lord, who explained DreamYard will have an artist working side by side with their high school interns to create a physical cultural asset map of Morrisania to help define the neighborhood’s history.

After the initial research, the teams, working with the community, will identify where increased cultural capacity could support Morrisania local families, youth, and artists.

The result will be a community-driven action plan to use the arts to address local cultural and community needs.

WHEDco, a community-based nonprofit, which has operated in the Bronx for 25 years, has focused on building and strengthening communities and economic development, according to WHEDco vice president of Community Development, Kerry McLean.

One of the arts aspects WHEDco said they are looking at is bringing back lost music spaces to the Morrisania area, as defined by research done by Dr. Mark Naison of Fordham University, folklorist Elena Martinez, and others over ten years ago, according to McLean.

“The Bronx is the birthplace of so many music forms and this neighborhood was once the home of many of those musical institutions,” said McLean.

“The physical evidence of the places where these musical styles got their start are here, but are now being used for something else,” continued McLean who also said they want to assess the history of music in the area and how it has influenced the culture of Morrisania.

The full assessment and creation of the action plan is expected to take about five months to complete, according to McLean and Lord.

“People from all over the world come to this borough with different traditions and there’s a need to provide spaces for people to celebrate these cultures and creatively express themselves,” said McLean.

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