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# Meanings of Cultural Participation at the Neighborhood Level: A Focus Group Analysis


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# Meanings of Cultural Participation at the Neighborhood Level: A Focus Group Analysis

## **Abstract**

In February and March 2004, Research for Action conducted three focus groups in North Philadelphia and Camden, NJ to shed light on the meanings of cultural participation in these low-income urban neighborhoods. Participants were recruited through neighborhood associations, senior centers, and churches to engage residents who were active in the community but not closely affiliated with arts and cultural organizations. The focus groups were designed to reveal how residents define cultural participation, the range of cultural activities in which they participate, how they express themselves creatively, and the barriers to cultural participation in these neighborhoods.

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Comments**

*Meanings of Cultural Participation at the Neighborhood Level: A Focus Group Analysis* was prepared for the Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project by Research for Action with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.



# **Meanings of Cultural Participation at the Neighborhood Level: A Focus Group Analysis**

**Prepared for the  
Philadelphia Cultural Participation  
Benchmark Project**

**by Research for Action  
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**Research for Action** (RFA) is a non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with educators, students, parents, and community members to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. RFA work falls along a continuum of highly participatory research and evaluation to more traditional policy studies.



## **Introduction**

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In February and March, 2004, Research for Action conducted three focus groups in low-income areas in the Philadelphia region to shed light on the meanings of cultural participation at the neighborhood level. The focus groups were designed to reveal how residents define cultural participation, the range of cultural activities in which they participate, how they express themselves creatively, and the barriers to cultural participation in these neighborhoods.

We conducted two focus groups in North Philadelphia – one in the East and one in the West neighborhood cluster as identified in the Social Impact of the Arts research design– and one focus group in North Camden.<sup>1</sup> Participants in the focus groups were recruited through neighborhood organizations, senior centers, and churches. Our goal was to engage participants who were active members of such organizations but who were not closely affiliated with arts and cultural institutions.

Several themes emerged that are relevant for arts and cultural organizations. Though there was variation both across and within the groups, we found that, for these respondents, culture was often closely tied to markers of identity such as racial or ethnic background and religious values or institutions. Cultural participation was also linked to experiences of public space, as residents sought either to stake a claim to their neighborhood or to find ways to escape it. We found that some of the factors that facilitated cultural participation also could serve as barriers; family commitments, for example, helped foster home-based cultural traditions but also limited involvement in activities outside the home. Finally, we learned that respondents did not see the term “artist” as describing only those with creative skills or talents. Rather, just as cultural participation was linked to cultural identity and values, artists were perceived as those who acted on these values and represented or evoked issues of racial and ethnic identity.

## **Strengths and Limitations of this Analysis**

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One of the strengths of these focus groups is that they foreground the perspectives of neighborhood residents whose voices are not always heard in conversations about culture and the arts. In addition, one of the groups was conducted in Spanish, which allowed for the participation of Latino residents who are sometimes excluded from such public dialogue.

Because of Research for Action’s long experience working with community groups in Philadelphia, we were able to locate active neighborhood organizations to recruit participants. The strength of this recruitment strategy was that participants were well-informed about neighborhood organizations and activities, cared deeply about their communities, and had strong opinions about neighborhood issues.

The limitations of this strategy were that the particular groups that participated tended to include mostly older adults and youth and thus we did not include many adults in their 20s to 40s. In addition, the participants were strongly affiliated with mainstream institutions and, as a result, the groups did not reveal information about forms of counter-cultural participation.

The small sample size and the fact that our findings were deeply embedded in unique neighborhood and city dynamics means our findings are not generalizable. Participants in these focus groups should not be seen as representative of their neighborhoods, their racial or ethnic group, or any other social category. In the cross-site analysis we do not presume to show the full breadth of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden but rather to highlight the range of attitudes toward and experiences with cultural participation that these sets of interviews revealed.

## **What Constitutes “Cultural Participation”?**

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As facilitators, we encouraged focus group participants to interpret the term “cultural participation” widely. Although there was diversity of opinion within each conversation, the three groups each tended toward a different understanding or experience of cultural participation, discussed below.

### **Western North Philadelphia focus group: Organized arts and cultural events citywide**

In general, the Western North Philadelphia group was the most active in conventional arts activities such as concerts, theater, and art and history exhibits. Members of this group also attended citywide festivals, book readings, regattas, and music performances. Almost all of the cultural events that participants named took place outside their neighborhood, primarily in Center City. This seemed to be an extremely mobile group, willing and able to go to other parts of the city for arts and culture that were not available in their neighborhood. This was particularly true of the adults in the group; the teenagers were, with one exception, more focused on activities in the neighborhood. It should be noted that none of the adults in this group had children living at



home. This may have made it easier for them to travel to activities in other parts of the city.

### **Eastern North Philadelphia focus group: Family traditions and uses of neighborhood space**

For the Eastern North Philadelphia group, the most memorable events in participants' lives focused vividly on family: births, deaths, family visits, and family holiday celebrations. Many of the cultural events they recalled were centered on the home rather than on the church or formal cultural and arts organizations. This centrality of family was a value that they spoke of passing on to their children and that they linked to Puerto Rican and Latino culture. The annual Norris Square festival, which includes public performances, artisan and craft stands, and Puerto Rican food, was lauded as one of the best events in the neighborhood. This was just one example of the ways that participants spoke of using and enjoying outdoor space; sitting on the porch, planting flowers, feeling the breeze, listening to birds, and listening to musicians in the park were also cited as activities that reminded people of the things they loved about Puerto Rico.

### **Camden focus group: Church-based volunteerism and travel**

For members of the Camden focus group, most types of cultural participation were mediated by the church, including social service and evangelical activities as well as more conventional arts and cultural experiences. The church seemed to be both a social and spiritual focus for this group. Their communal activities including attending a concert, taking a trip to Washington, D.C., and celebrating life accomplishments and rites of passage. On a more regular basis, participants were involved in a variety of church missions: volunteering at a food bank, working with the homeless, running a breakfast at the church, and teaching GED classes, for example. Focus group participants also emphasized the importance of family as a facilitator of cultural participation. They discussed family activities such as bowling and playing instruments at home, as well as outdoor hobbies such as gardening or walking at the park. They also described attending family reunions or cruises and participating in local cultural events with their children and grandchildren – including their grandchildren's musical performances.

## **The Value of Cultural Participation**

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### **Perpetuation/rediscovery of one's own cultural history and traditions**

In all three of the focus groups (two African-American and one Latino), the cultural activities in which

members of the group had participated revealed a deep interest in their own cultural heritage. This was most evident in the Latino group, which focused primarily on the linkage of cultural participation to Puerto Rican identity. Nonetheless, it was also present in the two African-American groups, where participants spoke about their interest in black art and literature, and in making visible the often overlooked role that African-Americans have played in American and world history.

For the Eastern North Philadelphia group, cultural participation signified maintaining a particularly Puerto Rican cultural identity, carrying on the traditions taught by parents and grandparents and attempting to teach them to one's children. One participant summarized the comments of many when she said,

*We carry our culture in our blood... the activities that you do, the music that we play during Christmas, because that is what culture means to us.... There are many of us that do not have the opportunity to go to a play, but we still live culture.*

Many of the participants who had come to the United States as children mourned the cultural associations and competencies that they had lost as a result of assimilation, particularly the loss of the Spanish language. For this reason, they were tremendously grateful to live in the Norris Square area, where they saw Latino culture affirmed and celebrated and where they could relearn and cultivate musical and culinary traditions and the Spanish language. Nonetheless, participants also expressed a desire for Latino culture to be more widely represented in mainstream American media and education.

In the two African-American focus groups, participants also described seeking out opportunities to learn their own cultural history. Members of the Camden group pointed out that as children, they had never been taught their own history and so sought out opportunities as adults to learn black history through travel and literature. A Camden participant provided this example:

*My most memorable experience was the seniors' trip to Washington that we took. I learned a lot about my own heritage and things that had happened. I learned about people who had contributed things to Washington that I wasn't previously aware of. When we went to school as children we learned about the White House, but we didn't learn about too many colored things and how [our] race had done.*

Unlike the Latino group, these groups spoke of leaving their own neighborhoods to find such learning opportunities, either through cultural tours in other parts of the country or through African-American or African performances and exhibits in other parts of

Philadelphia (e.g., the African-American Museum and Philadanco performances in Center City).

Focus group participants in Western North Philadelphia and Camden also expressed their interest in African-American artists and in artistic themes that reflected their experience. As one young person explained,

*I like a lot of different authors, but the ones that I like the most are the ones that relate to my neighborhood and African-Americans.*

Participants in these two groups were particularly interested in writing by African-American authors, both classic literary figures such as Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou and contemporary popular fiction writers such as Omar Tyree and Tyler Perry. One participant said that she herself was writing a book about the history and experience of “blackness,” building on the research she conducted for a regular column for her church bulletin on the role of African-Americans in the Catholic Church.

### **Learning about other cultural traditions**

In one focus group, in Western North Philadelphia, participants spoke of appreciating opportunities to learn about other cultural groups. In fact, several people, when asked about the cultural activities in which they participate, first named their experiences of cross-cultural interaction and education. One young person spoke about the personal transformation he had experienced as a result of participating in a summer program where he developed friendships with students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Other people described participating in multi-cultural arts events such as Caribbean music at the Dell East or the Puerto Rican parade on the Ben Franklin Parkway. One young woman planned to make a video documentary to highlight different musical traditions in the city:

*The kids in my school might only know about rap or hip hop but I want to expose them to the classical music or the Latin and reggae explosion that's going on.*

Interestingly, this group's interest in exploring other cultures may at times have conflicted with the desire for “authentic” cultural experiences that we heard in the Eastern North Philadelphia group. The Puerto Rican participants in this group said that the Puerto Rican parade had once showcased the beauty of Puerto Rican culture. In recent years, however, they felt it had been ruined by the participation of other groups such as the Mumpers and commercial/ advertising entries such as a Budweiser float.

*... the Mumpers, the cyclists and the beer trucks with their pretty horses are there, and the Puerto Rican tradition and what it means in culture doesn't exist.*

Nonetheless, it is possible that if the parade had been as “authentic” as this group of Puerto Ricans wished, it might have attracted only members of the Puerto Rican community and not been as accessible to the African-Americans with whom we spoke. This is an idea that requires further exploration.

