ART AND ORGANIZING

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A teaching case on the work of Sistas and Brothas United (SBU)
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Introduction

It is late March, 2009, and I am dropping by the office of Sistas and Brothas United (SBU), in the northwest Bronx, to conduct some last-minute interviews. The third-floor office pulses with life – young people coming in and out, formal meetings and informal chats taking up every available space. Hector, one of the staff members, is huddled in the central room around a long table with a group of students from a local social-justice-themed high school. Some young community leaders have set up a table out front and are talking to passers-by about SBU. And with less than two weeks until the start of a series of art- and technology-based classes that the organization will be offering, there is some scurrying around the office encouraging people to apply. Maria, the photography teacher and a long-time SBU member, rushes into the office and boasts to Mustafa that another person has applied for her class. Mustafa, the executive director of SBU, will be teaching theater. Raymond, who will teach the music theory class, sits by the corner desk trying to make sure that someone is following up with applicants and setting up interviews as Juan – whose job this is – calls out that he’ll get to it later tonight. He is currently at a computer, editing some of his drawings for a t-shirt design.

The teachers and other members of the planning team have been working hard to prepare for this four-month-long series of classes. There is much that they have changed since the first pilot program ran in 2008 – new classes offered, a new structure for integrating the various art forms and the theme of social justice, new teachers. As always funding is very low, but after years of work this program – under the name BronXchanges (pronounced “Bronx Exchanges”) – has become a passion for many of the leaders and more than one refers to it as their “baby.” Last minute adjustments to curricula are being made, and the teachers themselves are not sure how this program will go. But the group has big visions for the future of BronXchanges. This re-vamped program is the latest – and so far the largest – step in the increasing integration of the arts into SBU’s work.

I enter the office with my sketchbook, video camera and audio recorder, eager to capture in words and images this exciting new program. A 29-year-old white doctoral student from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I bring a background in arts education and a conviction that there is powerful potential in the intersection of arts and community organizing. By studying the work of SBU I am hoping to learn more about what this intersection looks like, and what it takes for a community organizing group to begin putting it into practice.

The Northwest Bronx

SBU’s office is located in the Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood, and their organizing reaches youth from across a wide swath of the Northwest Bronx. This area, comprising about 450,000 residents, is racially and ethnically diverse, with the census reporting a population of 65% Latino, 20% African American, 10% White, and 5% Asian and other. Half of the population is foreign-born, with particularly heavy immigration from the Dominican Republic and other parts of the Caribbean. Poverty rates range from 18 to 42% across the region.1 Though the Northwest Bronx neighborhoods have a number of strong institutions, they struggle to make do with scarce resources, especially when it comes to education and the arts. Ginette Sosa, an adult SBU staff member, explained:

When I was in school there were a lot more things to offer than academics. There were things that would help you decide what you wanted to do when you were grown up,

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but how do you decide what you want to do if you’re not exposed to it? The youth [at SBU] started also seeing that there weren’t a lot of activities out here for them to participate in. I mean you had students that could draw and you had students that were interested in music, you had students that were able to write poetry, or what they call spoken word. But there was no way for them to be able to express that on an ongoing basis...So there used to be an art room, there used to be a science lab, there used to be music in some of these schools. But a lot of that got eliminated not only because of the budget, which was the main reason, but because of space. And not only were they not doing it in school anymore, there was nowhere in the community to do these things.

Sistas and Brothas United

SBU grew out of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), a group that has been working to improve their neighborhood and city since 1974 through community organizing. As researcher Seema Shah explains, “Rather than providing direct services or playing an advocacy role, community organizing groups make use of professional staff organizers who work with community members to build grassroots youth and adult leadership. Community members are helped to build power to alter social, economic, and educational inequities in their communities.”

In the late 1990’s a group of local, mostly middle-school-aged youth began hanging out at one of NWBCCC’s offices in their free time. Fernando Carlo was one of those youth. A lifetime Bronx resident with roots in Puerto Rico and Italy, Fernando is now 23 years old. He has run the gamut of roles at SBU – leader, board member, paid organizer, alum, and now a teacher of film and video. But back then he was just a local kid who stumbled upon something new while going to pick up his sister:

It was all these kids from the neighborhood that I used to hang out with, they were just running around the office…and I saw Laura [Vasquez, the paid organizer at the office] and she asked me to this event they were getting ready for the next day. It was an action on a landlord who wasn’t taking care of his building...So I went to that and I just got caught up in the excitement of the chanting and making noise and getting on the bus with a bunch of people – I’d never seen that before. At the end of the trip when we were coming back to the office I was like, ‘When are you gonna do something like that again, cause I really want to go?’ and she was like, ‘Just come to the office and I can tell you what we do.’

