The Joy of Finding Community in an Intergenerational LGBTQIA+ Arts Program

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential for community building within an intergenerational, LGBTQIA+ arts workshop known as Stay Gold. I describe my personal experiences as an art educator in such an environment, as well as my journey to finding a community. I hope to become a stronger educator through self-reflection and to inspire other educators to seek out communities of their own.

KEYWORDS: LGBTQIA+, arts program, museum education, art education, self-reflection, narrative inquiry, autobiographical narrative, community

My art... is...
personal… my life...
is...
personal… how can I
share that with others.
I am gay...
queer… I am a gay man,
I make gay… queer
art.
The one thing I care most
about… my art. My
weird… gay... queer art.
This is me...
scattered...
jumbled...
disconnected...
queer.

Introduction

As art educators, we naturally center our practice around the needs of the students. They are, of course, the reason we are teaching in the first place. When I first started to teach and write about art education, I told myself to focus solely on the needs of learners, as if I didn't

have any as an educator. I thought it would be perceived as selfish
I thought it would be perceived as selfish to explore my own identity as a queer [1] art educator. Both my family and I worried that I could face discrimination in K-12 settings due to my sexual orientation. Two years in a social justice-oriented art education graduate program at The University of Arizona (UA) taught me that my identity does matter and that it's okay to be vulnerable. A course on community art education taught by Dr. Carissa DiCindio showed me that I can find a teaching environment in which I feel comfortable being myself. What will follow is the story of how I found community in Stay Gold, an intergenerational LGBTQIA+ arts program held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson (MOCA) and the joy it continues to bring me

Program Background

Stay Gold started as a class project in a graduate course focused on public pedagogy at the University of Arizona in 2017. The program was designed as an extension of Mapping Q, an afterschool arts program for LGBTQ youth jointly organized by The University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA) and Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation (SAAF). Stay Gold's three-session pilot program was held in a classroom on UA's campus. Bringing together LGBTQIA+ elders and youth, the initial Stay Gold program was focused on storytelling through zines and also included a visit to UAMA (Burke & DiCindio, 2019). Eli Burke, a current PhD candidate in AVCE at the University of Arizona and Education Director at MOCA, was one of the co-founders of the program and now fully oversees it. Under Burke's leadership, Stay Gold has now grown into a biannual 10-week program held at MOCA that offers participants the opportunity to work in a variety of mediums while interacting with the exhibits on display, as well as one another.

More recently, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a digital version of Stay Gold has emerged. Two rounds of 10-week digital programs were held through the late spring and summer of 2020 (Burke, 2020). Stay Gold is intended to make the museum more accessible to LGBTQIA+ individuals, one of many groups of underserved populations in museums. Traditional curatorial and educational practices prevent genuine inclusion and diversity in museums (Jennings & Jones-Rizzi, 2017). Social justice-oriented practices seek to disrupt this culture of exclusion.
While my experience with MOCA has been positive because of the

type of programming offered there, it is important to note that this is not necessarily the norm in museums across the country. Stay Gold is currently joined by only two other *reoccurring* museum programs for queer participants: Mapping Q at UAMA and InterseXtions at the

Brooklyn Museum (Aleman, Ehrlich, & Harris, 2018). I hope there are more out there that I have not found yet or that there are more to come. Without programs specifically intended for queer participants, these individuals will continue to feel left out of museums all together.

Autobiographical Narrative & Queer Theory

Narrative inquiry is a method by which researchers can better understand the world through the lived experiences of individuals. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that "…education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (p. 2). Autobiographical writing is one of a variety of potential data sources available in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry can inform teaching practices, curriculum, educational policy, and teacher preparation programs, among many other aspects of education. Dewey (1910) encouraged the use of self-reflection by teachers, suggesting that experiences hold educational value only when reflected upon.

