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Rockefeller Foundation
Innovation for the Next 100 Years

# Cultural Innovation in Action

Case Studies from 2011 Grantees of The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

**Chimpanzee Productions**
**Digital Diaspora Family Reunion**

Digital Diaspora Family Reunion uses personal storytelling and family archives to break down barriers.

# Introduction

## About Chimpanzee Productions

Chimpanzee Productions is an independent film and multimedia company dedicated to producing audio-visual experiences that illuminate the human condition and the search for identity, family and spirituality. Founded in 1979 by Thomas Allen Harris, Chimpanzee Productions uses a wide range of media, including video, still photography, installations, performance and film to draw people together and create a sense of community. The company's work has been featured on PBS, at the Sundance Festival, and at other festivals, museums and galleries around the world. Chimpanzee Productions has an annual budget of approximately $300,000.

## About the Project

Through Digital Diaspora Family Reunion, Chimpanzee Productions created a touring multimedia Roadshow (http://nyti.ms/gHjnae) and an online web portal (www.DDFR.TV) to capture and share hidden history contained in family photo albums. The goal of the project was to use personal storytelling and family archives to break down barriers between young people of different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds and to bring them together around the cultivation of their shared values and experiences.

# Process

## Starting Conditions

Chimpanzee is keenly attuned to the diversity of New York City—nearly 170 languages are spoken in the city, and 36 percent of New York residents are foreign-born. As an organization, Chimpanzee is driven by its belief in the power of personal story-telling and family archives to break down barriers between people of different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and to bring them together around the cultivation of their shared values and experiences. "If the color line was the problem of the 20th century," says Harris, "the challenge of the 21st century is the cultural divide." Writer and Producer Don Perry adds, "We live in a city composed of anonymous parts. We go through our day in small routine. Digital Diaspora gives us a way to slice through that and cut across divides."

When the opportunity to apply for an NYC Cultural Innovation Fund grant arose, Chimpanzee Productions was already working on Digital Diaspora Family Reunion, a project to encourage individuals and families to create new photos, unearth old pictures, and share images documenting themselves and their neighborhoods. The project was inspired and informed by Chimpanzee's film, *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, which Chimpanzee intended to tour with Digital Diaspora Family Reunion as a way to introduce families to the goals of the project. As Harris explains, "We were already making the film, and we decided to create an outreach program to get the audience to engage with our content in deeper ways."

With seed money from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and others, Chimpanzee had developed and refined the Roadshow experience; created a social media platform where individuals could upload their family photos and tell their own stories; and toured the Roadshow to Boston,

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> **- Don Perry**
> Writer/Producer

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Brooklyn, Jersey City and Harlem. But there was more work to be done. Chimpanzee wanted to tour Digital Diaspora Family Reunion to all five boroughs of New York City. This would require approximately eight weeks of initial preparation in each community, specific youth visual history projects, and public installations and broadcasts.

A grant from the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund enabled Chimpanzee to move ahead with its plans for wider distribution of the project.

# Prototyping

Chimpanzee held three Digital Diaspora Family Reunion events during the prototyping period, each taking on unique character and approach.

In collaboration with Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion opened the curatorial process to the public, asking residents to nominate people whose contributions to the community help make Harlem unique—unsung heroes, heroines, and ordinary people whose extraordinary presence creates a sense of community. Nominees ranged in age from 17 to over 60, including a student who created a community garden on her block, a grandmother who gave tours to Columbia students to counter the poor image they had of their new neighbors, a community events organizer, and a local legend who brought Double-Dutch back to the streets of Harlem. For the first time, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion integrated live musical performance by local musicians into the culminating event which, according to organizers, "brought out a totally new sense of intimacy and group cohesion around the event." This event was also the first time the project used technology to enable audience members to share their images and stories as an integral part of the event.

On Staten Island, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion focused on celebrating 193 years of Staten Island African American history—a cultural legacy that is generally tucked away in family albums and therefore invisible to the public. Project partners included the Sandy Ground Historical Society and the Central Life Family Center, the community

center of the First Central Baptist Church. First Central Baptist is one of the oldest historically Black churches on Staten Island and has deep ties to its community. In addition to asking residents to bring their photographs, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion encouraged them to bring artifacts based on their photographs, such as the historical quilts made by volunteers at the Sandy Ground Historical Society. "So many people came that we had to throw the schedule out the door and just let people speak," say event organizers. "They were so keen to share their family experiences with each other and with the many young people in attendance that we literally went into the early evening trying to [fit] everyone in."

Working with the Bronx Museum of Arts, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion sought to uncover *Real Bronx Tales*, stories from local residents about what life was and is like for them, their families, their friends and neighbors, and people on their streets. For the first time, the event featured two special presentations. *Tales of the Grand Concourse* was a five-minute video produced by a youth intern about fifth-generation Bronx resident Sam Goodman. *City of Memory: From Mambo to Hip Hop*, a video showcasing the musical history and fusion of cultures in the Bronx, was offered by CityLore. African drummers from the Bronx-based Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center performed to conclude the event.

In the Bronx, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion truly was a reunion, as residents renewed connections they had lost over the years. Organizers point to one story in particular about two women who rekindled their friendship after losing touch for 50 years. After discovering that their lives had actually paralleled each other as they worked in the New York City public school system, they are now working together to locate other lost high school contacts and to bring Digital Diaspora Family Reunion to new audiences—the Jewish diaspora and public school administrators around the country.

