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February 2017; Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project Minutes

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Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project
Meeting Minutes
Feb. 23, 2017

Dramatis Personae: Chris, Liz, Brigitte, Nissa, Ana, Adrienne, Carol, Camille, Isabel, Bob, Bridget, Samantha

An Homage to Buffalo's Ballroom Scene - Feb. 11, 2017

On Saturday, February 11, the History Project, led by the POC Committee and especially their leader Marielle, hosted an homage to Buffalo's ballroom scene at Sugar City. The event was rather stressful for its organizers: initially, we were scheduled to have three speakers and possibly performers, but two cancelled. One, a house mother who was scheduled to speak, fell sick--no fault of her own. The second, however, called in to tell us he had to work a mere hour before the performance. This meant that we would have no performers on stage, and that we would only be showing voguing through a video loop that Carolyn, Ana, and Chris had assembled. We also had to ask Ari Moore to bring Ebony, our last remaining speaker, at the last minute, because the second performer had been her ride.

Despite these stresses, the event appears to have been a success. Camille, our treasurer, tells us that after paying venue fees, we netted \$230 from the event, and now have a total of \$340 in the bank. Ebony absolutely carried the event as the sole speaker. She proved to be both flexible and a mesmerizing storyteller, and several attendees have come up to History Project members to tell us how much they enjoyed the event.

We spent some time at this meeting talking through the event--what we learned from it, how we can do better at the next event. This was an incomplete discussion: unfortunately, Marielle could not make it to this meeting due to a sick baby. We certainly hope to revisit this discussion with her. However, here are some of the preliminary conclusions we came to:

1. Capture people's information.

- Camille and Liz both pointed out that we need to know more about where and how people hear about our events, so that we can better target our advertising. We could either ask people to fill something out as they pay their admission fee, or incorporate the question into our opening spiel at events, inviting people to tell us during the event how they learned about it.
- Adrienne pointed out that when we collect admission fees from attendees, we also need to have a sheet on which people can write their e-mail addresses and where they can be reached on social media. We need to treat every event as if it is a potential membership drive, and make sure we invite attendees to connect with us. Carol took this idea one step further: we should also try to capture people's home addresses, because people who attend our events are a potential funding base, as well. We may also consider giving people small prizes (like candy) for filling out info, in order to encourage them to participate.

- During this conversation, we sheepishly noted that we actually made similar suggestions after the *Swimming with Lesbians* screening. New policy: before we host each event, we should review previous meeting minutes where we reviewed past events, in order to not make the same mistakes over and over again.

2. *Make better plans.*

- Before we even create an event, we need to make a timeline for planning the event and making it happen, to see if the event is feasible. In addition to giving us a reality check, the timeline will help us keep on schedule, and know what we need to complete by when.
- Nissa suggested that we make a new rule: events should always have more than one leader. This would serve two ends: first, it would require leaders to communicate their ideas and plans more thoroughly to a group, and make sure that the entirety of an event's plans don't exist in one person's head. Secondly, if life happens, and one leader isn't able to meet their obligations, another leader is present to take up the slack.
- Of course the biggest issue with this event was the last-minute cancellation by one of the performers, which almost caused the entire event to fall apart. In general, we discussed the need to put more contingency plans in place when we plan an event--planning for problems rather than being utterly surprised when they happened.
- In the specific case of this event, one of the major issues occurred when one performer, who was supposed to drive another performer, cancelled at the last minute. Carol pointed out that for future events, we need to make things as easy for our collaborators/performers as possible. Next time, we should offer to drive them, rather than leaving them to figure out their own transportation.

3. *Build relationships of trust across difference.*

- Several members of the group expressed concern that part of the reason we were unable to get performers and speakers to commit to our event is because we hadn't spent adequate time developing relationships of trust with our prospective collaborators. The facts of the matter are these: although we as a group *want* to approach local queer history intersectionally, and our hearts are in the right place, we are operating against a political and cultural background of segregation, gentrification, violence, and both interpersonal and institutional white supremacy. The ballroom scene, here and elsewhere, is predominantly African American. At this point in time, Project membership is predominantly white, and those of us who are POC don't have a background in the ballroom scene. These speakers and performers have no reason to trust us. That said: Ebony enjoyed herself, and has expressed interest in collaborating with us in the future.