In this article I will describe personal experiences that explore the connection between my identity as a gay man with a history of depression and anxiety and my developing practice as an art educator. I will utilize narrative, prose, and images to tell my story. Educators before me have made use of autobiographical narrative as a method of research, allowing them to reflect on their place in the field of art education and their teaching practices (Broome, 2014; Check, 2012; Rolling, 2010). Some educators have written autobiographical narratives that don't necessarily require a stated methodology; these have come in the form of commentaries or creative formats, such as graphic novels (Branham, 2016; Burke, 2019). Still, others reflect not only on their own experiences, but aslo those of other educators or preservice teachers, who have shared their stories through interviews, writings, or artworks (Blair, 2014; Check & Ballard, 2014; Unrath & Kerridge, 2009; Unrath & Nordlund, 2009). I am particularly moved by the first-hand accounts of queer art educators (Burke, 2019; Check, 2012), but there are not enough of these stories in art education publications. This is, perhaps, due in part to a fear of losing their jobs or other perceived personal and professional repercussions of revealing their sexual or gender identity in connection to their profession (Check, 2010).

Queer theory exposes the power dynamics that make it difficult for us to express ourselves fully. I take my understanding of queer theory from the writings of other art educators (Bey & Washington, 2013; Gretman, 2017; Sanders & Gubes Vaz, 2014). Through my scholarship, I hope to increase the visibility of queerness in art

education and challenge power dynamics that are present in the academy, museums, and society as a whole. Queer autobiographical narratives challenge the binary system's definition of normal and promote visibility and self-awareness. Similar to Ed Check (2010), I have sought out queer stories to inform my teaching practice and in return hope to contribute my own narratives to the field, so that another educator may someday benefit from reading them. While I have also often hesitated to identify myself as a queer art educator, the danger of remaining invisible is much greater. Just as queer students benefit from learning about queer artists (Lampela, 1995), queer educators benefit from reading the narratives of those who came before them. Queer theory guides my exploration of identities, spaces, and events, unbinding my experiences from the heteronormative world. This allows me to define my identity and my place in society and education, rather than having them defined by me.

Finding Community

On the first day of Dr. DiCindio's community art education class, I stared at a green chalkboard with the word *community* written neatly across it. She asked the class to contribute to a definition of the term. As I stared at the word, an anxious feeling started to grow inside me. I get a little edgy and aloof when I'm anxious. I hyperfocus on whatever it is that's making me anxious, as if nothing else exists. Worriedly flipping through the syllabus, I saw a list of all the places we would be visiting throughout the semester, all the people I would have to talk to, people who I assumed wouldn't like the art I made or the ideas I had. I quickly translated the syllabus into my own internal, irrational language and every page seemed to say, "*You don't belong here.*" I looked back at the board. The word had become twisted, crooked, thorny, unwelcoming. I hadn't realized it before this incident, but I didn't like the word community. I felt some sort of indescribable animosity towards the word… towards the concept. When I heard it, I immediately thought of exclusion. I thought of straight people, normal people, people who don't have to deal with mental illness, people who naturally fit the binary mold. I thought of 1950's television families: The Nelsons and The Cleavers.[2] Each with a perfect, plastic lawn and a perfect house made of plywood, sitting on a studio backlot. *You don't belong here.* I knew I didn't belong when, as a kid, watching reruns on late night TV, I found myself attracted to the male characters: Wally Cleaver, Theo

2 The Nelsons and The Cleavers are fictional families in the television sitcoms, Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet (1952-1966) and Leave It to Beaver (1957-1963) respectively (IMDb.com). Both of these families were white, middle-class examples of the supposed ideal American family. The Nelsons were portrayed by an actual family, but their characters are fictionalized versions of themselves.

Huxtable, Peter Brady[3] . As my satirical illustration below suggests, my television set could have told me I was queer.

Figure 1. *You're Queer by the author, 2019, ink with digital coloring.*

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I grew up in a small suburban town in Connecticut that lacked a visible gay community. I only knew a few other gay kids in high school, none of whom I was particularly close with due to my social anxiety. I was lucky enough to have gone mostly unnoticed and unscathed during this time. I didn't have any meaningful interactions with other queer people until I started college in Arizona. Just as I had learned that I was different from television, I also learned how to be gay from television, or so I thought. It turns out that *Queer as Folk*[4] does not serve as a practical guide for interacting with other gay men. My undergraduate experience was tumultuous, to say the least. In my third semester of college, I discovered a group of gay friends, but

3 Wally Cleaver, Theo Huxtable, and Peter Brady are fictional characters from Leave It to Beaver (1957-1963), The Cosby Show (1984-1992), and The Brady Bunch (1969-1974) respectively (IMDb.com). I watched reruns of these sitcoms as a child in the late 90's and early 2000's.