Members of the Camden focus group did not express this same interest in learning about other cultures. In fact, they suggested that the integration of people of different ethnicities, rather than enriching their neighborhoods, created new divisions based on language and cultural barriers. As a result of this lack of communication and shared experience, they saw their neighborhood “culture” as in decline, with few neighbors reaching out to one another, holding block parties, or developing friendships.

*In the inner Camden it's really hard to stay cultured because of the various ... it's just too mixed up. Half the people on your block can't even speak the language. There is no fellowship.... On my block it would be hard to get a cultural something going because we don't really associate. We speak. We're not enemies, but we don't do anything together.*

This difference in attitude is not surprising if we look at the demographics of the Western North Philadelphia and North Camden areas. While the Philadelphia area is almost entirely African-American, the Camden area has a growing Latino population; between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population grew from 42% to 52% while the African-American population dropped from 45% to 36%. While the North Philadelphia participants may be interested in cultural diversity from a safe distance, the Camden participants may be experiencing more directly the challenges of communicating across cultural, linguistic, and perhaps class differences with new immigrants in their own neighborhoods.

### **Connection to religious institutions and religious values**

Participants in the Camden focus group, all members of the same Baptist church, emphasized that the majority of their cultural participation was mediated by their church, which facilitated volunteering opportunities and sponsored trips to other cities or arts institutions. Their responses suggested that they saw the value of cultural participation as linked to social action, and perhaps that this social or religious mission increased its value or meaning for them.

This was not expressed in the same way by members of the Western North Philadelphia group, half of whom

were members of the Catholic church where the group was held; many of them participated individually in arts and culture unconnected with the church. Nonetheless, religious institutions did provide opportunities for cultural exploration, such as writing a column on black Catholicism for the church bulletin and traveling to gospel conventions.

For participants in the Eastern North Philadelphia focus group, religion provided a powerful context for home observance of holidays, lifecycle events, and home displays of religious objects. No one in this group indicated that he or she was a member of a church or other religious institution. Rather, churches were mentioned only as locations of social services and cultural educational programs in the neighborhood.

### **Spiritual and emotional value of cultural participation**

In all three focus groups, participants suggested in various ways that cultural participation had a spiritual or emotional benefit for them. In the Eastern North Philadelphia group, this was expressed in terms of the joy that celebrating cultural rituals with families could bring and the self-worth that could be gained by truly knowing and appreciating one's own cultural heritage. As one participant said,

*Culture is not something that you can put into someone; it's something that has to come out of the person and you have to offer it until, like a shipwrecked person out in the ocean waiting to be thrown a line, you have something to hold onto. That is culture for your spiritual life. It's a lifesaver.*

Similarly, some members of the Camden group also linked culture to self-worth, emphasizing the personal importance of learning black history and heritage. In the Western North Philadelphia focus group, different participants expressed that cultural participation helped to boost their self-esteem, helped keep them focused and motivated, and provided spiritual grounding. As one participant explained about her volunteer activities, "It just makes me whole."

### **Staking a claim to – or seeking escape from – neighborhood public space**

Members of the three focus groups expressed very different attitudes toward public space in their neighborhoods. In the Eastern North Philadelphia group, participants described the way that they had claimed public space in the Norris Square area, through the revitalization of Norris Square park, the cultivation of gardens, and the public celebration of festivals. They voiced tremendous appreciation for this neighborhood where Puerto Ricans could publicly express their culture without the fear of harassment or violence they

had once felt. Today, the neighborhood has been reclaimed as Latino space, particularly the Norris Square park itself, which this group likened to the public plazas that are so central to life in Puerto Rico.

*Sometimes there was a man sitting there [in Norris Square], on a bench with a guitar. I remember, I would sometimes see him playing his guitar and singing outside.... I remember because in Puerto Rico the serenades and everything...*

This claiming of outdoor space extended to people's homes as well. One participant in particular spoke of the importance of hearing the birds outside her home and building a porch for her mother so that she could sit outside, both experiences reminiscent of life in Puerto Rico. Another participant said she wished she could have a house, so that she could plant flowers, sit in a chair nearby, and "have the breeze outside, like in Puerto Rico." Many participants spoke about their agricultural experiences in Puerto Rico and the eastern United States, though no one in the group had translated this background to planting a community garden or other neighborhood agricultural projects.

In the Western North Philadelphia group, participants suggested that they had lost control of public space in their neighborhood. Concerns about neighborhood deterioration were paramount, and they said that problems of drugs and crime in the neighborhood had led to fear and mistrust. The young people in this group said that their participation in activities such as the school band and Beacon after-school programs helped keep them "off the streets." One young woman said that she looked for opportunities to leave the neighborhood.

*I barely stay in my own neighborhood. If I do, it's to catch the bus to get out of the neighborhood. I work all the way downtown. I told my dad that I would love to work around here, but I don't feel comfortable working behind bullet glass. I shouldn't have to go to work downtown.... A lot of times kids don't want to go outside in the neighborhoods, and if they do they are in fear. I don't feel comfortable sitting on my stoop anymore because I see all these smokers sitting on the corner.... So, I stay in the house, or if I have to go to work, I leave out as quickly as I can.*

For some members of this group, cultural participation seemed to offer an escape from the pressures and potential dangers of the neighborhood.

In the Camden focus group, participants described their neighborhoods as in transition. They complained that their blocks were no longer the close-knit communities they had once been but did not describe the sense of fear and uncertainty that Western North Philadelphia residents experienced. In some cases, participants

blamed the city for lax enforcement of laws against dumping and abandonment and in others they turned the blame on their neighbors for not fulfilling their responsibility to care for their property and their children.

*I would like to see the neighborhood get back on its feet, but nobody seems to be into that. When I went out there [to my neighborhood] it was beautiful. People kept their houses clean. They did their steps and everything nice because you had a different type of people there, but those people left. Now, you have people who just don't care. Most of the houses out there are being rented, and people don't want to take care of them. If you have a nice home on one street and two doors down the house is dilapidated, your house isn't worth anything. You can't sell it so you're stuck there. That's the way life is around my neighborhood.*

Camden participants linked the loss of pleasurable public space to a decline in neighborhood culture or, as they said in religious language, a loss of “fellowship” among neighbors.

## **Barriers to Cultural Participation**

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### **Personal and community commitments**

In the Eastern North Philadelphia and Camden groups, personal issues such as scheduling conflicts or family obligations were likely to prevent cultural participation. Many Camden participants discussed their obligations to help care for ailing family members or grandchildren. In the case of the Eastern North Philadelphia group, commitment to family helps to foster cultural practices in the home, but it may also prevent family members from participating in organization-sponsored activities. Similarly, in the Camden group, the majority of participants mentioned church outreach and church activities as occupying a great deal of their time, perhaps preventing them from participating in other activities; however, the church also facilitated a great deal of cultural participation. The Camden focus group was the only one in which participants mentioned conventional barriers to participation such as cost and limited access to information.

### **Loss of neighborhood resources**

Participants in the Western North Philadelphia group, many of whom were extremely active arts participants in other parts of the city, discussed the reasons that they do not have cultural outlets in their own neighborhood: community centers that once offered arts and crafts classes had closed, libraries had limited hours, boys' and girls' clubs were located far away, and bowling

alleys had been replaced by chain drug stores. Two grandmothers in the group said that their families had to drive grandchildren to other parts of the city for dance and music classes.

*In the neighborhood a lot of the places close up at night. You know, you used to have crafts, or, not necessarily senior citizen centers, but there were cultural things that you could do in the neighborhoods at night. Might be an art class here and there, you know, for people who are still working after six o'clock, and I think that because of crime and all you can't stay out in the neighborhoods. You used to, could take like a ceramic class, clay, right in the neighborhood. They still have them, but you have to go out further. Like now you have to go up to Chestnut Hill. There are plenty of classes but everybody doesn't drive. So, you know a person is not going to take the bus up there at 6:30 at night to get to class from 7 to 9. So, location, you know, a lot of that and crime, has taken away a lot of cultural things that were happening right in the neighborhood.*

This loss of neighborhood resources was also noted in Eastern North Philadelphia, where participants remembered that places to watch Spanish language movies had once existed.

One Western North Philadelphia participant suggested that the Internet might also have contributed to a decreased interest in participating in organized cultural activities.

### **Cultural and linguistic isolation**

In the Eastern North Philadelphia group, we did not ask about barriers directly, but because so much of the interview suggested that this group is fairly isolated – linguistically, culturally, and geographically – from other parts of the city, we can infer that these factors may serve as barriers to cultural participation outside the neighborhood. This is an issue that could be explored further in future research. Though this group did not discuss cost as a barrier to participation in cultural events, some did mention struggles with money at various times in their lives. This may also have restricted their participation in costly cultural activities.

### **Youth culture**

In all three focus groups, including the group that contained several young people, participants expressed their fears of what they saw as a disrespectful and violent youth culture and their frustration at the dearth of positive opportunities for young people. One older woman in the Western North Philadelphia focus group explained how she thought the availability of activities for young people was linked to the well-being of the neighborhood:

*I'd like to see more after-school activities for the young kids.... They need things that can get them off the corners. They need things that can challenge them. See one thing affects the other. Whether the youth are or aren't being aggressive, if the average older person sees four or five of them standing on the corner, they are going to be afraid.... Seniors stop coming out.*

Just the mere presence of young people on the street is enough to deter older people from leaving their homes and participating in a variety of activities.

In the Eastern North Philadelphia group, participants saw the perpetuation of Puerto Rican culture as dependent on the interest and commitment of young people, many of whom, they lamented, had rejected the food, dress, and other traditions that their parents and grandparents held dear. Nonetheless, participants were pleased that the popularity of Latin music and dance in wider American youth culture had led their children and grandchildren to show a new interest in learning dances such as the *merengue* and *bachata*. As one mother said excitedly,

*I have to find someone that can teach me about music so that I can teach my kids, because now they are starting to be a little more interested...*

Participants in this group suggested that Latino cultural heritage provided an alternative to the materialism and violence they saw in American culture and could help keep youth closer to family networks.

