

ACCESS and the Arab American National Museum

By Rebecca Lena Richardson
Arts & Democracy Project
Center for Civic Participation

“We are not in the business of entertainment; we are in the business of building communities.”

--Dr. Anan Ameri, Director,
Arab American National Museum, ACCESS

Since 1972, the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) has supported long-term community building and empowerment for the Arab-American community in Dearborn, Michigan (a suburb of Detroit.) ACCESS offers social services, a community health and research center, employment and literacy programs, and a cultural arts program- sustenance for the bodies, minds, and spirits of the people it serves.

In May 2005, ACCESS literally broke new ground when it opened the Arab American National Museum. The first museum in the world devoted solely to Arab-American history and art, it reflects the ACCESS' Cultural Arts Program's philosophy that art is an important tool for nourishing the spirit and building relationships. Dr. Anan Ameri, Director of the Cultural Arts Program since 1997 and Founding Director of the Museum, says, “If you look at the individual in a comprehensive way, they need something for the spirit. We believe that art can do that, especially for minorities. It can provide a sense of self-esteem and sense of identity. We also see art as a way to build bridges with other communities.”

In/Visible, the Museum's opening art exhibition, was the first-ever exhibition of contemporary art specifically by first- and second-generation Americans of Arab heritage. Curated by Salwa Mikdadi, a Palestinian-American art curator and author who has been a driving force in the world of Arab art for more than 20 years, the exhibit featured paintings and installations by 14 Arab-American artists. The Museum's opening also premiered permanent exhibits about the history of Arab-American immigrants and Arab-Americans' contributions to U.S. society and culture. In 2006, AANM organized a national conference for Arab-American artists to explore the impact of 9/11 on their work and their lives and to discuss the role Arab-American artists play in their communities. In addition to art galleries, historical exhibits, and conferences, the Museum conducts ongoing education and organizing programs that pursue ACCESS' mission of community-building and social change.

One such program is *SURA* (the Arabic word for picture), a youth photography program that recruits kids from Dearborn's adjoining, but segregated, Arab-American, African-American, and Latino communities. This program allows young people to develop their knowledge of photography by documenting their local communities and

creating an exhibit together at the culmination of the program. In addition to introducing photography as a career path and sponsoring visits to a variety of museums in Detroit, the program educates the youth about the connections between the histories and current realities of their communities. Ameri says: “During the classes, we talk about immigration to southwest Detroit and east Dearborn, which all developed around Ford Motor Company. The kids take pictures of their parents and interview their parents. We talk about how their parents all came to Detroit to make better [lives] and [how they] had the same issues. Then they take pictures of their neighborhoods and talk about the problems in their neighborhoods.”

The photography program’s focus on interracial alliance building echoes ACCESS’ long history of cultural programs that forge ties between ethnic groups. More than 15 years ago, ACCESS spearheaded the development of the Cultural Exchange Network, a coalition of approximately 60 ethnic organizations in Detroit. For 16 years, the Network has been organizing the Concert of Colors, which brings together its member organizations to produce a free three-day world music festival each year. The long-term commitment to this festival by a coalition of ethnic organizations in Detroit creates a strong sense of community. As Ameri says, “When you work with the same group for 15 years together...no matter what, people will really have relationships with each other.”

For Ameri, there is an intrinsic connection between cultural programming and civic participation. She says, “Let’s talk about African-Americans, Latinos and Arab-Americans-these three communities, they live in their own neighborhoods, they don’t interact with other communities.” She believes this isolation leads to fear of other groups and of the society at large, fueled by popular media. However, she notes, “When you bring people together, that barrier falls down...you create a positive atmosphere for people to work together.” This allows people to participate more fully in mainstream American society, as they go beyond their own enclaves.

