Over the past year, we have learned a great deal about our community and its assets, partnership, adaptability, and the art of stepping back to let community take the lead.

Susan Longhenry, Director
The Haggerty Museum of Art

Water supports our lives,” says Mary Ann Bonet, previous Manager of Community Engagement at the Haggerty Museum of Art in Milwaukee, WI. “So I think it’s important for us and--and our programming--to support ways for people to feel connected to this amazing resource that we have here in Milwaukee, being right here on the shores of Lake Michigan.”

Over the last three years, a unique group of partners has pooled its resources and creativity to spark community engagement around our shared environment through public art, including New York-based City as a Living Laboratory (CALL), the Haggerty Museum of Art, United Community Center’s (UCC) Acosta Middle School, Kinnickinnic River Neighbors in Action (KKRNA), Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers (SSHC), Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) School of Freshwater Sciences.

Full of innovation and unexpected twists and turns, this project’s story is one of continuous, collaborative learning, exploration and creativity—much like the nature and pathways of water itself. Museum Director Susan Longhenry reflects, “Over the past year, we have learned a great deal about our community and its assets, partnership, adaptability, and the art of stepping back to let community take the lead.” Following are the Haggerty team’s experience and reflections on their first year catalyzing community.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

In 2015, New York-based artist Mary Miss of City As a Living Laboratory (CALL) was invited by a consortium of Milwaukee community members to develop an urban-scaled public art concept addressing the importance of freshwater in Milwaukee. Miss had previously developed the concept plan for the Milwaukee Riverwalk, located on the Milwaukee River in the city’s Historic Third Ward district.
Having learned of Miss’s previous work, the Haggerty Museum of Art secured a significant grant from Marquette University allowing CALL to advance WaterMarks from concept to ready-to-implement design. The IMLS Community Catalyst grant, awarded in 2017, allowed us to prototype the first marker—and just as importantly, to develop a model for community-engaged programming that would make the concept meaningful in the context of Milwaukee communities. In this prototype, installations are to be activated by community partner organizations and residents who collectively develop the walks, workshops, and final art installations with the Haggerty Museum of Art.

WaterMarks is a comprehensive, citywide public art initiative design invites Milwaukee residents to explore their connections to the land, the rivers and the lake through the unique perspective of the arts.

The project concept involves two key components: a series of vertical markers that call out water-related points of interest in Milwaukee, and a series of walks co-led by artists and scientists to engage community members around the important issue of water. During the walks, local artists and scientists call out points of interest in Milwaukee’s water story and participants explore the impact of everyday actions on the flow and treatment of water.

The walks culminate in workshops where community members provide direct input to the marker installation by choosing a letter that best represents the marker site. Lastly, local artists who facilitated walks propose new water-themed art installations as a way to continue the conversation about the water systems that support the vibrant Milwaukee community (representing “ripple effects”).

PROJECT ACTIVITIES, IMPACT & NEXT STEPS

The Haggerty team brought the WaterMarks concept into practice through intentionally building collaborative relationships with a wide range of community partners. Mary Ann Bonet, the museum’s newly hired Manager of Community Engagement, developed these partnerships by diving directly into the community to discover and nurture relationships with groups and organizations with a stake in focusing community attention on water through a multidisciplinary lens.

Mary Ann began the work by reaching out to organizations who had already made a commitment to the project, as well as potential new partners including other organizations and resident-led associations. At first, as a recent transfer to Milwaukee Mary Ann found herself relying on the help of fellow museum staff-person (and Milwaukee native) to help her make local connections. Initial contacts sometimes meant attending existing or potential partners’ activities to connect with them.

Conversations often resulted in leads to other people she should connect with, forming a “this leads to that” dynamic that would shape the overall nature of the project. For instance, Mary Ann attended Harbor Fest, a community festival, where she took a canoe lesson and met a staff person from Environmental Health at SSCHS. She made a point to nurture new relationships she formed at these events and take up opportunities to deepen her engagement with them. For instance, she kept in touch with the SSCHS staff person, who invited her to join their volleyball team—an invitation she accepted. In another instance, during her first meeting with a staff-person at the Sewage District (a previously committed Watermarks grant partner), the staff took Mary Ann to a neighborhood on the Kinnickinnic River and explained how active neighbors and organizations there were already active around public art. Mary Ann then attended the group's river clean-up, met individuals representing KK River Neighbors in Action. In a follow-up dialogue with them, they agreed the neighborhood would be a perfect place to host a WaterMarks process.