In the Western North Philadelphia focus group, which included four teenagers, the young people primarily described their involvement in more mainstream cultural activities such as band, choir, youth organizations, and after-school programs. They believed such programs were available for students like themselves who wanted to take advantage of them, but lamented that many young people would rather join a gang or hang out on the street than participate. In addition to material resources, they said the neighborhood needed more “neighborhood leaders and role models” to motivate young people. Further research that specifically focuses on capturing the perspectives of youth could shed light on the cultural activities of those who generally do not engage with mainstream arts and educational institutions.

## **Active Cultural Organizations**

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When asked to identify the most active cultural organizations in their neighborhoods, adults from the Western North Philadelphia group tended to name mostly city-wide and formal institutions and

organizations, while the youth focused on school-based activities and their local Beacon programming. When responding to this question, youth named activities such as playing in a school band, singing in a school choir, and participating in a college access program called Upward Bound. One young participant was very active in seeking out Philadelphia’s diverse music scene (such as found on South Street, Center City coffee shops, Penn’s Landing, and The Gallery.)

In Eastern North Philadelphia, participants predominantly named locally-based organizations and churches and although they expressed an awareness of city- or university-based cultural programming (such as the Puerto Rican Parade and Latin American studies and other programs at the University of Pennsylvania) they did not participate in them. Several participants in this focus group specifically felt the loss of the Puerto Rican theater they had remembered in the area.

The Camden group showed relatively equal knowledge of Camden- and Philadelphia-based organizations, institutions, and churches that offered cultural activities, as well as local organizations and associations in their neighborhoods.

The following lists specific organizations and churches individuals were aware of and likely to travel to, or seek out, for “cultural” programming and activities in the city or in their own neighborhoods.

### **Places and Events**

*Western North Philadelphia Focus Group:* Participants made specific mention of the Dell East, Philadanco, the Ben Franklin Parkway (for Unity Day, Jazz Day, Puerto Rican Day, and music festivals), Boaters Row (to see the regattas and the balloons in summer), the Merriam Theater, Philadelphia Free Library (Central Branch), Philadelphia Art Museum (regular exhibits and Cultural Wednesdays), The Visitor Center (cultural exhibits), the African-American Museum, and Penn’s Landing. One participant also mentioned traveling to Camden to see the Amistad slave ship. One woman described the draw of exploring and attending different events outside her neighborhood:

*I think that being exposed to different things is what draws attention, because that is what got me into Penn’s Landing ... I told myself that I was not going to stay down there for more than an hour, but I wound up staying there for like three hours, because of all of the acts and shows... So I wound up spending the entire afternoon down there because I got exposed to all these different things.*

Neighborhood- and faith-based organizations included Youth United for Change (has retreats with cultural

activities), local senior centers (weekly poetry group at King Senior Center), local recreation centers, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), United Way, Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP), Sacred Heart (a hospice center), Honickman Learning Center, and the Beacon program at Strawberry Mansion High School (through Safe and Sound).

Participants also spoke about various cultural activities that they do within their churches, such as singing in the choir, taking exercise classes, attending a youth convention through the church, and attending a gospel convention called “Choir to Fire” (when this individual lived in Florida). One participant, however, felt that there were no cultural activities or programs offered in the churches.

Individuals found the Visitors’ Center downtown, the Internet, television news, school counselors, friends, and teachers as helpful sources of information about various activities and programs. One woman specifically mentioned the weekend *Philadelphia Tribune* as an excellent source of information about activities. She said, “It’s usually divided by child, adult, things for the family, particularly things that I want to do that are Afro-centric.”

*Camden Focus Group:* Participants mentioned the “black museum” (perhaps a local activity for Black History Month), the Tweeter Center, the Office of Aging, a theater in Philadelphia (to see a play with Judge Mathis), the Walt Whitman Center, the Camden Creative Arts High School, Rutgers University (Camden campus), professional associations such as Phi Delta Kappa, and African-American sororities such as Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Locally-based activities centered around Dayton Manor (a senior center), Weed and Seed, the Martin Luther King Center, Parkside Community Center, La Unique African-American Book Store, Respond Inc., the Renaissance, and a Christian day center (for people with special needs).

Camden participants also made note of several cultural activities that they engage in through the church, such as working with the homeless, having a communal breakfast, taking cultural tours and trips (such as to Washington to learn about black history), and participating in a month-long heritage celebration at the church (during the month of February). One participant mentioned that the Office of Aging often provided free tickets for seniors to local cultural events but that these were limited to Camden residents, which excluded some members of the church’s senior group.

*Eastern North Philadelphia Focus Group:*

Organizations mentioned included the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration (which, along with other Latino groups, sponsoring “Cultural Fridays”), University of Pennsylvania (their folkloric group that teaches about Latin American culture), and Temple University. Several individuals also mentioned the Puerto Rican parade, but they no longer attend for reasons discussed above.

Local organizations and churches included Norris Square Senior Center, Taller Puertorriqueño, Asociación de Músicos Latino Americanos [AMLA], Concilio, St. Henry church, Casa del Carmen, the Catholic Institute for Evangelization, and St. Bonifacio church. One participant mentioned the Spanish newspaper, *Al Día*, as a good source of information about activities.

## Who are Artists?

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### Those with creative skills and who express themselves creatively

Two individuals in the Western North Philadelphia and Camden groups felt that being an artist was based on one’s creative skills. The Camden participant said,

*I see myself as an artist when I take pen in hand and try to write some type of poetry. Whenever I write it comes out in a poetic form. I see myself as an artist when I get up against the wall and wallpaper, paint, and decorate. I see myself as very creative.*

Two others felt that when they applied themselves and became focused and creative in their writing, they were artists. One woman from Western North Philadelphia explained,

*When I take time and really get into what I’m doing, I’m really creative in my writing. If I’m preoccupied, I’m not as creative. When I read things that I have written when I took my time, I don’t even believe that I wrote it. I can tell when I have been relaxed, and I’m not doing a whole bunch of things. I can tell the difference in the writing.*

Across the groups, many people seemed reluctant to identify themselves as artists even though they engaged in creative activities. In Camden, for instance, eight individuals declared that they were not artists, yet four of them said they liked to fix things, bake, read, and sing (“make noises”). When asked how they express themselves creatively, participants in Western North Philadelphia named reading, fashion, verbal communication, writing (such as in a journal or online diary), and creative projects (such as cards or poems for family members). Members of the Eastern North

Philadelphia group said they expressed themselves creatively through dress, jewelry, food, language, music, home décor, manners, and hospitality. One woman clearly explained in the following how culture is expressed.

*You express culture when a guest comes to your house... in the moment that she puts one foot inside your house you are telling that person where you come from. Whether you want to or not. Why? Because of how you behave, how you talk, how you treat her, what your house looks like, you have told her exactly who you are. Because of music that is listened to, the food that is cooked, the smell that stays in your house.*

### **Those who represent the African-American experience**

Participants in both of the African-American focus groups, but particularly the Western North Philadelphia group, mentioned specific African-American writers whose work related to their lives and neighborhoods and who challenged them to think. Their list included: Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Alice Walker, Claude McKay, Walter Dean Myers, Alex Haley, Maya Angelou, Omar Tyree, Iyanla Vanzant, Tyler Perry, Toni Morrison, and Sister Souljah (writer, rapper, and activist). One young participant also mentioned Spike Lee:

*He's more about the people. He depicts what's going on in the neighborhood realistically. He doesn't just sugar coat it. He exposes every aspect of a place. I like him for that.*

### **Those who are spiritual leaders and community role models**

In the Camden focus group, many participants expressed their sense that being an artist was connected with serving God and the community. Five participants felt that they were artists, but for very different reasons. One felt that she was an artist because, "I'm patterning my life after Christ." Two others also saw artistry in their spiritual and social connections, as articulated below:

*Yes, I have to be an artist because I have to visualize the positive forces. There are so many negative forces. Being an artist, I have to visualize the beauty, and I must do that. There are so many other vibes and I don't want to be connected with those vibes. My connection is God. So, that's where I get my force from. So, yes, I'm an artist*

*Yes, I see myself as an artist, and my main artists were my mom and dad. When I say I'm an artist...I hope that I can paint a picture to help young people to see my life. I would hope that I would enrich their lives through my example.*

Four individuals saw their mother and/or father as a significant artist in their life, with two others mentioning their grandchildren. One woman nicely captured the overriding theme that parents were artists because they taught through example and built up their children's self-esteem:

*My mother really impressed me and impacted my life. By teaching us self worth no matter how poor we were she made us feel special and loved. She taught us to reach out to other people. Also, I was reared in the south. I had some dedicated black teachers that taught us how important our education was. They took an interest in us learning about self worth and our heritage. I grew up knowing that there was a Black National Anthem when a lot of people in the south didn't know about it.*

One person also spoke of "people who really give back" in response to this question. Many others said that the late pastor of the church and his wife served as this type of artist in their lives. These responses seemed consistent with the Camden group's discussion of cultural participation as linked to social action and their faith. Artists are perceived as those who act on these values of community service, faith, and commitment to cultural heritage.

## **Conclusion**

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We have found the key themes that emerged from Alan S. Brown's work with Connecticut arts organizations and their participants useful in clarifying our understanding of the ways in which cultural and arts participation coincides with other types of community engagement (such as involvement in churches, senior centers, or other community organizations).<sup>ii</sup> We believe that five of Brown's key themes are particularly relevant to our focus group findings and can help in developing a theoretical framework to guide a community-wide survey.<sup>iii</sup>

**"Value to the individual is not necessarily dependent on the level of knowledge, technical skill or competency with the art form. Higher order values are possible, however, as context rises."**

Consistent with the above, the majority of participants in our focus groups who spoke about attending art- and cultural-based activities did so with great pleasure, whether or not they held a particular fluency or competency with that form of creative expression. However, we also found that individuals seemed to express a greater sense of excitement and passion toward events where they understood the historical or cultural context of an artist, speaker, or setting based on their ethnic heritage, obstacles that they had to

overcome, or influence on shaping today's world. In general, participants placed high value on cultural avenues that they found relevant to their own racial/ethnic/linguistic backgrounds such as learning about the influential and important historical roles that African Americans played in shaping Washington, D.C. However, some participants also placed value on activities that could help teach them something about other cultural contexts.