4 Queer as Folk is a hyper-sexualized television drama about a group of gay, white friends that ran on Showtime from 2000 to 2005 (IMDb.com). I watched this series on DVD during my first year of college.

I never quite fit in. Social pressures weighed on me as I struggled to connect with other gay men. Halfway through college, I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety and clinical depression. While I had shown signs of both of these conditions growing up, they suddenly hit me with a force I had never felt before. I developed an anxiety-induced eating disorder, something that would control my life for the next six years. I became too wrapped up in the wrong things and I lost sight of my studies, as well as the community I yearned to be a part of. I was not in the right state of mind to contribute to a community at this time. My peers were ill equipped to be the support system I needed and those who did try to help were in over their head. My behavior was erratic. I couldn't think clearly because my mind and body were not whole. Every aspect of my life suffered because of my eating disorder. I was isolated in a dark place. Real life was proving to be much harder than it appeared to be on television. The image below references my feelings during this difficult period of my life, particularly the feeling that I was stuck with the disorder no matter what I did. When I finally sought professional help, the healing process was neither quick nor easy.

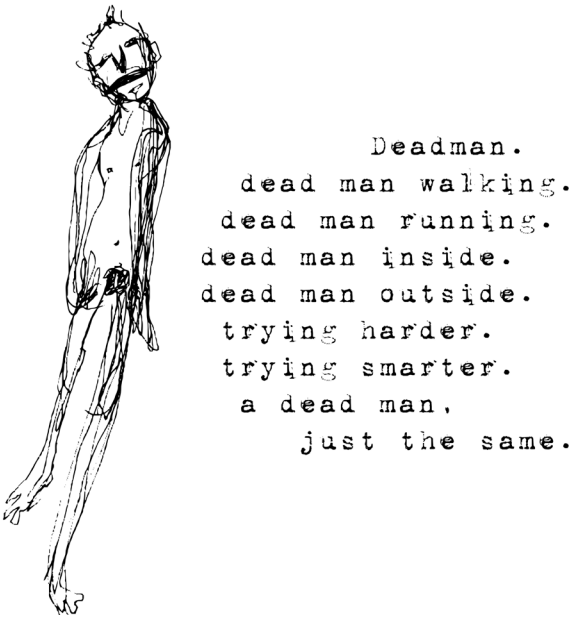

Figure 2. *Deadman by the author, 2019, ink with digital lettering.*

After a six years long battle, the eating disorder had finally been beat. Though it took longer, the depression and anxiety eventually became manageable. I regained eighty pounds after recovering from the eating disorder. I finally felt human again, no longer a walking skeleton. I had lived in New York City and Boulder, Colorado after graduating and in May of 2015, I made my way back to Tucson for a job unrelated to art education. I tried to reconnect with my old friends, but it didn't feel right. The past still lingered in the air. I had to look to the future, letting go of things that could not be changed. I buried myself in a job I felt little passion for. I kept my head above water by pouring my soul into artwork I didn't share with anyone. I didn't have anything even resembling a community and that bad feeling about the concept was probably brewing inside of me at this point. Yearning for something more for my career and life, I eventually convinced myself to go back to school. Soon after beginning a graduate program in Art & Visual Culture Education (AVCE) at the University of Arizona, I began to form bonds with peers and instructors.

Con...temp...or...ary
art. Am I a con...artist in a
hetero world? A squiggle in a
row of straight lines? I am
queer. Contemporary. I am
contemporary. My thoughts
are contemporary. My art is
contemporary. This is
relevant. I am relevant. My
art is relevant. This feels
right.

My sense of community greatly evolved when I became involved with Stay Gold. Dr. DiCindio took my class to MOCA to meet Eli Burke. We learned about museum education and began to plan an activity for Stay Gold, which we would then co-facilitate. I was immediately drawn to the space at MOCA. Just from our initial meeting with Eli, it seemed like a place where I could get involved and flourish. I mentioned to Eli that my research interests involved queer identities and he suggested that we work on a project together. Happy to make a connection with a like-minded person, I felt invigorated to work with the Stay Gold participants on the activity my classmates and I were planning. We were asked to center our activity around queer spirituality to relate to the exhibit that was on display at the time, titled Blessed Be: Mysticism, Spirituality, and The Occult in Contemporary Art. We collectively decided to make air-dried clay vessels that symbolized our souls, spirits, or bodies. Participants could, of course, interpret the activity in any way they saw fit to express their own concept of spirituality.