At the Kingsbridge Heights office, Fernando found a space where he could feel welcomed, listened to, and empowered. “We were taken serious,” he told me over the phone. “Laura really took everything we said into consideration. When we would speak in meetings nobody would break out and laugh – it wasn’t like school...Then we saw that there were people who were really seriously trying to do something and that there was a plan.” Pretty soon the young people began to outnumber the adults at meetings, and took to leading many of the meetings themselves. At the time the adults and youth were working on a campaign called Safe Streets that was pushing for stop signs and speed bumps to be put up around the neighborhood. As Fernando and his friends moved into high school, they began to share similar concerns around the schools they attended – run-down facilities, a lack of

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3 The demands of the Safe Streets campaign will finally be met in 2010. This highlights what a long and arduous process organizing for even the most basic resources can be.
guidance counselors, no homerooms. Fernando explained to me that Laura (who is now a co-Executive Director of NWBCCC) was “listening to us talk about the issues and challenged us to think about how these things affect our education, and then asked that one question every organizer asks: ‘So what are you going to do about it.’” What they decided to do was found their own organization. Some of the NWBCCC staff and board members were not sure that this was the best use of resources, but with continued advocacy by the youth and the assistance of key adult allies like Laura, SBU became a reality. SBU remained under the umbrella of NWBCCC but formed their own board, and Laura stepped in to become the first SBU full-time organizer.

Since then SBU has built up an impressive ten-year track record. They have worked to improve teacher quality, founded a social-justice-themed high school, fought successfully for increased school resources and are now a major player in the New York City organizing world. The youth that join SBU mirror the neighborhood’s population – Latino and African American, with a large concentration of Dominicans and other first or second-generation Caribbean immigrants. SBU, like many youth-led community organizing groups, has a dual mission. On the one hand, just like their adult counterparts, they take action to create institutional change in their communities. Integral to this process is leadership development – a mix of formal and informal training in the knowledge, skills and capacities necessary to be community leaders. On the other hand, they have a much stronger focus than most adult-led organizing groups on individual development – supporting youth as they grow and develop as whole people. SBU, for instance, runs a peer-tutoring program to assist members and others with schoolwork. (See Exhibit A for the SBU mission statement.)

**Arts and SBU**

Until recently the arts have not been central to either the campaigns or the leadership/individual development at SBU, but they have popped up here and there, largely due to the fact that individuals in SBU happen to be artistically talented. For instance, SBU has had a number of leaders who have been skilled in spoken word poetry. So before or after an important event, when traditionally a community organizing group would be planning and then reflecting on the experience, SBU would sometimes replace these conversations with spoken word performances that would help to motivate the youth.

Mustafa Sullivan is perhaps emblematic of this accidental convergence of art and organizing. Mustafa was hired on in 2001 as the organizer for SBU, while Laura shifted to being the Director. An African-American man in his late 20’s, Mustafa studied theater in college and has been a director, a playwright and an actor. He has also studied Theatre of The Oppressed, a method developed by Brazilian theater guru Augusto Boal. Based on Paolo Freire’s concept of Popular Education, Theatre of the Oppressed uses theater games to facilitate group analysis of the oppressions that surround us, and creative problem-solving around ways of confronting and transforming these oppressions.

Since Mustafa became an organizer he has moved away from professional theater, but it has occasionally snuck into his organizing. For instance, on one of SBU’s yearly retreats Mustafa used some of Augusto Boal’s techniques to explore oppressions the youth saw in their everyday lives. Juan Antigua, a youth leader who was at that retreat, still remembers that exercise:

> He had this at a retreat we went to – it’s called Theatre of the Oppressed – people would act out an oppression that was going on, silently. I remember, that was my first retreat. People were in a group and everybody had to do one movement. And the people had to see what was really going on in there, and it was like ‘oh, this person’s getting kicked out of their house because the landlord wants to sell it to a big company.’

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4 SBU sometimes refers to its active members as *leaders*. Paid staff are called *organizers*, though most were at one time leaders themselves. I will use these terms in this case as well.
Theatre was also used occasionally at large NWBCCC/SBU meetings as a way to communicate ideas connected to their campaigns. Sitting at his office desk, Mustafa recounted to me one of the largest theatre pieces they worked on, “How the Grinch Stole our Rights.”