**“Many people who are very talented and creative do not consider themselves to be ‘artists.’ It seems that a lot of people have a low regard for their own artistic abilities, even if they are highly creative” AND “Personal connections with artists can bridge a relevance gap and ignite latent arts interests and inspire participation.”**

Although we did not consistently ask focus group participants whether or not they considered themselves ‘artists’, very few of those who were asked identified themselves as such. However, nearly all of our participants identified having some outlet for creative expression and production (such as fashion, building, writing, singing, and cooking/baking). In addition, when focus group participants were asked to identify the artists in their lives, they did not speak of ‘conventional’ artists but rather of people who embodied their own concepts of cultural participation such as ethnic/cultural leaders, individuals and social activists who shape society, and people (such as their parents) who help others build self-confidence and self-esteem.

It is also interesting to note here, drawing upon a separate interview conducted with a representative of a Philadelphia arts organization, that, in his opinion, art can be successfully aligned with local social activism and efforts to improve neighborhood quality of life.<sup>iv</sup> By aligning their arts programming with local issues, this organization has sought to increase arts participation while addressing the social context of poverty.<sup>v</sup> The representative eloquently stated the following about the organization's work:

*A lot is based on the issues we deal with here in the community. We have a great production, that really talks about the issues that we deal with and our kids deal with on a day-to-day basis: the apathy in the churches, the drug issues, sexual issues that kids have to go through against family members. It's a lot.... We do everything that we can to raise a social consciousness in our community through the arts.*

**“Authenticity is a core value for some people, who are attracted to the ‘realness’ of art, be it folk art, art of indigenous peoples, historically accurate**

**settings, and personal connections with artists. Some people go out of their way for authentic arts experiences, and arts experiences in unusual settings.”**

This concept of ‘authenticity’ in art is a particularly salient theme that overlapped with what participants expressed about their cultural participation. Adult participants were incredibly passionate when they discussed exploring their cultural heritage through the work of contemporary African American and Latino artists (such as authors, poets, filmmakers, and musicians), historical tours, and their daily lives as they spoke, dressed, cooked, and engaged with others. So although Western art markets tend to define ‘authenticity’ in terms of the use, manufacturing, or exchange of objects (see Steiner, 1994)<sup>vi</sup>, our focus group participants identified more with the ‘realness’ of cultural participation as it related to their sense of ethnic identity and daily lives.

**“Parents, especially during their early child-rearing years, often don't have time for self-guided arts activities and shift their focus to facilitating their children's arts participation – which is sometimes their only connection to the arts for a long while.**

**Retirement is seen by some as an opportunity to re-awaken old arts interests and to cultivate new ones.”**

Although our sample of younger adults was limited, the Eastern North Philadelphia participants who had children living at home emphasized the importance of sharing culture with their children and indeed supported the above finding. In addition, our senior Camden participants clearly articulated that retirement brought about a new, and often first-time, opportunity to engage in cultural participation and explore their ethnic history.

Our focus groups thus expand on Brown's finding, as individuals expressed interest in exploring a much broader scope of ‘cultural participation’ than just the ‘arts,’ both for themselves and for their children. Many participants spoke of the centrality of cultural transmission in their relationships with their children and grandchildren, regarding both ethnic heritage and ideas of self-respect.

In addition to the above themes, another finding emerged from our focus groups that illuminated the ways in which individuals might engage in neighborhood and citywide activities through their various attachments to space and place. We offer the following theme to build further upon Brown's work:

**Place and space have a powerful impact on the value individuals attach to cultural experiences. For some, experiencing public space is in itself a cultural activity, and for others, cultural endeavors are made**



**more meaningful when an event or activity takes place in a space that also has cultural meaning.**

All three of the focus groups revealed that not only is public space shaped by wider social, economic, and political forces, but it is shaped by active neighborhood residents themselves. As anthropologist Setha Low (1996) explains, “The social construction of space is the actual transformation of space – through people’s social exchange, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting – into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning.”<sup>vii</sup> In the case of Eastern North Philadelphia, residents identified their neighborhood, a place where they historically were unwelcome, as Puerto Rican public space. They staked this claim in part by viewing the space through a nostalgic lens, likening it to the outdoor plazas and parks of Puerto Rico, and engaging in neighborhood transformation through construction of porches, gardening, and political activism to prevent the displacement of local homeowners and businesses. It is in these ways that people are “creating and representing public space rather than [being] subjected to it.”<sup>viii</sup> Here, it seems that the work of neighborhood organizations, which have actively worked to physically redevelop the area, has been successful. It may be, in fact, that such neighborhood organizations have made the reclaiming of outdoor space a priority because public space has such significance in Latino cultural practices.

Western North Philadelphia and Camden residents, on the other hand, seemed to feel that they were losing a sense of control over and claim to their own neighborhoods. The Western North Philadelphia participants viewed their neighborhood public spaces as dangerous and unwelcoming, empty of the cultural institutions and services that were once widely available. Because of this shift, individuals had largely begun to turn elsewhere in the city for cultural opportunities, both to enrich their knowledge of African-American history and culture and to expand their understanding of other cultural groups not represented in their racially isolated neighborhood. Many Camden residents, however, lived in rapidly diversifying neighborhoods and consequently experienced cultural diversity firsthand through their interactions with immigrant and new, lower-income neighbors. Within this context, such inter-group contact was not seen by Camden residents as enriching but rather threatening to their memories of a close-knit community. In addition, neighborhood competition over space and services, between long-term residents and ‘newcomers,’ may have served to exacerbate these tensions.<sup>ix</sup>

In sum, the contrasts between our three focus groups highlight the importance of understanding the social, economic, and political context of neighborhoods as they change over time and impact the ways in which residents engage in local- and city-based cultural activities. Although we did not explore this contextual impact on our findings in great depth, it must be taken into consideration in future research and by organizations seeking to expand their participation rates in these and in similar neighborhoods. We have found that residents are looking for opportunities to learn about themselves, commune with others in social settings, and stake claim to space and place by creating informal boundaries based on a shared or dynamic history and sense of identity.<sup>x</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The Philadelphia Cultural Participation Benchmark Project Research Design Report was submitted to the Knight Foundation in September, 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Alan S. Brown, Alan S. Brown & Associates LLC, (2004). *The Values Study: Rediscovering the Meaning and Values of Arts Participation*. Connecticut Commission on Arts, Tourism, Culture, History and Film, in press.

<sup>iii</sup> Brown, A.S. (2004). *op. cit.* These themes are what Brown identifies as “red threads.”

<sup>iv</sup> To refine our focus group interview protocol, we conducted interviews with representatives from two Philadelphia-based arts and cultural organizations. We incorporated their suggestions in our protocol and our analysis of the focus groups.

<sup>v</sup> For further discussion of community arts organizations and their roles in social mobilization and activism, see Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert (2000). “Irrational” Organizations: Why Community-based Organizations are Really Social Movements. Paper prepared for the Planners’ Network 2000 conference, Toronto.

<sup>vi</sup> Chris Steiner (1994). *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>vii</sup> Setha M. Low (1996). Spatializing Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica. *American Ethnologist*, 23(4), 861-879, p.861.

<sup>viii</sup> Setha M. Low (1996), *op. cit.*, p.863. See also, Certeau (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>ix</sup> Goode, Judith and Jo Anne Schneider (1994). *Reshaping Ethnic and Racial Relations in Philadelphia: Immigrants in a Divided City*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

<sup>x</sup> Denise Lawrence and Setha M. Low (1990). The Built Environment and Spatial Form. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19, 453-505.



# Appendix A: Focus Group Summary for Eastern North Philadelphia

## Demographic Overview

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- Participants: 11 participants total
- Area of Residence: 8 lived in the East North Philadelphia neighborhood cluster and 3 lived just over the boundaries to the east, west, and north.
- Sex: All participants female (except one male who left shortly after the group began)
- Age: ranged from 45 to 77 years old; 7 participants aged 60 or above
- Ethnicity: All participants Latina, 10 of Puerto Rican descent and 1 of Cuban descent
- Years in the neighborhood: ranged from 7 to 42 years; 7 had spent 20+ years
- Years in Philadelphia: ranged from 11 to 60 years; 9 had spent 30+ years
- Years in the United States: ranged from 35 to 69 years; 2 were born in the U.S.
- Children at home: 6 participants had 2-4 children and/or grandchildren at home, ranging in age from 4 months to 34 years.

## Context

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The focus group was conducted on February 19, 2004, at a senior center in the Norris Square area of eastern North Philadelphia. Participants were drawn from the senior center itself and from a grassroots community empowerment organization. The focus group was conducted in Spanish by Leah Mundell, with on-site translation assistance from one of the participants. Gretchen Suess and Eva Gold also attended and assisted with facilitation. We should note that the participant who assisted with translation also inflected the interview questions with her own perspective on cultural participation; she emphasized that culture is something “in our blood” that is expressed in everyday living. This may have narrowed the responses of the group somewhat, but it also seemed to help stimulate participation, and her interpretation seemed to resonate with other participants.

## Researchers' Reflections

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It was somewhat difficult at first, as a facilitator, to keep this group focused on the specific topic of cultural participation, because participants seemed so anxious to share their personal experiences of joy and tragedy, particularly related to family. At several points, participants were moved to tears when describing the losses they had experienced in recent years. But members of this group also spoke with great emotion about the joy they derived from the cultural traditions, foods, music, and religious celebrations that they shared with their community. After the focus group had ended, several participants thanked us for the opportunity to talk about these issues with one another and to alert arts organizations to the needs and desires of this neighborhood.

## Summary

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### Puerto Rican identity as culture

Though this group varied in age and length of time in the United States, they shared experiences as a bicultural community that in many ways seemed quite isolated from the rest of the city. Regardless of whether or not they had lived in Puerto Rico themselves, they felt themselves to be intimately connected to Puerto Rico. In this sense, culture was equivalent to Puerto Rican identity and cultural participation meant exhibiting that cultural identity, carrying on the traditions taught by parents and grandparents and attempting to teach them to one's children.