The Stay Gold group, made up of various generations, was receptive to my classmates and myself. We introduced the project, sharing example vessels we had made in our classroom. Due to my lack of experience with clay, I stuck with a simple phallus-shaped object, perhaps to bring a little humor to a new experience, in an effort to calm my social anxiety. The participants worked and talked in harmony. We were available to assist as needed, but in general, participants were confident enough to try new things on their own.

One of our classmates, Gus Meuschke, who identifies as Chinese, Alaskan Native, and white, volunteered to lead a spiritual activity at the end of the workshop. Inspired by the Chinese tradition of burning Joss paper for ancestral offerings, Gus planned to have the group burn paper in a bowl outside the museum. Participants would be invited to write something of meaning to them on the paper before burning it. The act of molding a vessel and then burning the Joss paper was intended to provide participants with a spiritual experience in which they could reflect on their queer identities and those around them, pay tribute to those who came before them, or to relieve themselves of grief. Participants scribbled words on their papers and took turns tossing them in the fire. At times somber, and at other times joyous, the participants appeared to be engaged in the activity. While the activity connected to a research project Gus was working on about his Chinese grandfather's immigration trial, he later questioned his use of Joss paper in this particular setting, unsure of the participants' understandings of the tradition. He reflected on both the potentials for learning and possible pitfalls of cross-cultural exchange in a museum (G. Meuschke, personal communication, July 19, 2020).

I feel (mostly)
comfortable sharing myself
in a room full of queer
people. (Un)comfortable
because everything makes me
(un)comfortable, but
comfortable because I'm
safe. Safe because it's
queer… contemporary… a
lovely evening it has been…
the air… the people…
it's all so… queer.

Defining Community

I soon became a more permanent member of the Stay Gold community when Eli offered me an internship co-facilitating the Spring 2019 season. More than a year later, I have now facilitated three 10-week seasons of Stay Gold, each time with a different co-

facilitator. I have seen both familiar and new faces each season. I have seen my community change, grow, and strengthen as some stay for a while and others, for a long time. Throughout my time with Stay Gold, I have considered the meaning of community, to further understand why this group means so much to me and others involved with it. Community is not something that can be defined from a singular perspective. It means many different things to different people. In my quest to define the term, I initially turned to psychology books with clear, concise definitions. However, as someone who channels raw, queer emotions through my artwork and everything I do, these definitions did not feel authentic to me. A clinical description of community would not suffice. I therefore turned to queer scholars, feminists, art and museum educators, and visual artists for guidance. Rather than the clinical, sterile, concise definition of community, I am interested in its unruly, emotional, queer counterpart. Feminist theorist Starhawk (1982) beautifully defines community from a Neopaganist perspective:

> Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free. (p. 92).

Consider the beauty in these words. In stark contrast to my previously perceived notions of community as a body of exclusion, Starhawk paints a picture of friends, hands, voices… all welcoming and healing in perfect harmony. This is not a community defined by geography, nor is it a mainstream heteronormative community that creates barriers for outliers to participate. How does one find such a community, one that they belong to perfectly? I desire the circle of healing, of friends, but I often feel displaced, caught between changing spaces, none of which feel like my own. Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) addresses this feeling of displacement associated with queerness and intersectionality:

> As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) (p. 102).

The queer in us is in all races, genders, languages, places. There is not a shadow on earth that does not have queerness in it. Everyone's circle, everyone's community may look different. We transcend

what is expected of us and descend upon our new home, where we feel right. I have contemplated visions of community through image-making. I have defined my circle of healing as one that does not place emphasis on roles assigned by a larger society. My circle consists of oddballs and outcasts, of thinkers and lovers, of the creative, the accepting, and the nurturing. Above all else, my circle, my community, is queer. The image below is my visual representation of community: queer people joined together, hand-in-hand, not afraid be themselves. It is also intended as a statement of solidarity with my friends who are not cisgender, all of whom are important members of my community.

