



Everyone Deserves Music



Michael Franti, soul rocker and justice advocate of the past three decades, has a great song called “Everyone Deserves Music.” Some of the lyrics are: “Even our worst enemies, lord, they deserve music, music.” As a proud Boricua, music, dance, and food are some of my favorite ways to connect with others while expressing who I am. Ask any of my co-workers at the New York City Department of Probation (DOP) who is first on the dance floor at our annual end-of-year event, and they won’t hesitate to tell you: Me. Whether it’s bachata, salsa, merengue; even a little hip hop to my kids’ dismay – I love to dance.

Unfortunately, in most parts of the country, access to arts and culture is too often determined by one’s zip code, instead of talent, passion, or interest. In the criminal justice field, this inequity is particularly important, as embedding cultural assets in under resourced communities has been correlated with an 18% reduction in the serious crime

rate, according to a recent study of New York City neighborhoods by the University of Pennsylvania.

As the leader of one the largest alternatives to incarceration entities in the country, I believe that not only does everyone deserve music, but also visual arts, spoken word, and dance. Especially those on probation and the communities they call home. Five years ago, DOP began what to some might seem like an unexpected partnership with Carnegie Hall to bring the NeON ArtsSM initiative to the neighborhoods of New York City that historically have had the least access to arts and cultural resources.

Through NeON Arts, young people in those neighborhoods, regardless of their justice-system involvement, get to explore their creativity through a wide variety of media. And NeON Arts uses a ground-up participatory budgeting model in which neighborhood residents come together to choose the arts and cultural programming they determine their community wants and needs. To date, NeON Arts has invested \$3.2 million in arts and cultural programming, funded 71 local artists and arts organizations, and helped to collectively produce more than one hundred arts and culture projects that have already reached nearly 8,000 New Yorkers throughout the five boroughs.

I have witnessed first-hand the amazing transformative power of participating in NeON Arts for people on probation, their families, our staff, and our communities. For instance, NeON Arts helped one woman transform her life through spoken word, and she used that new strength to earn her High School Equivalency diploma. Since completing probation, she has gone on to college and published her own poetry book! She also regularly gives back to her community by performing and nurturing new talent through the NeON Arts program.

This kind of impact is widespread and shows what we already knew: NeON Arts works! And now we have proof. A forthcoming independent evaluation, commissioned by the Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity and conducted by Metis Associates and Westat, found that NeON Arts is a powerful program that positively affects participant engagement, their relationships, and personal growth as individuals.

Research shows that participating in arts programming, like NeON Arts, helps young people develop better collaboration and communication skills, higher self-confidence, improved concentration and ability to complete tasks, increased coping skills and reduced anger, and better and stronger relationships with adults. And these positive outcomes are even *more* impactful on justice-involved youth.

During this year's Puerto Rican Heritage Month, I have had numerous opportunities to celebrate my culture's food, music, and dance. And I am reminded of just how necessary

that is to my sense of self. Expanding programs that provide access to arts and culture, such as NeON Arts, are critical to our communities. Because Everyone Deserves Music!

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Ana M. Bermudez is Commissioner of the New York City Department of Probation. In 2011, the NYC Department of Probation launched the Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) -- at the heart of the NeON is a network of partners – individuals and organizations, public and private – working together to improve public safety and promote the success of people on probation by working with them in neighborhood settings. At NeONs, people on probation can meet with their Probation Officer as well as receive a wide range of services such as HSE classes, employment preparation, mentoring, access to healthcare services, on-site food pantries, literacy programs, as well as arts and sports programming open to all in the community.