BronXchanges

In 2004, SBU took a step that would bring the arts into the organization in a bold new way. A recent campaign had hit a roadblock. For over a year, a group of SBU leaders had been working to transform the site of a former “crack-house” on the corner of 194th and Decatur, which their organizing had helped to tear down, into a vibrant community center. They had spent three months working hand in hand with an architecture class from Fordham University to design the center, which they hoped would boast a gym and offer services like ESL and computer classes. However, when they began to look into purchasing the land they found their vision untenable.

Around the time that the youth finished their work with Fordham, some of the older leaders who had played a large role in the 194th and Decatur campaign began to move on, and some newer faces were joining. Wendoly Marte and Maria Fernandez were two of these new faces. These two cousins immigrated at young ages to the Bronx from the Dominican Republic, and at 20 and 21 they are now returning adults. They sat down with me to go over why 194th and Decatur was finally transformed into something new. Wendoly explained:

In the process of us trying to get in touch with the landlord the taxes that he owed were so big that the house was taken over by the city and put on auction. We realized that it's worth half a million dollars – there's no way in the world we could get that money. We had a meeting and at the meeting we were like, ‘Okay, so we don't want to take all this work that we have put into it to go nowhere. So why don't we focus on one or two things that might actually work for a community center?’ That's when we decided on art and technology.
These young leaders were influenced by Nick Iuvienne, a young white organizer from upstate New York who was hired not long before. Nick saw how much energy had gone into the 194th and Decatur project, and thought that it might hold the potential for something “transformative” for the neighborhood. For Nick, this was an opportunity to bring a new burst of creativity to SBU. Organizing, he told me, can sometimes lack creativity. It can become a “brutal space” in which individuals become very pragmatic and issue-oriented. And as Mustafa explains, “[Creativity] is an important aspect of organizing, you have to be creative in order to figure out how you’re gonna win a campaign.”

Nick was “trying to plant a seed and see if there was life still” in the 194th and Decatur campaign. Apparently there was. The group ran a four-day retreat at Nick’s parents’ house in upstate New York, at which Nick pushed the group to begin to put their ideas on paper. They drew out what the different aspects of such a center would be, and split up into groups to draft the various sections. This would become draft #1 of the “concept paper” for a center called BronXchanges or, as many of those involved call it, “Art and Tech.”

The core reason for the existence of BronXchanges, from the very beginning, was to offer members of the community much-needed access to art- and technology-related resources and education. This focus on access is important to all of those with whom I spoke. For some it is important because these workshops offer real-life skills that can help youth build a career; for others it is more a matter of encouraging individual expression and the holistic development of young people. But once this idea was in the hands of a group of highly politicized young leaders, the project quickly became about more than just access. Their image of the center grew to encompass social-justice, political education, and opportunities for art- and technology-based community engagement. (See Exhibit B for the complete BronXchanges mission statement.)

With the Concept Paper (more or less) completed, the group moved into a phase of “reaching out to other institutions.”

Wendoly: We knew that we had to share with people. Any time that we had a site visit or a meeting with a foundation we would give it to them any time that we found out that had any kind of art experience or anyone who knew how to write. And then we started investigating art and technology institutions in the city.

During this year-long process SBU began to form relationships with potential partners. They met with the education department at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), who seemed very interested in collaborating.
They initiated a relationship with Eyebeam, a Manhattan-based art and technology center, as well as with the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Unfortunately, some of these relationships have waned in the past year or two, but some in SBU still hold hope for reigniting them in the future.

**Resistance**

Wendoly: At the time we didn’t have money to fund anything like this.

Maria: At the time we didn’t know how to go about doing this because the arts were so foreign to us. This was something completely new.

Wendoly: And it wasn’t exactly an organizing campaign where you had a target. It’s not something that you had to engage in action and negotiation. It was more just work. Just basic work.

It was partly this aspect of the project – the fact that it was not a traditional organizing campaign – that led to resistance from the NWBCCC staff. What the youth wanted to do was offer classes – which would put SBU in the position of providing a service to the community. For some staff, including then-Executive Director Mary Dailey, this was outside the scope of SBU and was pulling needed resources (including Nick’s time) away from other campaigns. Since its inception SBU has offered more services alongside its organizing than NWBCCC has – for instance, its tutoring program. And NWBCCC itself had from time to time engaged in non-organizing work, leading it to create and spin off institutions like the Fordham Bedford Housing Association. But this project raised questions: Is this the best use of limited resources? Is this where the organization’s core strength is?

So in the words of Wendoly, the youth “organized our own organization.”