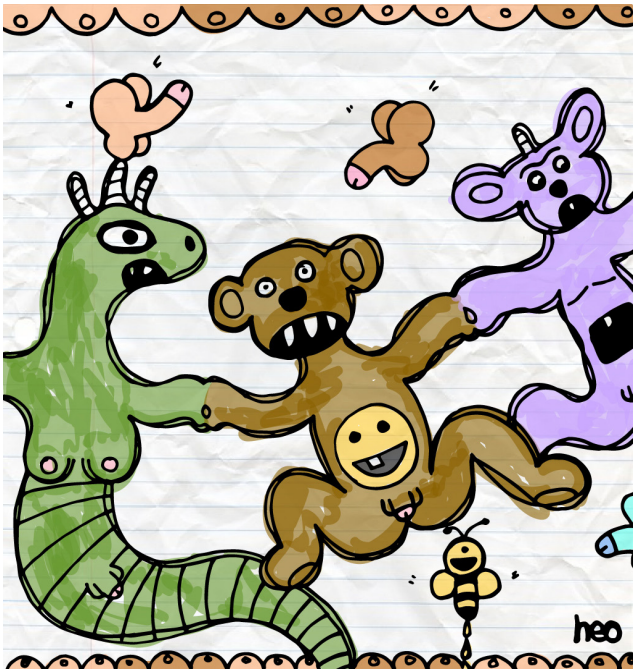

Figure 3. *Gender is a Construct by the author, 2019, ink with digital coloring.*

As a scholar and art educator, my sense of community intersects with multiple environments, including classrooms and art museums. Despite my experience, many marginalized individuals may not view museums as a place where they can find a community. I also, felt this way before I discovered Stay Gold. Art education can, perhaps, serve as a tool for addressing this issue of inclusion and help museums form welcoming communities. Though there is not a general consensus in the field of art education on the definition of community (Campana, 2011), the concept has been addressed by former museum director Nina Simon (2016) through the lens of museum programming:

> A community is a group of people who share something in common. You can define a community by the shared attributes of the people in it and/or by the strength of the connections among them. You need a bunch of people who are alike in some way, who feel some sense of belonging or interpersonal connection. (Part 3.1)

A sense of belonging, interpersonal connections, and shared attributes are key themes in Simon's definition of community. Without them, a community would fail to thrive. Museums and other spaces for learning can serve as places where these elements converge. When museums offer programming that brings people with shared experiences together, drawing people out from the fringes of the larger community, new bonds are formed and new connections are made between humans, the museum, and the artwork, forging a circle of belonging.

The larger LGBTQIA+ community can be difficult to navigate and is divided into segments based on varying identities, such as Lesbians, gay men, and transgender individuals. It is further divided by age, race, and other factors. Therefore, the museum has the ability to serve as an important meeting place for queer people interested in contemporary art who may have felt disconnected from the larger queer community, as I have. Researcher David Woolwine (2000) describes the gay community as an imaginary concept. An anonymous participant in his study on the gay community echoes a sense of fracture within the larger community:

> I'm not sure there is a community per se. I think there are multitudes of communities who have a loose alliance over the fact that they share some sexual… habits. Other than that I don't know if there is a community. I think you go to a Gay Pride Parade and you see all the variety of communities that come there. To say that they're all one community would be stretching it a little. (p. 12).

Since I didn't feel like I fit in with other groups, it was a relief to find a sense of community in Stay Gold. As the participant in Woolwine's study suggested, there are many communities of queer people, often based on race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status. A beautiful thing about Stay Gold is that these artificial barriers are torn down. People are free to be themselves and to commit to their own art and to enjoy the company of one another. The image below is a whimsical take on community, exploring the joy we experience together.