As work progressed, the team’s overall understanding and knowledge of local assets grew, informed largely by work with the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute. HMA project team member Nora Barr reflects, “We learned through the process of engaging our partners to value their assets, their neighborhoods, and their communities, and to see ourselves as trying to complement what was already there. Certainly, the community members were engaged with these issues and had strong leadership in their own communities (UCC, SSCHC, KKRNIA), so that we became partners in enhancing the neighborhood by bringing the special skill-set of public art, and connections with local artists and scientists.” The museum and our partners’ enthusiasm for supporting community members to lead as much as possible would fuel many of our innovations along the way.

“We learned through the process of engaging our partners to value their assets, their neighborhoods, and their communities, and to see ourselves as trying to complement what was already there.”

Nora Barr, Graduate Research Assistant  The Haggerty Museum of Art
Students chose the letter **A**: for “Acosta,” “agua,” “art,” & the highest grade to which a student can aspire.

Through continued discussion, the neighborhoods near UCC Acosta Middle School and Pulaski Park along the Kinnickinnic River emerged as three public art installations by local Milwaukee artists. Acosta Middle School’s new building—scheduled for a September 2018 opening—would be the site for the prototype of the WaterMarks marker.

We found that partners could enthusiastically adopt WaterMarks because they could easily “fold” it into their existing priorities, projects and momentum—all of which they had taken the time to discover.

UCC Acosta Middle School was approaching the opening of a new middle school building, where it was agreed that WaterMarks installation would be a fantastic way to celebrate a school with a strong STEM and transdisciplinary focus. SSCHC was in a second phase of a rails-to-trails grant project, where they were looking to implement a gates design in Pulaski Park, where the Kinnickinnic river runs, while KK River Neighbors in Action was actively engaged in clean-up and beautification of the park along the river. UCC Acosta Middle School and SSCHC both had committed staff who saw opportunities to create direct impact to their stakeholders through collaboration with WaterMarks. With strong buy-in from community partners, HMA and CALL were able to create even greater community impact than anticipated.

These partnerships and conversations led the HMA and our community partnership team to develop two series of three community walks co-led by pairs of artists and scientists in our first year of work.

The first series engaged UCC Acosta Middle School. After the first walk, a local water sustainability nonprofit organization began helping collect “water stories” of how water impacts or is connected to our lives from the students at UCC Acosta. This led to a workshop with the students, which resulted in a project where the students interviewed their family members about the importance of water. Meaningful, beautiful stories emerged from students’ family interviews, including lessons about the role of water in preparing traditional foods, water in Catholic baptism, and one family member’s story of working on the sugar cane fields in Puerto Rico and the importance of water to the workers and the farmers.

The water stories were then shared at the culminating workshop with the community, with plans to be featured in the app that will accompany the WaterMarks marker.

Another amazing outcome of the first walk series and workshop was that Acosta Middle School students were able to vote on the letter that they wanted to go on top of the first WaterMarks marker. They chose the letter “A,” which had many dimensions of meaning for them: “Acosta,” “agua” (reflecting the community’s rich Latinx culture), “art,” and the highest grade to which students aspire.

All three artists who led walks around Acosta Middle School submitted proposals for public art installations that would be informed by topics generated during the walks and the culminating workshop, actively involve students, and engage and educate viewers around the topic of water. These artists were all local.

The three proposals were evaluated by a selection committee of UCC Acosta Middle School teachers, students, administrators, and members of the museum’s team using a collaboratively designed rubric uniquely developed for this event. The artist chosen was Melanie Ariens, who will work with the students over nine sessions in Spring 2019 to create paintings of the students stating water facts through cartoon bubbles on the underpass of the highway outside of their school. The entire project will be done in active collaboration with the students, engaging them every step along the way in learning about water and doing the painting together.
"WaterMarks Art Initiative" JOURNEY MAP

As work gets underway and lead staff discover significant existing local assets, energy and activity, the team realizes the value in joining and supporting "what's already there" in the community.