In addition, arts-based programs and events offer a “non-threatening” opportunity for relationship-building that make broader community organizing efforts possible. Taleb Salhab, ACCESS National Outreach Director, agrees. His department ran a highly successful 2006 young voter drive among Arab-Americans and he observes that “In terms of the arts work, there has always been a community outreach and community building agenda to that. You know, that event [Concert of Colors] is not just about music. It’s about building community connections, it’s about networking, building ties.” He notes the emergence of the New Detroit Immigration Task Force from groups involved in the Concert of Colors. Ameri cites the direct results of ACCESS’ long arts-based intercultural collaboration in the tangible support the Detroit Arab-American community received after September 11, 2001, in the form of letters, visits, and funding to deal with the impact of 9/11. “I don’t think this would have been possible if we had not been working with these people for so many years,” she adds.

In addition to bringing people together, Ameri also notes how arts programs and exhibits that draw from community history can inspire visions of, and faith in, social change. For a recent museum exhibit “Women in Time of War,” young women interviewed older women in the community about their actions in wartimes, such an Iraqi

woman bringing medication to Iraqi civilians facing shortages during the U.S. blockade of Iraq. Referring to ACCESS' efforts to pass along community memories of achievements and victories in social change, Ameri says, "We need to keep getting young people to learn that when the community gets together, they can make change."

As she envisions the future work of ACCESS and the Museum, Ameri imagines a youth leadership institute for young Arab Americans that would combine a focus on art and activism. "The younger generation are much more skilled [technologically], but I am not so sure how strong their involvement in their local communities is," she says. Ameri describes how the generation of activists who formed ACCESS- who, like her, have their roots in 1960s activism- "have that larger perspective that we are in this world together." She would like to nurture this sense of solidarity in the next generation, including a focus on fostering philanthropy among young people.

In addition to building relationships and organizing within the Arab-American community and with other ethnic groups in Detroit, ACCESS also works on a national scale to create networks and coalitions of Arab American organizations. ACCESS founded the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC) in 2004, after several years of research and networking with Arab-American organizations around the country. In envisioning next steps, National Outreach Director Taleb Salhab says a key part of NNAAC's focus will be developing national programs in culturally competent civic engagement for all Arab-Americans and Muslims, with a special focus on youth engagement.

In developing these national efforts, Salhab sees the arts as a key part of effective civic engagement work, which, in his view, is much broader than voter mobilization. For him, civic engagement is about "getting people to play active roles in shaping the issues that affect them," including educating legislators about pertinent issues and engaging the media. He believes that the arts can be a powerful way to increase visibility in mainstream society of issues facing Arab-Americans. He points to shows like *The Watch List* on Comedy Central, which features a combination of the stand-up acts and sketches from some of the funniest up-and-coming Middle Eastern comedians, who discuss issues like racial profiling and civil liberties in their routines.

Salhab believes that the process of linking art and civic engagement among Arab-American organizations on a national level is "still in its infancy," but ACCESS and NNAAC are supporting the beginnings of this bridging nationally. NNAAC collaborated with the Museum to sponsor a comedy tour at other NNAAC organizations by comedian Maysoon Zayid, who describes herself on her website as "The Palestinian Muslim Virgin from New Jersey with Cerebral Palsy" and whose work, not surprisingly, discusses social and political issues facing Arab Americans. NNAAC also recently worked with the Museum to bring two hip-hop artists, one Arab American and one African American, to NNAAC member organizations in four other cities after the artists had completed a ten-day residency at the Museum. In each city, the two hip-hop artists conducted a model residency and public performance with youth based on their work at ACCESS. In each

city the Museum used the public performance by the two hip hop artists as a tool to bring different ethnic groups to work together in planning the event.

At ACCESS and the Arab American National Museum the arts help create a groundwork of community relationships from which civic participation can emerge. In addition, says Salhab, sponsoring and presenting socially and politically relevant performance that draws audiences beyond the Arab-American community is “a really effective way of raising the profile of the community” and gaining allies in the broader society.

Rebecca Lena Richardson is a facilitator and writer. Currently the Website and Profile Project Coordinator for the Arts & Democracy Project, she also facilitates workshops about arts-informed approaches to researching family & community histories.