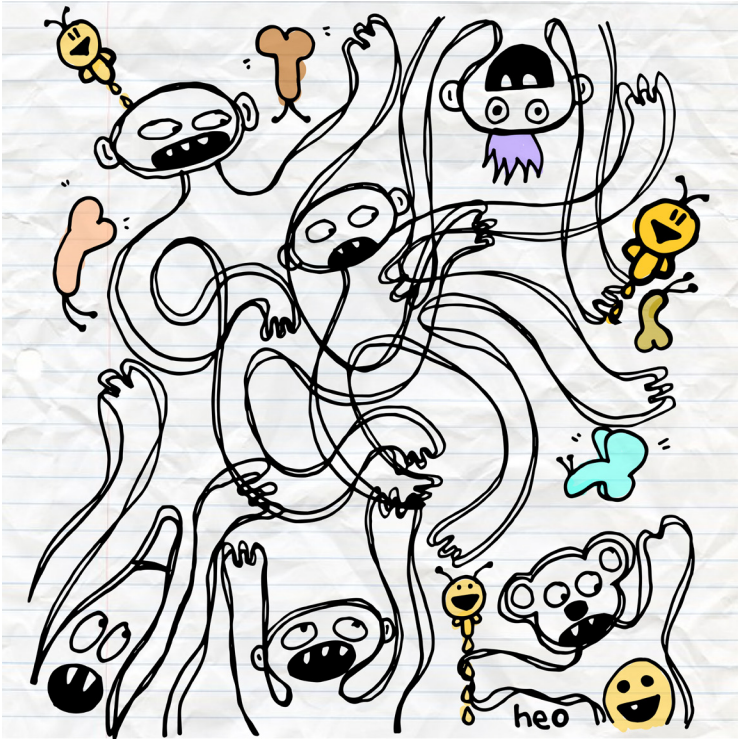

Figure 4. *Don't Let the Bees Pee on You by the author, 2019, ink with digital coloring*

Reflection

Stay Gold has helped me overcome some of my inhibitions and has taught me to embrace other people, welcoming them into my heart. I am now more capable of working through social anxieties and I am able to commit myself to meaningful friendships with others in the group. I have greatly enjoyed working with each and every individual who has come to Stay Gold. They all have their own reasons for coming to the program, but in the end, we are bonded by a common goal of creating a community through art. There is great momentum in museums for educational programming directed towards underserved populations. Of the museum experience, Nina Simon (2016) writes:

> Instead of asking: "How should we script the experience?" we could ask: "What do our visitors most desire? What's in their hearts? How could we start by getting to know them, and then build an experience based on that?" (Part 3.7)

Simon's quote resonates with me as an art educator. I want to know what's in my participants' hearts, what they desire, and what they need from me and the museum. I learn more about the unique individuals at Stay Gold each time I talk to them. A couple that recently moved to Tucson told me that they had come to Stay Gold for the intergenerational aspect. They are both retired and spend most of their time at home making art and reading, so they are eager to interact with others, especially those with youthful energy. A returning participant told me that she had recently experienced a violent altercation. Stay Gold was the only thing she was willing to leave the house for that week. My eyes filled with tears as she told me this and I hugged her and assured her she was in a safe place and that she belonged there.

When participants allow themselves to be vulnerable, I do the same in return. I value Stay Gold participants, and in return, they make me feel valued. That is one of the greatest joys of finding a community. These moments are what tell me that I have truly succeeded in my quest to belong. I encourage all art educators to search within themselves and consider the environment in which they work. If you haven't found a community there, one that you connect with on a much deeper level than your paycheck, then ask yourself why that is. Where do you belong, and where will you flourish? I believe that educators can serve a purpose beyond the instruction of art by activating the potential for spaces of learning to form communities.

Communities are made up of a multitude of bodies that transcend their own being to become a part of a whole. A good community environment embraces the differences of its members, never striping an individual of their unique identity. I have speculated about the relationship between our bodies, our community, and the place in which our community comes together. How do we exist differently when we are in that space? If I hadn't become a part of Stay Gold, what would it look like without me? It would still be functioning perfectly fine, but what does a body look like when it is missing a piece? Unlike the disjointed, hectic figures in my art, I believe the body of a community is more resilient and will, therefore, reshape itself when one piece goes missing. Stay Gold was a wonderful community before I came to it, and I imagine it will remain so with or without me.

I believe Stay Gold will have a greater effect on me, as an art educator and human, than I ever could on the program itself. The lessons I learn and the connections I make will remain with me in my journey. Our impact on a community is meaningful, whether it be fleeting or long-lived. Wherever an art educator ends up, there is always potential for creating something meaningful. Whether you

create something new or drop in for a bit, each of us has something new to offer, as well as something to gain. While it may seem like the odds are against us, defying long-held traditions of exclusion in museums, there is always hope. I encourage educators to either seek out pre-existing programs that promote inclusion or to create their own. This sometimes requires finding an institution with leadership that shares our desire for inclusive programming, other times we can make small, but meaningful changes in environments that aren't as supportive overall. Perseverance and determination are key in the journey for inclusion and equality. No matter where we go, always remember that our identities matter and that the formation of a supportive community is possible.

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