1. Mary AnnBonecired as Manager of Community Engagement. She realizes the degree to which community involvement, community "having a voice" and "shaping the design" is leading "ownership" of the project and process. In part after attending a public viewing of the film "ChicArt."

2. The importance of stories. Through an adaptation to their original plan in which students interviewed and presented family members' water stories to the community, the team realizes the importance of community members' stories, and ways for them to be collected and shared.

3. People should choose. As UCC Acosta Middle School students wrote and narrated, and KK River Neighbors take a greater leading role in the activities, the team recognizes that residents and community members should choose important aspects of the project whenever possible.

Illustration by Brittany Curry
Another unique and exciting development was the artist chosen from the KK River Walks with Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers (SSCHC) and Kinnickinnic River Neighbors in Action (KKRNIA). Each of the three walks, led by a local scientist-artist pair, explored portions of Pulaski Park and a site where MMSD has demolished 27 houses in preparation for a river restoration that will be happening over the next 10 years. Once again, each of the three artists submitted proposals for public art installations—proposals that were informed by topics generated during the walks and responsive to the river restoration site.

The partners scheduled the end of the three-walk series to occur at a time when community members would already be gathering for their annual picnic in Pulaski Park. Here, community members were invited to meet the three artists and vote on their favorite public art proposal. The winning project was a series of panels by local artist Gabriela Riveros (an artist who had not had an opportunity for a public art installation prior to this) featuring illustrations of water deities from the cultures of the people living in the neighborhoods. The panels were installed in December 2018 along a new trail created alongside the river, on the site of the demolished houses.

We were also surprised and delighted when the district’s local alderman, Jose G. Perez, who participated in some of the walks after expressing initial concern about the citywide WaterMarks project, also participated in the picnic and voted along with his entire family. Alderman Perez stated that everyone in his family liked the projects so much that “We have to find funding for all three!”

With the Alderman’s support, the museum collaborated with SSCHC on an ultimately successful Milwaukee Arts Board grant that will allow us to realize two out of the three artist projects proposed for the Pulaski Park site. Another delightful development was that SSCHC also stepped up to contribute funding for these and Riveros’ panels through their Rails-to-Trails grant, augmenting IMLS funds in a great example of pooling resources.

**We believe that these are all great examples of catalyzing community.**

In the big picture, the Haggerty Museum of Art has found that this process and experience have strengthened the following key things in our community and networks:

- **Relationships** - specifically, stronger bonds with community members and core organizational partners
- **Presence of high-quality public art truly informed by community interests and concerns**
- **Commitment of the Museum to collaborative community work from an asset-based approach**
- **A deepened relationship with the Milwaukee artist community**
- **Maximizing interdisciplinary work between artists and scientists**
- **Adding to Milwaukee’s water stories**
- **Stronger understanding of partnerships and projects at the museum**
As we enter the second year of the project, our team is focused on creating and sustaining the artist installations, and on deepening our partnerships with UCC Acosta Middle School and SSCHC. We are committed to exploring, and understanding, how this work can be sustained beyond the IMLS grant period. We are about to hire our new Manager of Community Engagement, and have prioritized continued intra-institutional development around this work, ensuring ongoing commitment from the Museum’s entire team.

ADJUSTMENTS, ADAPTATIONS & CHALLENGES

A few key adjustments and adaptations unfolded from the original grant proposal in addition to those mentioned above. Initially, we planned to adopt programming that was already tried and tested by CALL. Instead, Miss’ concept was adapted and transformed through the on-the-ground work of the Haggerty Museum of Art’s Director of Community Engagement, Mary-Arn Bonet. Making the WaterMarks concept meaningful in practice was spearheaded by HMA, UCC AMS, Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers and KK River Neighbors in Action.

In short, Mary-Arn Bonet, very effectively developed WaterMarks by building strong collaborative partnerships based upon shared interests and needs. In addition, the science and art teachers from AMS stepped up in a major way, providing much of the programming framework for AMS’ participation in WaterMarks. As a result of this unexpected lack of a model or blueprint, much of our project has ended up being a collaborative process of adaptation and creative partnership with community. In another example, we adapted the plan to install a marker in the second site through dialogue with the neighbor and health organizations in which all parties realized that a marker wouldn’t fit that community’s identity or wishes.