At the time the leaders of the campaign were on the board for the Northwest Bronx Coalition and were on the executive board for SBU, so to us it was like, ‘it’s this project or nothing else. To us it’s a priority.’ And unless the organizations took it as a priority, we were not going to invest as much time in the other campaigns which were also important to us, but weren’t really giving us the energy that this campaign was giving us.

With the youth this persistent, the Coalition and SBU staff decided to support the project by including money for it in their general operating grants. Mustafa, who became the SBU Executive Director around this time, was initially skeptical as well – less because of the type of campaign and more because of its scale.

I had a lot of questions about where [BronXchanges] is gonna be, how it’s gonna start, who’s gonna pay for it, and what the planning was for those types of things. So it was a difficult time because I think the youth who were working on it saw it as me not supporting them, and in fact I thought it was a great idea. I just thought… the original proposal was very big. It included an artist residency program and all these things, and I think we never did a strategic planning process specifically to make BronXchanges a center. What started to make this come together was the decision to start off with a pilot. That was where there were much more concrete steps.
The Art & Tech Pilot

In the spring of 2007, after an attempt to find a new home for both BronXchanges and SBU fell through, the group decided that, without letting go of its long-term vision, it would scale back for an initial pilot program. This was not an easy decision after having spent so much time and energy on the concept paper. As Maria explained, “At the beginning I was like, ‘no we can't open till we have a final product,’ but it's understandable. When we can't get the funding to start this and we don't exactly know how to run a full program we might as well start small and go forward.”

After much discussion, they chose to have two arts- and technology-based “tracks” for students to join – film and spoken word. Each class would meet once a week for four months. Plus, every other week the students from both classes would come together for a Political Education class, where they would learn about systemic oppressions like racism, sexism, gentrification, etc. This was SBU’s first attempt at combining the teaching of artistic skill and social justice. The planners also included some of the organizing techniques in which they had been trained into the structure of the classes. For instance, one-on-one relationship-building meetings, which are central to much traditional community organizing, would be conducted between teachers and their students. Funding was low, but they were able to secure a $5,000 grant from the Bronx Council on the Arts and some support from Fordham University for the film class. Along with the operating expenses covered by SBU’s budget, this was just enough to move forward.

Partly because of the small budget and partly because of the passion and interest of the BronXchanges team, they decided that SBU members and alumni would teach the classes – though in the long run they envisioned hiring teachers. This choice came with both negatives and positives. On the one hand, the teachers would be relatively inexperienced – none of the first-round facilitators had taught before. But on the other hand, all the teachers would be highly committed and aligned with the mission of the program, and would have inside knowledge of the community and the participants – something a teacher brought in from outside would take a substantial amount of time to pick up. So after a somewhat brief recruitment process the program began, in March 2008, with twelve students – the majority of whom were existing SBU leaders.

Film & Video

After a long and varied career in SBU, Fernando had become the only one still around from the founding group, and had decided to go to college: “I felt like I owed myself to experience something different than organizing,” he told me, “and I knew the only thing I had ever enjoyed is really going to the movies…I really enjoyed storylines, shots and lighting and angles and all that…so I started looking at film programs.” Unfortunately his choice for college – Catherine Gibbs – was both expensive and in the process of being shut down. Soon he had to leave, but not before learning some valuable film skills. And just as he was leaving he found out that the BronXchange pilot program was in the process of being put together, and he offered to teach a film class. SBU accepted his offer.

It was his first time teaching. Fernando tried to do as little lecturing as he could. He would sit the students down in front of a movie and they would take notes on what they saw. He gave them homework. His main concern, from the beginning, was around teaching basic skills.

I want these students to know how to use the equipment to create a documentary or a film…the clear goal was to make sure that they leave with that knowledge. They know how to hold a camera, they know the rules on how to shoot video, what angles they shoot from, how do you cut back and forth on conversations, how do you shoot

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5 I will sometimes talk about “the arts” without mentioning technology because it is the focus of this case. However, in BronXchanges the two can not be completely separated – technology is an integral part of some of the classes, such as video and photography.
interviews, how do you set up interviews, then once you're done with the shooting how do you use editing software. Very basic skills.

However, Fernando also included exercises that showed how images can be strikingly political – for good or ill. He showed images from news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, demonstrating how racial bias can permeate reporting. He showed images from Iraq of US soldiers torturing prisoners. The class then produced a series of public service announcements targeting the Department of Education (D.O.E.) on the issue of school overcrowding – a major problem in the Bronx on which SBU and NWBCCC have long worked.