# Changes in Assumptions

Initially, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion was conceived as an audience engagement project to support the feature-length documentary film, *Through a Lens Darkly*, which looks at how Black photographers and Black communities have used the camera as a tool for social change and self-determination. Harris explains, however, how they quickly re-imagined their approach when they arrived in local communities. "As we toured with the film trailer, we discovered that many people were eager to tell us their stories and share their photographic images as part of the vernacular communal history that Digital Diaspora Family Reunion was fast developing. So even before the Cultural Innovation Fund, we had a fairly well developed structure in mind for the elements that composed the Roadshow event platform and how those elements would be deployed within a particular community."

Based on prototyping experiences, says Harris, they made additional format changes and shifted their view of Digital Diaspora Family Reunion to a much more organically focused platform that changes to meet the needs of the local partners in a particular community. The basic elements remain the same—photo-sharing events, workshops—but how they are configured reflects the particular circumstances that Digital Diaspora Family Reunion encounters as it moves into production within a given locale. With its toolkit of methodologies, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion can now produce virtual community roundtables, stand-up engagements, and self-curated community sharing events.

One powerful shift, says Perry, was an increased understanding and commitment to vernacular narratives. "We learned that vernacular photography is extremely important. What is vernacular today becomes the museum collection of tomorrow. That has really been the surprise and joy of Digital Diaspora," he says. Participants, too, learned the same lesson. Harris and Perry describe how they asked people to put on white gloves when handling their photos. "At home they may just have had a sandwich, and we're asking them to put on gloves," they say. "All of a sudden, they realize that the thing

*Digital Diaspora Family Reunion's organizers discovered that many people were eager to share their stories and photographs to contribute to a communal history.*

they are holding is important, precious, and has value. That moment is a real shift as people begin to see the project on another scale. It changes their relationship to their photos." Harris adds, "These stories have only been told within the family, but now the photos are more than a private memento. The larger use of the photos has all these different registers—history, personal history, and community connections."

# Obstacles and Enablers

Harris and Perry cite scheduling and logistical challenges in producing each of its prototype events. A small staff made things difficult, but an experienced core of videographers and production assistants from past events who were familiar with Digital Diaspora Family Reunion events helped prepare volunteers quickly and efficiently. Having a dedicated corps of interns also helped.

Strong partner organizations helped with publicity, public relations, media outreach, email campaigns, and community mobilization. "It was essentially a quid pro quo," say Chimpanzee staff. "We brought the Digital Diaspora Family Reunion infrastructure, and they brought the crowds and handled the venue logistics."

While partnerships and a solid methodology made events run smoothly, the greatest enablers of success were the local residents, their stories, and their willingness—even eagerness—to share them. A deeply personal project, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion is ultimately driven by the content creators themselves.

# Impact

## By the Numbers

Digital Diaspora Family Reunion began its five-borough tour with events in Harlem, Staten Island, and the Bronx. Through the project, Digital Diaspora has interviewed over 200 people, gathered over 3,000 images, and recorded over 30 hours of video of ordinary New Yorkers sharing their family photographs and stories with over 500 live audience members. The project has received extensive media coverage—from newspapers to television, radio, blogs, and other web-based information outlets—with a combined local reach of 2.7 million people.

## New Pathways to Public Value

"Because of the history of segregation," says Harris, "our images are hidden in family albums, but not circulated in popular culture." Illuminating and sharing these archives creates a significant new pathway to community-building. "We want to activate those archives and get people to look at them differently," says Perry. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund grant enabled Chimpanzee to experiment with different ways of accomplishing this goal. The project, they say, "has expanded the organization's footprint and been amazingly successful in helping to create a prototype for carrying Digital Diaspora forward and uniting

us with others across the United States and the world."

Leaders point to other significant impacts as well, saying that they have re-engineered how they plan Digital Diaspora events with partners and how they adjust to respond more productively to the needs of partners. The process has helped the organization develop stronger partnerships, as well as "new community allies and champions who are bringing new ideas for future events and potential funding sources, helping embed Digital Diaspora ideals within neighborhoods, across groups within communities, and between elders and youth." The result is a more innovative platform that will be able to live on long after an initial Digital Diaspora Family Reunion event.

Chimpanzee leaders say that Digital Diaspora has changed them. "We'd been doing everything," says Perry. "Now we've turned over a lot of the process to the community, and as a result, events have become very interesting. We've never been disappointed." For Harris, that says it all. "That's my mission," he says, "to use the image as a tool for social change."

# Learn More

Visit ArtsFwd.org to watch a short documentary about this project and learn more about the 2011 Grantees of The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund.

*Profile written by: Catherine Maciariello for EmcArts*

*All images: Meerkat Media*

## About The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

Through the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation invested $16.3 million over six years to increase capacity for cultural innovation. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund sought to reflect the creative aspirations of low-income and minority people, and to contribute to the development of theory and practice of integrating the arts into efforts to achieve cultural equity and community resilience.

The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund supported a diverse portfolio of experiments, explorations and innovations by 86 different cultural and community organizations in New York City. The Fund helped organizations experiment with new artistic programs and imaginative audience engagement strategies; involve community residents in creating work; present art in unconventional venues where it can be seen by a larger public; showcase work of minority artists and immigrant cultures; and pilot new revenue-generating approaches to sustain artists.

www.rockefellerfoundation.org

## About EmcArts

EmcArts is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. We envision a time when participating in art is recognized as lying at the core of human potential. EmcArts is dedicated to advancing a resilient not-for-profit sector that can make this vision a daily reality. Our programs support individuals, organizations, and communities on their journey to becoming highly adaptive.

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## EmcArts Inc.

127 West 122nd Street
New York, NY 10027