*We carry our culture in our blood... the activities that you do, the music that we play during Christmas, because that is what culture means to us.... There are many of us that do not have the opportunity to go to a play, but we still live culture.*

*I would say, “Hate me all that you want to hate me,” but my grandchildren and my children are going to speak Spanish. They are going to speak Spanish and they are going to learn, sooner or later, to make pastries and alcapurrias and cakes and mofongo and everything that I make, they are going to learn it too, because I believe in culture.*

After the group discussion had concluded, one of the facilitators spoke informally with a participant she knew, asking her why she didn't mention in the discussion her work with the grassroots organization to sponsor dance programs and a youth photo exhibit. The participant said that, because those programs were not specifically Puerto

Rican, they did not qualify as “cultural.” These, she said, were events that one observes or watches as an audience; culture, rather, comes from within. Although another participant disagreed, saying that these events were, in fact, cultural, this notion of culture as linked primarily to Puerto Rican identity permeated the focus group.

### **The importance of language to cultural survival**

Many of the participants who had come to the United States as children mourned the cultural connection that they had lost as a result of assimilation. This was reflected most strongly in terms of loss of the Spanish language. In some cases, participants blamed their parents, bent on Americanization, for refusing to teach them the language; in other cases, they blamed the schools for punishing them for speaking Spanish. In many cases, they blamed themselves either for rejecting the language themselves or for being unable to pass it on to their children.

*I feel that when my parents brought me to the United States I lost my culture. When trying to share with the Americans, trying to become American, I was forced... they would hit me so that I would talk in English. And so I, to be more American, even though I always knew that I was really proud to be Puerto Rican, I didn't teach that to my children and that is my biggest regret. In my life I wasn't able to teach them what culture is... I couldn't teach them and give them culture because America took it away from me. And my mother, God bless her soul, wasn't strong enough to continue the culture... So, you know, growing up in Newark, in the Elizabeth area, you couldn't speak Spanish, you could not speak Spanish, so you had to lose the culture and that is what hurts the most.*

*All children, when [they] don't speak English, they translate for their parents when going to the doctor. I went with my mother to the doctor and translated for her and when we were on the bus back [home] my mother started to talk to me in Spanish, so I stood up and went to sit in another chair. She followed me and sat next to me and I told her, “If you say one more word to me in Spanish I am going to get off this bus and walk home.” I was 11 years old when that happened.*

Nonetheless, all of the participants had since found ways to reconnect with Puerto Rican culture and, if necessary, to learn the language. In some cases, their families had required them to speak Spanish at home as children. In one case, a woman learned Spanish as an adult in order to communicate with her mother-in-law. Many of the participants still wished that their children were more interested in speaking Spanish and in Puerto Rican culture. One woman was particularly distraught, because her grandchildren do not speak Spanish, so she is unable to communicate with them.

### **Culture of family and home traditions**

The most memorable events in participants' lives in recent years focused vividly on family: births, deaths, family visits, and family holiday celebrations. Many of the cultural events they recalled were centered on the home rather than on the church or traditional arts organizations. This centrality of family was a value that they spoke of passing on to their children and which they linked to Puerto Rican and Hispanic culture.

*To me, part of the experience of being in a cultural event is the birth of my grandson. To me, that's a cultural event, because he is fourth generation Hispanic.*

Many participants saw Puerto Rican culture expressed most overtly in culinary traditions and the practice of hospitality. Cooking rice and beans and Caribbean pastries and eating avocados represented the maintenance of Puerto Rican culture in the home and it also helped ease people's nostalgia for Puerto Rico; this was comfort food both in the way it tasted and the way it was prepared and served. Hospitality and respect were also described as cultural values that marked a person as Puerto Rican or Hispanic/Latino.

*You express culture when a guest comes to your house... in the moment that she puts one foot inside your house you are telling that person where you come from. Whether you want to or not. Why? Because of how you behave, how you talk, how you treat her, what your house looks like, you have told her exactly who you are. Because of music that is listened to, the food that is cooked, the smell that stays in your house.*

### **The Americanization of Puerto Rican culture**

Because Puerto Rican culture was so linked to a nostalgic past for these participants, it seemed to take on an ossified quality, frozen in a time when women dressed impeccably before leaving the house and children still preferred rice and beans to McDonalds. But the participants also acknowledged that a new, hybrid culture is emerging as Latino culture becomes integrated into mainstream America. Many parents were thrilled that their children and

grandchildren were reclaiming Latino music and dance, as house parties and clubs have begun to feature Latin artists.

*Now they want to know what Spanish music is, but only because of the new thing that is going on with the kids. They are dancing and want to listen to the music. The other day they were asking what is merengue and what is bachata, and I was like "Oh, oh, music lessons!" [everyone laughs]... I have to find someone that can teach me about music so that I can teach my kids, because now they are starting to be a little more interested...*

Interestingly, in the quote above, this mother does not say she is looking for an organization that can teach her kids about music and dance. Rather, she would like to learn, so that she can pass the traditions on to her children herself.

Participants were critical, however, of ways they saw Puerto Rican culture being degraded or diluted by American influence. They felt that the city-sponsored Puerto Rican parade, for instance, had been ruined by commercialization; what they saw as a beautiful expression of Puerto Rican culture had been degraded by the entry of various Mumpers groups and the trademark Budweiser horses.

### **Claiming Puerto Rican public space in Norris Square**

The majority of participants in this focus group had lived in the Norris Square area for twenty years or more, and they expressed tremendous appreciation for this neighborhood and its Puerto Rican public space. One longtime resident explained that she remembers a time when Latinos couldn't walk in this part of the neighborhood for fear of harassment or worse.

*In that time we weren't... we weren't allowed to be on this side [this part of the neighborhood].... Latinos were not allowed to come through here, because if we did, well they would just come after us.... The last thing I remember was that they killed a boy there... they killed him and they put a cross there.... Nobody came to this park, not the Latino children... none of the Latinos could come here, and this is important because that's why I'm so happy that Norris Square is now more established and that there are a lot of Latinos around here.*

Today, the neighborhood has been reclaimed as a Latino community space, particularly the Norris Square park itself, which residents likened to the public plazas that are so central to life in Puerto Rico.

*Sometimes there was a man sitting there [in Norris Square], on a bench with a guitar. I remember, I would sometimes see him playing his guitar and singing outside.... I remember because in Puerto Rico the serenades and everything...*

*When I was in Puerto Rico I would see people in the plaza. How pretty the plaza is, my God... I know that the plaza of San Lorenzo is still there... that is where I relate to when I see the park and I see the trees, especially when they change color. That reminds me of Puerto Rico.*

The annual Norris Square festival, which includes public performances, artisan and craft stands, and Puerto Rican food, was lauded as one of the best events in the neighborhood. Residents took pride in the fact that people worked to keep the park clean and one participant contrasted Norris Square with other American parks, where one could not feel comfortable just sitting on a bench as one could in Norris Square.

This claiming of outdoor space extended to people's homes as well. One participant in particular spoke of the importance of hearing the birds outside her home and building a porch for her mother, so that she could sit outside. Another participant said she wished she could have a house, so that she could plant flowers, sit in a chair nearby, and "have the breeze outside, like in Puerto Rico." Many participants spoke about their agricultural experiences in Puerto Rico and the eastern United States, though no one in the group had translated this background to planting a community garden or other neighborhood agricultural projects.

Beyond the enjoyment of outdoor space, participants voiced their appreciation for the Norris Square neighborhood as a public site of Puerto Rican culture in Philadelphia. Here, Puerto Rican culture could be expressed and cultivated openly, not suppressed as it was when they were children.

*But we didn't have that culture that the kids have now. I didn't know this culture until I came to Philly and I met the people in Norris Square.... Now my kids are learning Spanish. I should've taught them Spanish from the beginning, but everything was English, English, English... and they love it... my kids love the Puerto Rican music, they love it... they go to all the activities... they love it...*

### **Awareness of and desire for cultural organizations in the neighborhood**

All of the events discussed in the focus group, with the possible exception of the Puerto Rican Day parade, had taken place in the Norris Square neighborhood or immediate vicinity. In fact, other parts of the city were rarely mentioned at all. This seems to be a group that is quite locally focused and does not leave the neighborhood often, certainly not for the kinds of Puerto Rican cultural activities they said they value.

Participants were well aware of a variety of cultural organizations in their neighborhood, which offered events or classes, some of which they had participated in themselves. These included:

- Norris Square Senior Center – Christmas dance
- Taller Puertorriqueño – theater production class with performances, services for people with Alzheimers, Puerto Rico carnival
- AMLA – music lessons for children
- Los Pleneros – music group that performs in the neighborhood
- Concilio – unclear
- Catholic Institute (5<sup>th</sup> and Cayuga) – music lessons for children
- Casa del Carmen – music and dance lessons
- Cultural Fridays – new initiative to hold exhibits at a variety of Latino organizations in the neighborhood one Friday evening a month [La Colectiva]

Several participants remembered nostalgically the live theaters and Spanish language movie theaters that they used to attend in their youth. They said they wished there were such a theater in the neighborhood, which would show classic Puerto Rican and other Spanish language films. They said that although organizations like Taller Puertorriqueño offered many classes and workshops, such organizations did not serve as gathering places for the community. In contrast, they suggested, a Spanish theater could serve as a community center, with other cultural activities, even dance and music performances, offered during the movie intermissions.

### **Desire for wider representation of Latino culture and history**

Participants also expressed a desire for Latino culture to be more widely represented in mainstream American media and taught in public schools. Some participants said they thought that Puerto Rican culture and history should be part of the school curriculum. Others said they felt their history was underrepresented in the media.