This project foreshadows what a number of the Art and Tech leaders see as one of the big promises of integrating art and organizing – art as a way to document what is going on in the neighborhood and to raise awareness around important issues, perhaps connected to ongoing campaigns. For instance Travis, one of the students in the film track, has been thinking about using his new skills to record what is going on in neighborhood schools to dispel myths people have about them. The final project for the class was a documentary about BronXchanges itself, with footage of the various classes and Wendoly discussing the history of the program. Documentary films like this, some feel, have the potential to help publicize SBU’s work, raise the organization’s visibility and support fundraising. Fernando explained:

One thing I’ve always thought about is I would like SBU to be documented for about two years...It could definitely be a powerful tool if SBU recorded all their own workshops. And it wouldn’t matter if the media didn’t show up for stuff, we could just send them videos, copies of the events or the rallies...It would definitely add a lot of strength to SBU. It’s a better outreach tool, it’s a better way to explain what they’re doing, they can just send those out to foundations to try to get more money and use them as grassroots fundraising tools.

For Fernando, BronXchanges – and its eventual development into a community center – represents a key aspect of the larger mission of SBU. The goal, he explains, is for young people to take control of their own community and the institutions within it. Community organizing is one way to accomplish this goal, but another is the creation of institutions that are youth-led, democratically-run, and based on shared principals of social justice. This was the goal with the small school SBU designed, and is part of the vision for the future of BronXchanges.

Spoken Word

Jorman Nuñez stepped up to teach the spoken word track. Jorman moved to the Bronx as a kid from the Dominican Republic, and was both an excellent student and, later, a bit of a self-proclaimed trouble-maker. He decided not to finish high school, and has focused much of his attention over the years on organizing. Like Fernando, Jorman had not previously taught, but he was skilled in writing and wanted to “test myself, to see if I could teach it.” Jorman says he doesn’t actually like to write, and definitely doesn’t do “poetry for poetry’s sake” – he's more
interested in the effect it has on people. It was in his first Political Education workshop with an SBU organizer named Ali that he was pressed to try his hand at poetry.

When I performed the poem everybody was like ‘Yo, that was hot, you need to continue.’ Since then at our events they would get me to do poems, specifically we had an annual meeting and I did a poem and the whole room just ‘roooooar,’ you know? And then another leader here…came up to me and she was like, ‘my brother thanks you for sharing that poem because now he’s trying to write, now he’s getting into poetry and rethinking his life so it changed him and so that was good that you did that poem.’ That’s when I was like, ‘what? My poem did that?’

Jorman carried this experience into his design for the spoken word class. He taught some poetry basics, such as irony and metaphor, as well as some skills specific to performance poetry, like body language. But through it all was a vein of seeing poetry as a tool for creating change through moving people to act. He started the first day by asking the class for important moments in history, and talked about how each one of these was created, in part, by words.

In BronXchanges spoken word is about getting the community to act. You’re not just doing this to do this, you’re refining your skills, you’re becoming better, you’re getting more out there so that people can get organized and do something about it, whatever it is that you’re saying. Whatever strategies you come up with, however you structure the content of your spoken word, that’s entirely up to you, for what you think would get people to act. But in the end did people act? We would have evaluation sheets that were about messages. The person would have to write did they feel like they wanted to do something after [the poet] said that? Or did the artist present a means of doing something?

The students in the class benefited from the workshop in very different ways, fitting the new skills into diverse parts of their lives.

I had a student, Xavier. Xavier was like, I want to start my own music group and either write their songs or be in the music group…called something like ‘get off your couch,’ where it’s all about getting people to get off their couch, go do something. Some
people were like I’m gonna use this for school, this was Julia…She’s like. ‘yeah, I’m gonna use this so that I can get good grades and I’m also, when I put applications for colleges, I’m gonna include spoken word in it so they can feel moved by it.’ It helped [one student] talk to her mom cause she had a lot of things inside about her mom and her father and doing spoken word and refining her message at that point--what is she really trying to tell her?

Political Education

The political education class was taught by Wendoly Marte and Juan Antigua. Juan had been in SBU for five years, joining just in time to take part in the original BronXchanges planning retreat. Another Bronx native, Juan is a graphic designer, often creating flyers and other materials for SBU. He is the youngest member of the teaching team, at 19, with both Dominican and Puerto Rican roots.

Political education is something that SBU has long taught as part of its leadership development. Though the term can be used for a variety of pedagogical practices, in this case political education is largely a matter of developing a deep understanding of how systemic oppressions (racism, classism, homophobia, etc.) function in society, as well as ways that people resist and overturn those oppressions. By placing political education alongside the arts the group hoped the students would naturally make connections between the two. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, arts found their way into the political education meetings as well.

