



## Community Theatre Network Convening 3 Tues. August 1, 2023 Synopsis

Ten representatives of 7 community theatres, together with guest speaker Erika Wesley, 2 Cultural Alliance staff members, and guest John Cusano, met at Center Stage Shelton on August 1, 2023.

We opened with a welcome from Carla Sullivan describing the history and current space and facilities of Center Stage and then proceeded with brief introductions.

### **Erika Wesley: Building Equity**

Following on from the discussion at the previous meeting about DEI issues, we invited Erika Wesley, Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the Westport Country Playhouse to speak about her work at the Playhouse and how it might translate to the group of Community Theatres (see Meeting Notes for a detailed account of her talk).

### **Strategy**

Erika opened by stressing that DEI was long slow, iterative work: "Equity is the outcome of strategic, consistent and well-resourced organizational initiatives." A key overall goal of successful DEI work should be to create and amplify a sense of belonging, physical and psychological safety, and a diverse experience for all.

### **Assessment and Listening**

Starting with a team of two (or more) to work on a self-assessment of the organization was key. Surface what the organization's core values are and uncover any competing value systems. Are there particular individuals who are driving particular values. Do traditional value systems compete with the interests of DEI?

In a larger organization you can create an affinity group - the Playhouse's Justice League consists of 10 individuals that look for areas ready for improvement and quickly working on change. It's important to think collectively and inclusively about what

changes can be made. The Justice League is separate from the power structure of the Board - but the two groups meet together in a DEI Committee.

### **Messaging**

Erika firmly believes in slowly building momentum in building equity in an organization. Find the low-hanging fruit, micro-projects that can still make a difference. And then be sure to message your intentions and your successes - to the whole theatre, to your audience and your community. Be clear in telling people the journey you are on - and emphasize that it's a journey. "We are becoming a more inclusive organization and here is how we are doing it." Make it very tangible and have regular reports, perhaps a web series.

### **Community Action Group**

With smaller community theatres, Erika strongly recommended creating a Community Action Group that consisted of audience members, funders, and community members and leaders you want to build a relationship with. This group, especially if it included members of new populations moving into town, could be the source of new board members, donors, audience, technicians etc. She also emphasized the importance of looking for the common thread of interest that could bind the group together.

### **Intersecting Identities**

One of the lessons of equity projects is that we all have multiple intersecting identities and it is important to have exercises in which all team members think through and write down all those identities. Having people think about all the different types of people they are is a way of getting people who think they are not part of the conversation to recognize that they are.

### **DEI Training**

DEI Training is important - as an entry point. It creates awareness and awareness is where you have to start. But it should lead quickly into action - to the development of goals and a practical strategy to making the changes that all agree need to be made.

### **Campaign for Federal Funding of Theatres.**

The arts and tourism as a sector were the hardest hit during the pandemic and is the slowest to recover. And performing arts organizations were the hardest hit and the slowest to return and the future of many theatres is still very much in jeopardy.

Lou Ursone and High Hallinan have worked on a letter to stimulate federal funding that would follow up on the Save Our Stages and Shuttered Venues Operating Grants. The letter will be circulated for signatures and would then be sent to federal and state representatives and senators.