*You know, when I watch documentaries on television about Black history, I never see anything about ... Spanish history. Why not? Why don't they bring it here? I think it's important. I think it's important in the schools, in the colleges, wherever they teach.*

### **Generational differences and the threat of Americanization**

Perhaps because the majority of the participants were older people, they expressed frustration with youth culture and saw American influence as potentially threatening. They believed their children and grandchildren were more materialistic and greedy than they had been as children, that young people could be “destructive.” One participant attempted to summarize the comments of others, adding her own commentary in the process:

*She thinks the kids are so destructive because of the lack of culture that's in their lives.... She thinks that this creates violence in the youth and it is a lack of this fundamental culture in the daily life of these kids. As many of us have said, when you don't have culture you feel empty.*

Another participant said, “Those who were born here have something very ugly about them,” demonstrating a lack of respect for other people and a lack of patience for hard work and effort. Perhaps because of this concern for the values expressed by young people, the participants were particularly pleased that some of their children and grandchildren had begun to gravitate toward Puerto Rican music and dance, as discussed above. And they were grateful for the organizations in the neighborhood that provided music and dance classes. As one participant explained,

*AMLA gave an opportunity to many kids who had nothing to do, or rather kids that were doing many things they shouldn't be doing.*

**The burdens of age and instability**

The first question of the protocol, asking the participants to recall a few of the most memorable events of the past year, revealed the enormous personal tragedies that many members of the group had experienced. Three participants had been widowed in the past two years, one when her husband had become lost on a trip outside the city and been hit by a car. One participant's granddaughter had been murdered this year, and another's mother had been badly burned and was now dying. Several members of the group (though only one spoke about it) had been active in a campaign to keep the city from taking neighborhood houses for new development and relocating the residents from their homes. The burdens of aging and living in a poor neighborhood seemed heavy and may have constituted barriers to wider participation in the cultural and arts organizations they mentioned.





## Appendix B: Focus Group Summary for North Camden

### Demographic Overview

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- Participants: 12 (+ 2 informal participants who work with the church) = 14 total
- Area of Residence: 8 lived within the North Camden boundaries and 5 within the South Camden boundaries (one address missing).
- Gender: 11 females + 3 males
- Age: ranged from 62 to 77 years old
- Ethnicity: All participants were African-American
- Years in the neighborhood: ranged from 11 to 51 years; 7 had spent 30+ years
- Years in Camden: ranged from 25 to 66 years; 7 had spent 50+ years and 3 have lived in Camden their entire lives
- Years in the United States: ranged from 62 to 77 years; all but 1 were born in the U.S.
- Children at home: 3 participants had 1-2 children and/or grand (great grand) children living at home, ranging in age from 2 years to 39 years.

### Context

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The focus group was conducted on March 18, 2004, at the Mt. Calvary Baptist Church in North Camden, New Jersey, located between a 2 and 12 minute drive from the participants' homes (estimated via Mapquest.com). The church was identified by a former Research for Action client and director of a community organization who is now at Camden Community College, where community outreach is among his responsibilities. Participants were drawn from the senior ministry of the church and unfortunately lacked our desired age diversity as they were the only individuals available during that time. The focus group was facilitated by Gretchen Suess. Eva Gold also attended and assisted with facilitation. We should note that the church-based organizer of the focus group and a second employee of the church, who joined mid-way, also participated in the interview and may have influenced the dynamics of the interview, as a significant emphasis was placed on the work that individuals do with the church. However, all of the participants do volunteer work with the church and are also actively involved in humanitarian work outside of the church (ranging from tree planting, community cleaning, and neighborhood evangelization).

### Researcher's Reflections

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When participants in Camden spoke about their relationship with the late pastor of Mt. Calvary and his wife, their personal explorations into an African American past, their families, and the breakdown that they saw going on in their neighborhoods, they did so with intense passion and occasional tears. Involvement with the church and 'giving back' to society was not only a part of their daily lives and activities, as they engaged in volunteer work, but it was a central component of their identities. Participants praised one another aloud when acts of kindness were announced and offered verbal recognition with 'Praise the Lord' and 'Amen' when individuals mentioned deeply engaging cultural experiences (such as learning about African American history in Washington, D.C.).

### Summary

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#### Exploring invisible black history as cultural participation

The majority of participants from the Camden focus group expressed, either overtly or covertly, concern about the invisibility of black history. Their comments focused on the fact that they had never learned about their own history as children and are thus very interested in exploring African-American culture through church trips, literary events, and self-exploration. They expressed the idea that there is a 'hidden' black history for them to learn and they are very eager to explore it with other members of their church and community. Cultural tours, some sponsored by the church, provided such opportunities.

*My most memorable experience was the seniors' trip to Washington that we took. I learned a lot about my own heritage and things that had happened. I learned about people who had contributed things to Washington that I wasn't previously aware of. When we went to school as children we learned about the White House, but we didn't learn about too many colored things and how [our] race had done. So, that was very memorable to me, and I will never forget that trip.*

*I took my first cruise, I went to Nova Scotia. It was quite a big thing for me because my sister and her husband really had to encourage me to go. I didn't want to go, but after going we went on a black history tour, and there was a tree there along with a museum. I saw my family's name on that tree. Chills went all through me when I saw [our name] on that tree.*

*I've never really been anywhere in my lifetime. I would like to take a trip to Africa just to observe and see. I'd really like to find some background of me.*

Cultural participation did not consist of merely observing exhibits or performances; rather, these experiences led to – or could potentially lead to – transformation of personal identity.

### **Church-based social action as the focus of participation**

The majority of participants spoke about their heavy involvement in the church community and articulated that what is most important for them right now is involvement in direct social action. Although many of the participants discussed being involved in tree planting and clean-ups in their neighborhoods, most of the participants do their volunteer work directly through the church by volunteering at a food bank, working with the homeless, running a breakfast at the church, teaching GED classes, etc.:

*I work with the Willing Workers, and I work in the kitchen. The group of people that work back there are friendly. It's a lot of fun. We have the basic Willing Workers attitude. We try to maintain that attitude, and we try to live out the meaning of Willing Workers.*

Like many others, this respondent described church work as both a social responsibility and a social opportunity. The Camden group spoke about doing things together as a social group, since the church and local senior centers mediated their cultural experiences both within and outside of Camden. Such activities included attending a concert in Philadelphia with a seniors group from an assisted-living facility, joining a trip to Washington, D.C. with the church seniors, and celebrating life accomplishments and rites of passage with the church.

*Our church has its heritage day. That lasts during the whole month of February. We have our dinner on the last weekend. It's a beautiful sight to see. Everybody comes dressed in their African attire. We're all one big family anyway, but it just seems as though we are just so close on that day.*

*I enjoy interacting with the different groups in church. I enjoy socializing whether we're working ... like when we're on produce [distribution] or whatever. Our choir gets together for rehearsal, and it's not just rehearsal. We really have like some service. I guess that's what I like to do. I'm a people person.*

### **Centrality of family**

Focus group participants also emphasized the importance of family throughout their daily lives, memorable events such as family reunions or cruises, and participation in various local cultural events. Several participants spoke about the ways that their children and grandchildren facilitated their participation in the arts:

*I had the privilege of escorting my grandson to the Tweeter Center. He plays the piano and he was invited there by his music school to meet one of the profound pianists. That was quite memorable for me. His picture was even put in the paper. He was playing at the Piano with Mr. [Leon] Bates looking over him.*

*The thing that I enjoy doing in my home with my two grand boys...my oldest grandson will be at the piano, and my youngest and I will be singing. We get a big kick out of doing that.*

Participants in this focus group also had significant obligations to family that occupied a great deal of their time. They expressed no reservations about these responsibilities, however.

*I have a lot of responsibilities when I'm not at church. I have a daughter who is handicapped, and I have a granddaughter. When I'm not doing that, I'm at a nursing home visiting with my husband. So, I'm very busy, but I enjoy doing those things.*

### **Artists are mothers, elders, and religious, ethnic, and community leaders**

The Camden group saw “artists” predominantly in their mothers and other members of older generations, in religious figures, and in people who shape the world in a positive way. Some of the participants noted other artists in their lives, using the term in a more conventional sense. They saw members of their family and themselves as artists when they engaged in creative expression. They also identified African American writers and poets as significant artists; these were figures whom they viewed as inspirational in a cultural/ethnic capacity as well as in their artistic productions. All of these themes (regarding ‘mothers’, ‘world shapers’, and ‘ethnic inspirers’) relate directly back to the participants’ daily lives as they are deeply involved in family, social action, and exploring a historical African American identity and heritage.

#### **“Artists” are people who drive social change**

*The artists in my life have been ... virtually unnamed, and they're people who really give back. I've had an occasion to see two people. I think they were both lawyers who went to Harvard. I think they went back to Harlem to live in such a way that they could facilitate change. One gave back to the kids at the Frederick Douglass school in Harlem. The other one was a woman who took the worst out of the crowd and molded them. Every last one of these people not only went to college; they went to some of the most prestigious colleges in the country. So, that, to me, is an artist.*

#### **“Artists” are those who visualize the world in a positive way and inspire others**

*I was just listening and thinking. Yes, I have to be an artist because I have to visualize the positive forces. There are so many negative forces. Being an artist, I have to visualize the beauty, and I must do that. There are so many other vibes and I don't want to be connected with those vibes. My connection is God. So, that's where I get my force from. So, yes, I'm an artist.*

*I would say that Reverend Harris was [an artist]. It's strange that you asked that because I was just thinking about it today. I think that he has had more impact in my life than anybody else.*

#### **“Artists” are mothers and elders who taught their children love and self-respect**

*My mother [my artist] really impressed me and impacted my life. By teaching us self worth no matter how poor we were she made us feel special and loved. She taught us to reach out to other people. Also, I was reared in the South. I had some dedicated black teachers that taught us how important our education was. They took an interest in us learning about self worth and our heritage. I grew up knowing that there was a Black National Anthem when a lot of people in the south didn't know about it. Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass- I grew up knowing about them. I am somebody. I am a black woman, and I'm proud of it.*

#### **“Artists” are those who express themselves creatively**

*I see myself as an artist when I take pen in hand and try to write some type of poetry. Whenever I write it comes out in a poetic form. I see myself as an artist when I get up against the wall and wallpaper, paint, and decorate. I see myself as very creative ... I couldn't see it before, but I do paint beautiful pictures.*

### **Awareness of Many Cultural Organizations**

Focus group participants were aware of and participated in programs offered by both formal city-wide institutions and more locally based organizations in Camden and Philadelphia such as the Walt Whitman Center, the Tweeter Center, Rutgers University, assisted-living facilities, the Office of Aging, and the New Jersey Tree foundation. Participants were also acutely aware of programs and venues that helped expose their invisible, African American history and actively attended trips to New York and Washington, D.C. Several participants were specifically aware of cultural programming offered at Rutgers University such as a jazz festival, a Kwanza celebration, and a special program that Rutgers held during Black History month. Many of the participants also explored both cultural and social programs on their own with family members and were aware of various non-profit organizations and associations in their local neighborhoods and throughout Camden, such as Respond Inc., the Renaissance in East Camden, and a Christian Day Center in East Camden (previously called ‘Trinity’).