There was one activity I came up with. I modeled it after Plato’s “The Cave.” I went and got media clips of all these TV shows and ran them - entertaining, sensational news footage in which they would hype things up such as Britney Spears shaving her head, which is really irrelevant to our own lives. I put up a curtain of plastic bags and behind it the projector was shooting out, and I told them the only thing you have control over is the volume. You can raise it or lower it...Then in back it was me and Jorman. I was a government official, he was a corporate CEO. We were having a conversation about this idea that we fund this Latin-American country that we can export a new drug from and his corporation can profit from it and he’ll cut me in with some money. We were playing on the whole Nicaraguan thing...and the idea was for them to stop listening, stop being confused by [the sensationalism] and listen to what was really going on.
Comics at SBU

Around the time the pilot was ending, Kathy Rosario decided that she would enjoy teaching a class on how to draw manga, the Japanese comic books that have become increasingly popular in the US. Kathy had been in the organization less than a year, brought in by a friend, as many SBU leaders are. But she had years of experience drawing manga-style comics, having trained repeatedly with a teacher at the Bronx Museum. She spoke to Jorman and some others about the idea and they were particularly interested in the possibility that such a class could work together to create an original comic book. So in the fall of 2008 she began what would be an ongoing series of Friday evening manga classes.

The classes have a very informal atmosphere and an unpredictable size – ranging from one person to over 14. Many of those taking the class are Kathy’s friends, most of whom are not part of SBU. Because of this, some in the organization hope the class will serve as a recruitment tool for the organization – people will come for the art, but will eventually learn about the whole organization and perhaps get involved in other aspects. This has been a hope of the BronXchanges program also. Art and technology classes, the theory goes, will attract potential youth leaders who wouldn’t otherwise come through the door.

Kathy and others also hope that manga can be a tool for educating people about both SBU and important community issues. Until recently this has not been a focus of the class, but new plans are in the works.

Kathy: Right now we’re working on this big project that we’re gonna do a magazine, and it’s gonna be based on different issues. But the first story’s gonna be about how organizing works at SBU. We want to use it so if [community members] don’t know about it at least they can read about it. We’re not only doing it for that - I also want people to see ‘hey, there are people out there that have great talent.’

The way that the manga class came together mirrors the processes SBU uses in its organizing: Youth are brought together around a shared self-interest (in this case learning to draw), organizers support the youth and help them to clarify and expand their ideas, and the group takes action towards its goals (in this case a class and, eventually, a product). And as with political organizing, this process is used as a chance to develop new leaders. This is is definitely the case with Kathy, who for the first time is taking on the responsibilities of designing, promoting and running a class. Ginette Sosa, whose son, Travis, is in the Manga class, explained how bringing youth together - whether around an issue or around an art form - can be the basis for building power.

The idea is if you’re coming together around something then you have a connection, you have a base of people. Now what is the issue that you want to address together? So if you’re dancing together, where are you dancing? How are you dancing? Is the dancing available for you? Is there funding that’s needed for whatever it is? Do you want to put on a performance? Just being able to unite people together is powerful.
Pilot Round Two

After four months BronXchanges had its first graduation celebration. Family and friends were invited, and the group showed off some of what they’d been learning. The students in the poetry class performed individually and as a group. The video class showed their documentary. The group felt excited by what they had accomplished, but many felt also that there was still a long way to go.

First of all, they had begun a process of integrating the different art/technology tracks, but they wanted to go farther. The film class filmed the spoken word class for their documentary and filmed the graduation ceremonies, but this was a far cry from the original vision of multimedia presentations combining video, theater, poetry and other arts. Also, though participants found the political education class useful, it never integrated with the arts tracks to the extent the planners were hoping. In a number of post-program surveys participants said that it felt “separate” and they would like to see them brought together more.

So from August 2008 through March 2009, the BronXchanges team re-vamped the program in preparation for a second pilot starting in April. They expanded the program to include four tracks: photography, theater, film and music theory. In response to the pilot surveys, they decided not to have a political education class and instead teach all political education through the other classes. They have paired up the tracks – theater with film and photography with music – and each pair of classes will meet once a month together for a joint workshop focused around an aspect of political education. These plans are still coming together.

Photography

After years of involvement in SBU, including a stint as the co-president of the board, Maria left for New York University to study urban planning. It was while at NYU that she discovered a passion for photography:
Maria had been central to the development of BronXchanges, so when she saw the first pilot program get off the ground she was excited. She e-mailed SBU and asked if she could teach a class. Maria’s passion for the technique and art of photography is apparent in how she has struggled with creating a curriculum that balances skill building with a focus on social justice. Unlike Jorman, whose interest in poetry is very instrumental – he uses it as a means to another end – Maria feels strongly about the intrinsic benefit of this art form and is wary of sacrificing the teaching of the necessary skills.

