

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Engaging Individuals with Disabilities

QUEST VISUAL THEATRE

Lanham, MD

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Take Note

- Quest includes people with disabilities in all aspects of the organization.
- In the past ten years, Quest has presented the work of more deaf and hard of hearing artists than another other company in the United States.
- Quest believes that visual theatre builds bridges between communities, engages underserved populations (many of whom have language barriers to text-based theater), and provides more employment opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing artists, as well as those who use English as a second language.

Overview

Quest is a group of dedicated artists, educators, and volunteers committed to creating, producing,

presenting, and supporting theatre that emanates from a visual base. While Quest's casts and production staffs are inclusive of all people, the organization has a particular interest in serving people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Quest's primary presenting program is QuestFest, an international visual theatre festival. QuestFest's goals are to:

- Create community partnerships by presenting visual theatre that encourages the full participation of people with disabilities and people who have been disenfranchised by text-based theatre;
- Promote the creation, production, and presentation of theatre emanating from a visual base and featuring casts and production staffs that are inclusive; and
- Provide accessible cultural experiences to deaf, hard of hearing people, and people whose primary language is not English.

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

Everything Quest does, every day, includes people with disabilities. The Quest staff, board of directors, affiliate artists, and volunteers reflect Quest's inclusive approach to its work. People with disabilities assume leadership roles in planning and programming.

Professional Development

Quest provides educators with professional development in the use of visual theatre to enhance learning readiness and literacy through workshops, classes, and residencies. Quest also provides technical support to teachers and administrators on arts-in-education research and issues.

Quest also provides sign language interpreters with professional development in several areas: visually interpreting text, Interpreting for the stage, and tactile interpreting visual theatre.

Leadership in the Community

Quest serves as a national and international leader and advocate for careers in the arts for people with disabilities. In addition, Quest:

- Served as a sponsor and steering committee member for the 2010 National Summit on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities;
- Supported the National Deaf Theatre Summit in 2010 as a part of QuestFest;

- Produced Gallaudet University's Deaf Way II International Arts Festival in 2002;
- Coordinated the first National Forum on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities in 1998; and
- Assisted in forming the Maryland Governor's Committee on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities following the 1998 Forum.

Effective Practices

Community Engagement

QuestFest uses a collaborative regional approach through partnerships with professional producing theatres, presenting theatres, a community-based arts center, and universities. The partners share resources for the common purpose of planning and conducting the festival. The partnership serves as a model for a regional, collaborative approach to welcoming all people to the artistic process.

Through its community network and its partnerships, QuestFest conducts 8-10 performances, workshops, and/or residencies throughout the year in community centers, places of worship, and schools that serve QuestFest's target populations. Quest staff believes that these direct, personal engagements are important for developing relationships and trust in communities that have been traditionally excluded from the artistic process.

Implementation

Quest accomplishes its goals by:

- Presenting a two-week festival featuring up to 15 professionally produced plays.
- Conducting panel discussions for area theatre professionals and the general public.
- Conducting visual theatre residencies in area schools and community centers.
- Conducting visual theatre workshops. Artists participating in QuestFest conduct workshops in aspects of visual theatre (mime, creative sign language, digital media, etc) for area students, theatre professionals, and the general public.
- Providing opportunities for university students with and without disabilities to participate in the planning and production of QuestFest.
- Conducting post-performance discussions with audiences.

- Holding all Quest programming and meetings in inclusive and accessible environments.
- Setting ticket and event prices at levels that are affordable to most people. The maximum QuestFest ticket cost is generally \$17, with most tickets going for \$11 and \$12. The festival includes a QuestFest “Frequent Flyer” discounted ticket that provides access to all festival programming.
- Using grant monies to provide \$7,000 in complimentary and reduced priced tickets to children and adults with disabilities.

Evaluation

People with disabilities play a central role in assessing Quest’s programs. Quest often uses a facilitated, sign language-based assessment process for its community engagements in order to collect feedback from participants with low literacy levels. Quest also evaluates the success of QuestFest based upon the expansion of the festival alliances.

Challenges

While people with disabilities in general have difficulty in finding careers in theatre, deaf people face a particular challenge. Since most theatre directors, artistic directors, and producers think of plays as words on paper that are then spoken to an audience, opportunities for professional deaf actors are rare and sporadic.

Advice

Make art *inclusive*. Rather than thinking in terms of “accessibility,” consider the community. Ensure that all can share in the arts experience. As a result, everything becomes accessible.

Think beyond text. Visual theater provides an artistic common ground for everyone, regardless of language. Once participants are engaged in a shared experience, community and dialogue become possible.

Develop real relationships. Direct, personal engagements are important for developing relationships and trust in communities that have been traditionally excluded from the artistic process.



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