*In my neighborhood we have a committee called weed and seed. We walk the neighborhood to see what has to be done. A city policeman walks with us ... a state trooper walks with us. We meet once a month, and there are about ten of us. There are about 1000 people in that area, but only ten people have volunteered to do this.*

*There's a book store here in Camden-Center City. It's called Unique Book Store, and Larry had book signings and poetry nights. You can buy the poets' books, and they'll sign it. Our fraternity and sorority organizations have programs where they help the children in the city. I know that Phi Delta Kappa has this sort of program.*

## **Barriers to participation**

### **Lack of money, information, and time**

Focus group participants in Camden were very active and only mentioned a few reasons for not participating in cultural activities such as a death in the family, lack of money, needing to work or be elsewhere, and simple forgetfulness. Some said that they had more time to participate in cultural activities because they were now retired. Because many of the activities that individuals participated in were run through the church, transportation and cost were not seen as serious barriers, since the church could access discounted tickets and arrange for transportation. Nonetheless, cost and lack of information were mentioned as inhibiting participation:

*That's one thing with us working all of our lives you never got a chance to benefit from cultural things. Now that we're retired and involved in church and whatever there are a lot of cultural things that I would like to do now, but the cost factor comes into play too. I was reading the paper this morning. I saw that the creative arts school in Camden is having something in conjunction with Cherry Hill creative arts school. They're having a big concert. If I hadn't looked in that particular section of the paper ... you can see that our creative arts school doesn't have an auditorium or a budget for these big productions, but they're joining with Cherry Hill in order to split the money. This would be something nice to have gotten tickets for as a group. We could have appreciated going. You could have taken your kids, your grandkids, or your neighbors children.*

*Once in a while I find that even when something is going on and I can get out ... a lot of times there is a cost factor. You get a social security check every month, and you have to run a household. There are a lot of things that you would like to do that you just can't afford to do. There is a cruise that I would like to go on this year, but when I sat down and figured out the cost, I realized that I just couldn't do it.*

Participants also explained that their commitment to the church – in addition to their obligations to family – occupied the majority of their free time. While the church facilitated many cultural activities, this time commitment may have inhibited members' involvement in activities outside the church. As one participant explained,

*Well, I think that I can speak for the majority of us ... the time that we usually have is spent coming back and forth or doing something for the church. So we ... at least I don't. I don't spend too much time concentrating on outside or doing outside activities.*

### **The breakdown of neighborhood community**

Participants emphasized that they had once experienced their neighborhoods as sites of community-building and participation, but that changing demographics had led to a breakdown of that neighborhood structure. They felt that the arrival of new immigrants had separated people within their neighborhoods, since language barriers prevented them from communicating with one another. Diversity was thus seen by participants as a burden to forming strong neighborhood ties. Some also viewed urban decline, increased violence, and increasing ethnic diversity (with a growing Latino population) within neighborhoods as a diminishment of “culture” in the neighborhood, resulting in the discontinuation of block parties, a breakdown of neighbor communication, the isolation of older people, and a sense of public danger.

*In the inner Camden it's really hard to stay cultured because of the various ... it's just too mixed up. Half the people on your block can't even speak the language. There is no fellowship. Say for instance, it might be that I'm here and [someone else] is over there. I may not even know the other people on my block. It's just a, “Hi”, but it's not really a neighborhood. On my block it would be hard to get a cultural something going because we don't really associate. We speak. We're not enemies, but we don't do anything together.*

*It used to be that when a member of your block died we'd get flowers and go around and get a donation. You can't do that now ... nobody knows nobody.*

*Back in the day we used to have block captains. Those were people who were interested in the neighborhood, and they used to go around and see if they could help out. Those days are gone. My neighborhood is drug infested. The people who are moving in that are decent and who want to keep their homes are few and far between. You get people who are slide by night people. They are there one day, but the next day those people are gone. I would like to see the*

*neighborhood get back on its feet, but nobody seems to be into that. When I went out there it was beautiful. People kept their houses clean. They did their steps and everything nice because you had a different type of people there, but those people left. Now, you have people who just don't care. Most of the houses out there are being rented, and people don't want to take care of them. If you have a nice home on one street and two doors down the house is dilapidated, your house isn't worth anything. You can't sell it so you're stuck there. That's the way life is around my neighborhood.*

Although participants did not overtly make the link between declining social ties in neighborhoods and active church participation, their frustration with what they saw as a lack of neighborhood community could help to explain why church participation appeared stronger than participation in neighborhood activities.



## Appendix C: Focus Group Summary for Western North Philadelphia

### Demographic Overview

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- Participants: 8
- Area of Residence: 6 lived within the West North Philadelphia neighborhood cluster and 2 lived just south of the boundary
- Sex: 2 male (both teenagers), 6 female
- Age: adults ranged from 33 to 75 years old; teenagers ranged from 15 to 18 years old
- Ethnicity: All participants were African-American; one was African American and Latino
- Years in the neighborhood: ranged from 1 year to 61 years; 5 participants had lived in the neighborhood their whole lives
- Years in Philadelphia: ranged from 1 to 75; 6 participants had lived in Philadelphia their whole lives
- Years in the United States: all but one participant were born in the United States
- Children at home: None of the adults had children living at home; 2 of the teenagers had one other sibling living at home

### Context

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This focus group was conducted on March 25, 2004, at an African-American Catholic Church in North Philadelphia. Half of the participants were adults recruited through the church and half the participants were teenagers, recruited through their involvement in a local youth organization. Leah Mundell facilitated the group, with assistance from Elaine Simon. Alan Brown, from Audience Insights, also observed.

### Researchers' Reflections

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The Western North Philadelphia neighborhood cluster has the highest median income of the neighborhood clusters in this project, and although the neighborhood is still quite poor, that difference seemed reflected in these focus group participants. The adults in the group were white collar workers, students, and active retirees, and the young people were active in school and enrichment activities. The cultural experiences of both young people and students were extremely sophisticated; the adults in the group were particularly impressed with the range of activities in which the young people were involved.

### Summary

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#### **Cultural participation extends beyond the neighborhood**

This group was, overall, extremely active in culture and the arts, naming a wide range of activities that they attended, including concerts in Fairmount Park (at the Dell East), plays at the Merriam Theater in Center City, citywide festivals on the Ben Franklin Parkway and at Penn's Landing, book readings at the central library, African-American historical exhibitions at the African-American Museum or special exhibits such as the Amistad slave ship in Camden, art exhibits at the Philadelphia Art Museum, regattas on Boaters' Row, and performances at music venues on South Street and coffeeshops in Center City.

Almost all of the cultural events that participants named took place outside their neighborhood, primarily in Center City. This seemed to be an extremely mobile group, willing and able to go to another part of the city for arts and culture that were not available in their neighborhood. This was particularly true for the adults, but one of the young people in the group also saw the whole city as accessible to her, especially for exposure to different types of music:

*I go down to South Street and I see a lot of rock [music] stores, or I go around, I think Sansom, has like a lot of coffee shops, so I listen to that. And I do go over to Penn's Landing sometimes, and they might have somebody playing music or whatever, or go down to, I think it's 11<sup>th</sup> and Market and go to the Market East Station and I remember, that there were like these kids there were probably younger than me and, they were playing classical music, and it was beautiful.*



This young woman had only recently moved to Philadelphia. Because her parents were in the military, she was born abroad and had lived all over the United States. In her brief time in Philadelphia, she seemed to have explored the city as much as (if not more than) participants who had lived here all their lives.

### **The loss of neighborhood resources**

The adults in the group were particularly frustrated that resources for cultural events had drained out of the neighborhood. In particular, they mourned the loss of activities that used to be available for youth and older people close to their homes.

*At least for older people, in the neighborhood a lot of the places close up at night. You know, you used to have crafts, or, not necessarily senior citizen centers, but there were cultural things that you could do in the neighborhoods at night... I think that because of crime and all you can't stay out in the neighborhoods. You used to, could take like a ceramic class, clay, right in the neighborhood. They still have them, but you have to go out further. Like now you have to go up to Chestnut Hill. There are plenty of classes, but everybody doesn't drive. So, you know a person is not going to take the bus up there at 6:30 at night to get to class from 7 to 9. So, location ... and crime has taken away a lot of cultural things that were happening right in the neighborhood.*

Other adult participants recalled that exercise classes used to be available at local community centers and libraries were open late. There were Saturday dance classes, girl scouts and boy scouts, boys' and girls' clubs, and bowling allies. Now, they explained, the closest boys' and girls' club is in Nicetown, and most of the organizations in the neighborhood are not cultural centers but social service organizations or chain stores.

*They closed all the bowling alleys and put CVSes in there. Now, you have more drugs than you do exercise. I don't know if we're in this situation because nobody is home anymore, but the inner-city children have very few outlets... just like my granddaughter. Between my daughter and myself, we're driving her out of the neighborhood to get her involved. The dance class she goes to is not in the neighborhood. The music that she goes to is not in the neighborhood.*

The young woman who had recently moved to Philadelphia contrasted this with her previous experience in a different part of the country.

*I would really like to see places where kids can go to get a positive image about things. Back home in [a different state] they had actual places for teens to go. I know that a lot of kids go to clubs, but it seems like these clubs are a grown up atmosphere.... The clubs that they have back home ... had a little pool table, and an arcade. They had stuff for kids. It wasn't just dancing. They had actual activities there. They had a YMCA, and they actually had basketball courts. Every Friday they had a neighborhood dance where all the kids from the neighborhood would come. It was people in the neighborhood who actually cared and gave them positive images about what they can do.... I just want to see places where kids can be kids, and they don't have to grow up too fast.*

Other young people in the group were aware of newer programs in the neighborhood, such as the Beacon program at their high school, which offered aerobics, basketball, karate, and video games for kids and adults. They saw these programs as available for students like themselves who wanted to take advantage of them, but lamented that many young people would rather join a gang or hang out on the street than participate. In addition to material resources, they said the neighborhood needed more "neighborhood leaders and role models" to motivate young people. One young man poignantly contrasted the lack of support for young people in his neighborhood with what he believed exists in white families:

*I think that...speaking as a black person. As a young person, we need somebody who actually cares for us. White people tell their kids that they can do it. It can be something sky high, but they tell them that no matter how tough it gets....You know how parents will sit down and help you out...In the black neighborhood [we] need some good role models. We need somebody to say come here and [say], "Let me help you out." We need somebody to say, "I know that you can do this"....*

Others in the group agreed on the need for more involved parents and more caring teachers in their community, but they also described powerful examples of the role modeling provided by their own parents.