Photography is very time consuming because you have to go into the darkroom and spend hours and hours – I’m a perfectionist – hours and hours for one photograph. And I know we only have a set amount of time for the program to run so I want to make sure that in that small amount of time they’re getting all that they can from it – and also working on organizing which is very, very confusing, how to incorporate the two, so were still working on that.

But by my last visit she had found a way to combine the two that she felt best engaged the dual goals.

What I’m going to do is have them focus on a lot of specific photographers and the styles of those photographers. We’re going to focus on Robert Frank…he used to do a lot of war photography. There’s a photographer that got killed in Mexico in action. We’re gonna talk about that while learning the skills…We’re also going to focus a lot on specific images, powerful images…that portray the struggle of people. And there’s a lot of events going on in New York City, like the AIDS walk, that I’m going to register my class to go and photograph.

For Maria, teaching photography is about offering a chance to gain real-world skills and enhance one’s creativity, and creating avenues for young people to express their anger and frustration. She also sees it as having a lot of potential to undergird organizing because of its documenting power. “You could easily ignore a youth that says ‘I go through this,’” she explains. But when you have documented it through your art, “you can’t ignore that.”

Theater

Mustafa was inspired by the first pilot program. He decided to brush off some of that old training and teach a track in theater. The leaders were impressed with how deftly he was able to intertwine art and social justice in his curriculum. He describes the class as a combination of Theatre of the Oppressed and “Theatre 101.” Classes concerning character analysis and story structure sit next to classes about how to use theatre games to explore external and internal oppression. And Mustafa plans to take his class outside and use theatre to interact with and “disturb” the public.

For Mustafa, the connection between his class and SBU’s community organizing work is not a high priority. He believes in the importance of theatre in its own right – though his theatre is definitely infused with the politics of justice and anti-oppression. He does note that theatre can be another avenue for individual and leadership development. Many of the skills learned in a theatre class are the same ones encouraged in SBU’s leadership development training – creativity, teamwork, communication. But he is also quick to explain that he is not expecting his class to train youth to organize:
I have organizing skills that I have to develop, and I have acting skills that I have to develop. I have leaders that are part of both of those things that are coming together, but I don’t think of it like art is really gonna make them a better organizer. No. Organizing is going to make them a better organizer. In my mind it seems like two separate things. The intersection is the leadership development that comes out of either one of them when they’re done effectively.

**Music Theory**

Raymond Cyrille has also been attracted back to SBU after heading off to college. Having joined originally in 2002, Raymond was co-president of the SBU board with Maria. He is an amiable young man, 21 years old, who moved to New York from the West Indies as a kid. While working on the early stages of BronXchanges, Raymond was learning the guitar and getting more and more interested in “harder and harder” rock music. He has since left SBU to go to SUNY Purchase, where he was able to take a number of music classes in their conservatory. Though he has switched his focus to medicine he remains committed to music as a pastime, so when BronXchanges got going, Raymond offered to teach a class on music theory.

Covering music “as a language and as a math,” the class will cater to those who already know how to play an instrument but do not have a deep knowledge of the theory behind it (and who already own an instrument, since the program does not yet have the funds to buy instruments.) Class sessions will teach basic aspects of music theory – for example, the second session will teach about the major scale – with time for everyone to apply the theory on their own instruments. There is also time put aside for song analysis. Raymond hopes that by focusing on music performance he will help his students develop confidence – something that could potentially translate into political action.

Whether this occurs or not, the program is a development opportunity for him. “It really helps us develop as leaders who can pass on leadership” he told me. This issue of passing on leadership is a difficult one, and particularly important in youth-led organizations in which youth are continually “aging out” as they become adults and either move on, or take on support roles.
Raymond suggests that the BronXchanges teachers bring some particular skills to the table due to their organizing training. Specifically he cites the ability to uncover people’s self-interest – what really motivates them – and the ability to “agitate,” to challenge people to take action on what they believe in.

One of the things that can go missing in any class…and you see it in your high schools a lot, is people not getting challenged. One of the things that we learn how to do very well in SBU is challenging new leaders and really getting down to the root of why maybe they’re shy, getting down to the root of why they may not always follow through on commitments they make. Those are skills that we have being in an organization like this, to really challenge someone like, ‘Is this what you really want to do?’ Or talking about what they want to get out of the program…for their own personal development. Asking that question is something that’s missing from even a lot of college courses.

