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treating trauma at its roots

NICOLE RUPERSBURG | THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2016



Sanctuary is a place of refuge or safety. In urban neighborhoods throughout America, sanctuary is a luxury that can be almost impossible to find. But Michael O'Bryan is working hard to bring that sense of security to Strawberry Mansion in North Philadelphia.

The [Sanctuary Model](#) originated in Philadelphia in the early 1980s. It promotes safety and recovery from adversity through the active creation of a trauma-informed community. Crucial to this program is the understanding that trauma is a pervasive element of life for city residents. Trauma cycles become vicious cycles that perpetuate violence within trauma-impacted communities.

O'Bryan works as a Sanctuary Coordinator for the Trauma Informed Care Initiative, a program of the U.S. Attorney's Office Eastern Pennsylvania District in partnership with the [Sanctuary Institute](#), the leading trauma care and capacity-building training institute in the country.

He was brought on board because of his experience with the Sanctuary Model. O'Bryan worked at the [Salvation Army Red Shield Family Residence](#) -- the first shelter in Pennsylvania that adopted the model -- for seven years. As the Youth Service Coordinator, he instituted and oversaw the development of the organization's Youth Services Department, including after-school services, trauma-informed arts enrichment programming, and psycho-education. Prior to that role he served as an after-school program coordinator and mentor of after-

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school care.

O'Bryan is also an artist and he harnesses the healing power of creativity through arts-related programming for a variety of different nonprofit organizations. He currently serves as a vocal instructor and music department coordinator for the [New Freedom Theatre](#) and is also the program manager of Youth Arts Education at the [Village of Arts and Humanities](#), an organization dedicated to community revitalization through the arts.

As a teenager he attended the Greater Hartford Academy of Arts in Hartford, Connecticut, "before I ever knew what social practice arts meant and what it stood for," he recalls. "A lot of my teachers had a lens that lent itself to talk about social justice and social equity."

He was part of a theatre troupe of young actors that performed pieces focused on social issues: bullying, interracial dating, dating violence, eating disorders, parental neglect, suicide and coping with alcoholic parents, to name a few.

"We would go out and perform for anyone who would watch," explains O'Bryan. "[We] would do talk-backs in character throughout show and then as ourselves at the end of it. We knew people were responding and engaging and dialoguing about it."

But high school is high school, and O'Bryan knew he had to figure out what the work meant to him as an adult.

He attended the [University of the Arts](#) in Philadelphia where he had a great time performing and gigging. At the end of his senior year, he went down to Miami Dade County to work as an arts and youth development consultant with [enFAMiLIA Inc.](#) The project focused on Latino migrant farmer families.

"It was very social justice-centered without bearing that into the kids," he says. "They were just having fun, but the program lent itself to that lens of social equity and helping them find that voice that was on the inside that might have been silenced, particularly on issues of immigration and migrant status and blended families. That was a huge thing for me -- [tackling] exploitation and lies about immigration and labor branding, that all those immigrants are 'sucking up taxes,' blah blah. That was my first community immersive social equity in the arts engagement."

The experience had a profound impact on him. There was no turning back. O'Bryan took a position at the Salvation Army for seven years while still teaching arts, performing as a musician, and doing some consultant work.

"I was able to marry my love of arts and social justice," he explains. "My mentor would always say, 'You were always a social worker; you just didn't know what that formally meant.'"

Even before his current role with the Trauma Informed Care Initiative, O'Bryan worked extensively around the intersections of art for youth, health and wellness, and community development. He served as the Community Activities Coordinator of Valley Youth House's [Achieving Independence Center](#), a communal space serving, educating, and empowering youth in dependent care; and a music instructor with [EducationWorks](#), a nonprofit that provides support for economically disadvantaged communities in Philadelphia.

O'Bryan was also the Project Facilitator of [Philadelphia Ceasefire](#) in 2013, a

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project done in partnership with Philadelphia Youth Network's high school interns in the 22nd police district of Philadelphia. He conceptualized and implemented an arts-based public health summer project centered on violence.

More recently, in 2014, O'Bryan was the lead artist of [Journey2Home](#), a [Mural Arts](#) program featuring a social emotional learning and psycho-education workshop series aimed at re-entry youth and youth experiencing homelessness.

Addressing trauma was always a large part of this work -- looking at the youth's relationships with other people, their ability to try new things and to dream, their ability to maintain a job, and more generally their ability to lead healthy lives coming from trauma-informed backgrounds.

"How do you make sense of the traumatic things that have happened to you and how that affected your ability to maintain trusting relationships?" asks O'Bryan.

As a Sanctuary Coordinator for the Trauma Informed Care Initiative, these are the kinds of questions O'Bryan asks every day.

The U.S. Attorney's Office's decision to pursue community-level work via the Sanctuary Model came from a goal of addressing trauma at the neighborhood level, and changing how people interact with the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

The project is funded through [Project Safe Neighborhoods](#). It is a prevention program aimed at reducing gun and gang violence by supporting local programs in high-risk communities.

"The whole goal is to lessen the experience of trauma and reduce violence," says O'Bryan. "We're the only ones that took a public health and prevention approach."

The City of Philadelphia is ripe for this kind of work.

"It is the poorest metro area in the country," explains O'Bryan. "The wages here are terrible. The youth death rate is high. It is pretty much one of the bottom cities in the country. Philadelphia is just a ripe area to deal with the roots of where that comes from."

The Trauma Initiative looks at trauma on the micro level, person to person, but also on a macro level that looks at whole systems.

"People, neighborhoods, even systems are trauma organized," he says. "People in certain neighborhoods have no access to income that doesn't put their lives at risk. These neighborhoods are filled with bright, beautiful, vibrant people who want nothing more than to thrive in life, but access to a network that will help them thrive is just not there."

Trauma-organized systems display the same characteristics of a trauma-impacted person. There's a lot of secrecy, power is not distributed, and there is a lack of communication or total silence. That happens at the individual community level *and* at system levels.

"Where do you find the relief in any of that, when trauma addresses trauma?" he says. "We're addressing the roots of that, starting with the neighborhood and community. Neighbors and members have this knowledge that can hold the people who are supposed to service them accountable and create new levels of accountability for how service is delivered."



Part of the Initiative aims to teach people about the effect trauma and relentless stress on individuals and neighborhoods, and what a person needs to know about all of the opportunities for healing, for building coping skills, and for finding resources.

O'Bryan continues to use his arts background to address these complicated social issues.

"Art is a great medium and mode of communication and inquiry," he says. "Art can work in any kind of educational space. People have access to equity through art that diminish barriers from traditional learning."

This profile was originally published by [Urban Innovation Exchange](#) in partnership with [Meeting of the Minds](#) and [Kresge Foundation](#). For more stories of people changing cities, visit [UIXCities.com](#) and follow [@UIXCities](#).

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