*As hard as it was for [my mother], she always tried to motivate us. She let us know that being black and female weren't bad qualities. She let us know that those were two great qualities that we have. It does stem back to the parents. The love and motivation that we get from the parents is what is going to help the kids and the whole community.*

### **Cultural activities as a means of personal development and neighborhood escape**

For some members of the group, the activities they named as “cultural activities” were important primarily as a way of avoiding less productive behavior. One young man, who played in the school band, said he played because “I don't want to be on the streets like everybody, like most of the boys in our school.” An adult in the group said that her volunteer work “keeps me grounded.” She said that these activities motivated her in a way that work and school did not.

One older woman showed clearly how she thought the availability of activities, especially for young people and senior citizens, was linked to the well-being of the neighborhood.

*I'd like to see more after-school activities for the young kids....They need things that can get them off the corners. They need things that can challenge them. See one thing affects the other. Whether the youth are or aren't being aggressive, if the average older person sees four or five of them standing on the corner, they are going to be afraid.... Seniors stop coming out. They do everything before broad daylight.*

Others similarly emphasized the isolation of senior citizens in the neighborhood, who were either frightened to leave their homes or unable to reach their destinations because of the poor quality of public transportation. Even as they discussed the need for more activities to serve this population, one participant noted the infrastructure that would be needed to facilitate participation, such as van service.

The pervasive fear and uneasiness that many participants expressed had led one teenager, who was new to Philadelphia and perhaps less accustomed to the area, to leave the neighborhood as often as possible.

*I barely stay in my own neighborhood. If I do, it's to catch the bus to get out of the neighborhood. I work all the way downtown. I told my dad that I would love to work around here, but I don't feel comfortable working behind bullet glass. I shouldn't have to go to work downtown.... A lot of times kids don't want to go outside in the neighborhoods, and if they do they are in fear. I don't feel comfortable sitting on my stoop anymore because I see all these smokers sitting on the corner....So, I stay in the house, or if I have to go to work, I leave out as quickly as I can.*

This was the same teenager who described her adventurous treks around the city exploring different kinds of musical venues; she obviously did not feel this same freedom to experiment and explore within her own neighborhood.

### **Cultural participation as creative expression**

Both the adults and young people in this young group were not only avid participants in cultural activities but also active cultural producers in their own right. Two of the young people played in a newly formed school band. Another had participated in a dance group, step team, school and church choirs, and was currently writing an online diary and learning to make video documentaries. Two of the adults in the group were writers: one had been privately working for many years on a novel about black history and experience, and the other wrote poetry and shared it as part of a poetry group at her senior center. A young person wrote nightly in her journal. An adult did small craft projects to send to family members. And another adult described the way she expressed herself creatively through her personal style, changing the way she did her hair, clothes, and shoes every day.

Besides participating in activities to avoid negative influences or behaviors in the neighborhood, members of this group also engaged in cultural expression for personal fulfillment. As one participant said, “Every day that I wake up I want to learn something new.” Some participants actively sought out opportunities for this sense of fulfillment, while others found themselves easily drawn to such self-expression.

*And it's surprising how, you know sometimes you get a thought, and I get my thoughts at night, when I'm in bed, and if I don't jump up and put it down it will be lost. So that's why I try to write a little poetry once in a while. So, I've written a couple of poems.*

*I wanted to boost my self esteem, because before I used to be very depressed, and I didn't have a lot of friends. So, getting into the choir and like drawing and taking pictures of stuff, that allowed me to become like me, and to boost my self esteem and, now, I'm like the bubbly people person that you see.*

Later, the same young person said:

*A lot of people say that I go through a lot of stuff that normal 17 year olds don't go through. They said that I had a lot of stories to tell, and I should type them up. So, I have this diary online. My life is like one big book so I just type it all out to let everybody know what's going on.*

### **Interest in cultural diversity and African-American history**

Participants in this group spoke about the homogeneity of their African-American neighborhood and of appreciating opportunities to learn about other cultural groups. In fact, several people, when asked about the cultural activities in which they participate, first named their experiences of cross-cultural interaction and education. One woman described her volunteer work cooking at a shelter and her attempt to research and experiment with the different culinary traditions of the shelter residents. Another spoke about participating in multi-cultural arts events such as Caribbean music at the Dell East or the Puerto Rican parade on the Ben Franklin Parkway. The young woman who had explored different music scenes in Philadelphia wanted to make a video documentary to highlight different musical traditions in the city:

*I really wanted to do that, expose everybody to that different music scene, because the kids in my school might only know about rap or hip hop but I want to expose them to the classical music or the Latin and reggae explosion that's going on.*

One young man had participated in a college preparatory summer program at Temple University that brought students from throughout the city to live together in college dorms and take classes. The most important aspect of the program for him was the opportunity to meet people from different cultural backgrounds.

*It was like different people from different cultures that all came together for the program.... My school is a dominantly black school and it was, like, in the room it was like different cultures. You had like, different people and then you learn from one another and like, my best friend is Indian. I learned much more about Indians than I knew.*

Later in the interview, he said that this experience had helped him to feel more comfortable in other contexts where African-Americans were not in the majority.

*I think that was my main reason why I liked it, because it was like a different culture and, you're learning about everybody else, and they teach you, like, to be open. For myself, I remember a time when I was downtown, you know like City Hall.... When I was down there, I was scared. I think this was like two years ago, and I was nervous you know because I was down there. Not to be racist or nothing, because everywhere you look I just see white people.... So I was like whoa, should I be here?... But then when I got exposed to Upward Bound and we stayed on Temple campus for six weeks and where we ate at, the college students were there, the majority wasn't black, but then you learned about different things. We stayed in the dorm rooms, so the music they played, ... it was different and stuff and, different people talk to you. So, I think that was the reason why I actually really stayed there.*

Another young person spoke about her experience at a gospel convention, hearing gospel music performed by white bands and with white audiences, which she enjoyed as a different way to share a Christian message. She said she didn't think it was problematic that she enjoyed what was usually seen as white music.

*Just like how, with rap music a lot of white kids embrace it because they want to learn, because they think it's fun. So it shouldn't be a problem for me to learn about their bands and their arts. There shouldn't be a problem with that.*

At the same time, the participants clearly expressed their interest in African-American artists, in artistic themes that reflected their experience, and in opportunities to learn African-American history that is often neglected. In fact, the student who had participated in Upward Bound explained that learning about other cultures helped to make his own cultural background visible, forced him to explain things about his history that he'd never reflected on before.

In describing their cultural activities, many members of the group spoke of particularly African-American or African cultural performances or historical exhibits: Philadanco, the Amistad slave ship, the African-American Museum, exhibits about slavery at the Visitors' Center, Voices of Africa, and African-American music groups. One woman researched and wrote a regular column for her parish newsletter on Black Catholic history. One young person explained,

*I like a lot of different authors, but the ones that I like the most are the ones that relate to my neighborhood and African-Americans.*

Another young person said about Spike Lee,

*He depicts what's going on in the neighborhood realistically. He doesn't just sugar coat it. He exposes every aspect of a place. I like him for that.*

The group seemed particularly knowledgeable about African-American literature and engaged in a lively discussion about authors they enjoyed and those whose work they struggled with. The authors mentioned included Alice Walker, Claude McKay, Walker Dean Myers, Alex Haley, Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Omar Tyree, Tyler Perry, and even Sister Souljah. An older woman in the group encouraged younger women to keep reading difficult works by Maya Angelou, to take the time to absorb the meaning. Another woman explained that she didn't read Toni Morrison, because she reads for relaxation and didn't want to have to look up references while she reads for pleasure. Though participants were intellectually interested in learning about other cultures, their most intimate cultural connections were with artists who reflected their experiences as African-Americans.



## About the Authors

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Leah Mundell is a Research Associate at Research for Action and a Lecturer in the Department of Urban Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She is an anthropologist whose doctoral research focused on relationships between faith-based organizations and public schools in Philadelphia. More recently, she has examined the politics of local school reform efforts as a contributing researcher to *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a research and public awareness project assessing key aspects of the state takeover, including implementation of the multiple provider model in place in Philadelphia's public schools. She is a co-author, with Katrina Bulkley and Morgan Riffer, of *Contracting Out Schools: The First Year of the Philadelphia Diverse Provider Model*, released in May 2004.

### **Gretchen Suess, M.A.**

Gretchen Suess is a Senior Research Assistant at Research for Action and a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Temple University. She has an extensive background working with community organizations and residents throughout Philadelphia's low-income areas. She has also taught classes on anthropology, race, and racism at Temple University. Gretchen is interested in visual ethnography and the impact of grassroots and community activism on policy and school reform, as well as the impact of structural reform initiatives on schools, parents, students, and communities. Her Master's thesis was entitled, *Does Art Save Lives? Mural Arts, Politics, and Identity Negotiation in Two Philadelphia Neighborhoods*.

### **Eva Gold, Ph.D.**

Eva Gold is a Principal at Research for Action and has served as primary investigator for numerous local and national studies concerning the relationships among parents, communities and schools. She is a co-author of the report series *Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools*, which presents a process for documenting the contributions of parent/community organizing groups to strengthening communities and improving schools. In 2000, Eva received the Ralph C. Preston Dissertation Award from the Reading/Writing/Literacy Program of the University's Graduate School of Education for her study of community organizing at a neighborhood high school. Currently, she is a director of *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, Research for Action's research and public awareness project. Eva is also a Lecturer in the Urban Studies Program and Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Elaine Simon is a Senior Research Associate at Research for Action and has conducted ethnographic research and evaluation in the fields of education, employment and training, and community development for over twenty years. Elaine followed Chicago education reform for several years under a Spencer Foundation grant and is the co-author of the *Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools* report series. In addition, Elaine is a research partner of *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*. She is Co-Director of Urban Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and also serves as chairperson of the board of the Community Education Center, a community arts organization in Philadelphia.



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