Conclusion

As the start date for BronXchanges approaches hopes, anxieties, expectations and questions fill the third floor office. Members of the team have a lot riding on this – it is very close to their hearts. How will the changes to the program turn out? And what’s next after this? Will BronXchanges find a home, perhaps at a local library the group is working on turning into a community center? How will the program change as it grows beyond this small group of passionate founders and includes more students and non-SBU teachers?

I also find myself wondering about the future of arts in SBU. If BronXchanges fulfills its dream of becoming a separate organization with its own space - likely taking some of the older leaders with it - will that mean a drop in the artistic engagement of SBU? Or will arts continue to pop up as they have in the past, especially if SBU youth are taking classes at BronXchanges? Mustafa suggests that it might make sense for SBU to leverage BronXchanges’ success as a tool to pressure the public schools in the area to offer the arts classes the community needs. And what are the lessons for others who are interested in connecting the work of organizing with the arts?
That's what I see when I look around
Yet a city implies we're supposed to work together
And mechanisms of imprisonment to lock us down
The city's full of 99 cent stores, plastic and pleather

Cheap and fake

Wanna be the alpha of males, kings of the throne

Yet the majority of us stick to ourselves, look to our own

Rape murder and slavery of our dome

But kings ruled our families and what have they shown?
We’re isolated
development clusters
with crazy Walmart
economics

Crazy human
philosophy that
dominates our
culture

Trust me, it
ain’t trigonomic

To climb
the pyramid of
capitalism you’ve got
to be vultures

And it’s
because we don’t
own anything, look at
this disaster

Everyone I know
rents and it’s from the
slave master

We’re tryin to
be on top, but it
was us who they
slaughtered

The planet’s
two thirds liquid
but we still got to
pay for water

The money
scheme is crazy,
they’re really going
full throttle

I won’t be
surprised if we
got to pay for air
in a bottle

So can you really
call us a city?
Nowadays it’s harder to find a job than it is to find war.

And they’re trying to tell these companies they need to invest.

I better be ready to act, in fact.

We’re being robbed of our money, we’re being robbed of our stores man.

It just isn’t funny, I can’t take it no more.

Used to be easy to live, it ain’t easy no more.

Nowadays it’s harder to find a job than it is to find war.

And they’re trying to tell these companies they need to invest.

In education to control like they need to impress.

But they constantly fail, man, especially males, man.

Bragging success when all we get sent to is jail, man.

Braggin’ order when we got the poorest urban county on our border.

Braggin’ progress when poverty’s in excess, and

I better be ready to act, in fact.

If I’m not ready to react then pack and stack.

Any weather attract and impact the masses.

Come together in packs and combat their asses.

But...
WHERE MY PEOPLE AT?
Exhibit A

Mission Statement of Sistas and Brothas United¹

SBU’s mission is to develop the leadership of youth in the Northwest Bronx community who are concerned with the conditions in their neighborhood, interested in developing creative ways to address these problems in concrete ways, and believe in their own ability to build people power to hold all public officials accountable for the decisions they make. SBU’s leaders fight for educational justice, more jobs for youth and community residents, and for more community-based resources.

Exhibit B

Mission of BronXchanges²

BronXchanges, an art and technology center planned and created by youth, will provide many with the opportunity to enrich their appreciation for the arts while taking advantage of today’s advanced technologies in a community with little to no investment or access to the arts and technologies. The center will be structured in a unique, creative manner to provide the most effective and accessible tools needed. It will give already skilled artists and technology professionals the opportunity to further nurture their talents as well as offer interested individuals the opportunity to explore artistic and technological dialogues while building skills and expanding their creative abilities. This will be made possible by emphasis placed on collaborative projects and the integration of the art and technology disciplines. The center will also provide a series of trainings, workshops, and community-based projects that will allow participants to become leaders who explore social issues by expanding social awareness and sharing and creating new ideas within and outside the community. As a result, the emphasis placed on social justice will encourage professionals and participants to apply their artistic and technological skills to create a common language for social change.

A Note on the Illustrations

This case utilizes illustrations as a visual method of reporting research. These illustrations are based on rigorous visual data-collection methods. Throughout my interviews and site-visits I collected videos, photographs and on-site sketches that captured the individuals involved in BronXchanges, the context in which they work, and the research process itself. Every illustration is based on this collected data, though as the artist I have chosen which aspects of each image to include or accentuate – much as a writer of a text-only case study would choose which descriptions and impressions to include. All word-bubbles in the illustrations are direct quotes from interviews or observations.