We encountered significant hurdles over the summer of 2018 when multiple setbacks occurred under the purview of our out-of-state partner, CALL, causing the marker installation to be delayed. Permitting, fabrication, and installation of the marker deviated from the proposed budget and timeline, and unfortunately caused strain on our team’s relationship with UCC AMS. Although the relationship with UCC AMS was salvaged, a planned seating component had to be eliminated.

Overall, the local partners on the WaterMarks project experienced many challenges working with this outside organization from NYC. It was a difficult experience that resulted in many learning experiences. Museum staff reflects that, in being able to overcome these challenges, “Mary Ann was a huge asset in navigating partnership relationships, as well as Susan Longhenry in resolving budget issues as quickly as possible, [persevering] in hiring on new people and delegating resources to protect the investments in these community relationships.” (Nora Barr)

Another unexpected turn of events forced us to adapt when Mary Ann Bonet (the lead staff on the project) transitioned to a job opportunity out-of-state midway through the two-year grant period. Using our learning so far about calling on the assets of community and partners and creating space for them to exercise greater control over the project, we turned to our steering committee partners to help us respond to this development. In the meantime, other staff members developed closer relationships with our community partners. As we write this, an offer has been extended to a very strong candidate, and we hope to have a new Manager of Community Engagement on board by February of 2019.

LEARNINGS & IMPACT ON PROJECT ORGANIZATIONS & INDIVIDUALS

For the Haggerty Museum of Art, this process has created an identity transformation towards an institution that can go beyond the walls of the museum and create more value for community. During a summer 2018 convening one of our partners, expressing the impact of the Haggerty Museum’s active engagement in this neighborhood, stated “I don’t think about the Haggerty as just a place you go anymore. It’s more than that.” The same partner recently affirmed their desire to continue our partnership by stating, “We’re married now!”

What were our key learnings and changes around how to engage community, the issue and role of water in Milwaukee, and how to tap into and mobilize local assets? We have learned that when partnering with larger institutions like Marquette University and other art museums that don’t have a long reputation of community work and commitments, unique sensitivities are at play that need to be taken into account.

Among the many local assets we have discovered, the most valuable have been:

• the strength of SSCHC and UCC Acosta Middle School as partners
• the AMAZING local artists Melanie Ariens, Gabriela Riveros, and Mollie Oblinger
• a community that cares, and
• responsive community organizations and institutions.
We experienced many awakenings when it came to applying a lens of complementing community work rather than directing it. So much came out of listening to our partners and what they wanted above all. We have learned more about how to not tread on people's space, to not come in as experts, and to not demean the skills and assets of the people and places in community. We have learned to be humble; to seek to be a true partner. For example, Marquette University has a long tradition of what it calls “service learning.” Through this work, and by wearing our new “ABCD lens,” our orientation has completely changed to one of meaningful, bi-directional partnerships. We can’t un-learn ABCD! It informs everything that we do.

Nora Barr notes that, on a personal level, “I am more hopeful about doing this work. I have learned to critically reflect about bringing community partners higher on the citizen ladder of engagement and deepening engagement in all phases of a partnership and the collective work.”

Overall, our confidence that the Haggerty Museum of Art can do community engagement work has grown, as well as our understanding of the challenges and benefits of this work. Our increased capacity to do this work benefits not only the WaterMarks project, but other community-engaged projects—such as a recent symposium developed in collaboration with the Milwaukee Art Museum entitled “The Milwaukee Model: Envisioning the Role of the Arts in Criminal Justice Reform.”

In summary, the learnings the Haggerty Museum of Art feels would most benefit libraries and museums are:

- Let partners define vision, own power and lead.
- Step back in partnerships and ask what the community wants.
- Take a step back.
- Reflect on how to create maximum value for all partners every step of the way.
- Reflect on how to create more value for community members and partners.

What is the team’s advice for others seeking to catalyze community?

“Let the community lead as much as possible. Vet your partners. Take the time to build relationships and navigate where your interests align. Never build anything the community doesn’t want. Better yet, never build anything the community hasn’t asked for itself.”

Prepared for the Institute of Museum and Library Services by the DePaul University and ABCD Evaluation Team in collaboration with the Haggerty Museum of Art.

Photos courtesy of the Haggerty Museum of Art.

TO LEARN MORE:

The Haggerty Museum of Art
www.marquette.edu/haggerty

IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative
www.imls.gov/cci