- At the event, Ebony said she was interested in hosting another ball--possibly at Sugar City, where the event took place. If she does that, we should be prepared to assist her and signal boost in any way we can.
- The MOCHA Center played a central role in helping Marielle arrange this event. As a group, we should focus on building a relationship with the MOCHA Center.
- Carol also pointed out that we need to be better when it comes to reaching out to potential audience members, as well. The audience was predominantly white. We need to make sure that people who might corroborate our speakers/performance, who are seeing their experiences reflected on stage, are also welcome and present.

4. *Commit to the work.*

- Ana, in particular, brought this issue up. She mentioned that within our group, there were a lot of problems with people not completing the work to which they had committed, not reporting back on their progress with work, not speaking up when they found themselves incapable of completing their jobs, and not responding to messages asking them about the status of their work.
- We need to treat this work as a commitment, not a casual favor. While it may feel good to announce at a Project meeting that we will do a job, it's actually crucial for each of us to know the extent to which we can commit to a piece of the work, and not to promise anything we can't deliver.
- This discussion led to a larger discussion about how to address commitment and accountability problems within the History Project, as well as about our structure and future.

Internal Concerns: Commitment and Accountability

This month marked the first of many potentially difficult but crucial conversations about the future of this organization, and in particular its structure. In the year since the Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project has been founded, the group has had an ongoing problem with participants failing to deliver on actions they have committed to completing. This has slowed down our process on a number of projects, and at times led to a few numbers performing disproportionate--and invisible--labor for the good of the group.

In trying to address this problem, much of our conversation turned to questions about the structure of the History Project. The central questions that guided our discussion seemed to be: is the failure of our members to complete tasks due to a lack of role clarity within the group? Would clearer roles, and a more defined structure, alleviate those problems? And if it would not--or if we decide we want a looser structure, how else might we build accountability into our process?

Liz helped the group open this discussion up by writing a proposed Code of Conduct. Based on a similar document she found in Carol Speser's private archives, the Code of Conduct aimed to codify the roles the History Project requires, identify who plays each role, and outline a few of the organization's shared values.

The Code of Conduct proved extremely useful for generating conversation, but also controversial. Here are some of the concerns members raised about the Code of Conduct, and about the structure of the group overall:

- Carol expressed the opinion that any Code of Conduct adopted by the group should explain decision-making processes: who decision-makers are, how decisions get made, how people get decision-making roles, and how communication flows. She felt that codifying the roles already taken on by group members didn't go far enough toward explaining how decisions get made.
- A number of members--most notably Chris and Nissa--felt that the Code of Conduct, as it currently stands, bureaucratized the organization in a way that turned them off to the work. Both members said they liked the fact that the group currently has an affinity group-based structure, and felt that a more hierarchical structure would spell the end of the organization.
- Adrienne agreed that she preferred an affinity group-based structure, but feared that in practice that would mean changing nothing about how the organization works, and continuing to guarantee that work wouldn't get done. She felt that, whatever structure the group took on, a new system of commitment and accountability needed to be created.
- Still other members--most notably, Isabel and Brigitte--felt that it was helpful to consider that they had a specific and fixed role within the group. They felt that it facilitated the completion of tasks. Ultimately, they argued that a kind of "middle ground" could be found between what some members worried would constitute the bureaucratization of the group, and what they felt was a current lack of organization.
- Even those who favored Liz's proposed structure had suggestions about things to add: roles such as Coordinator (one who facilitates communications between affinity groups), clarity as to how long someone would hold a given role, explaining the flow of communication
- Invisible labor was an ongoing topic of concern throughout the discussion. Ana, in particular, pointed out that when people failed to fulfill their commitment to work, she often ends up picking up the slack, or getting pushed into the role of taskmaster. She doesn't like that role, nor does she get credit for performing it.
- Bridget, as head of the Trans Committee, asked for us to clarify the relationship of the main group to the various autonomous communities that form to pursue specific projects.

- One possibility, brought up by Carol, is that the issue is not structure, but doability. When any event or project is planned, we need to make sure it is doable. We also need to consider that it's sometimes better to take on a modest project and do a good job with it, than to take on a huge project and drown in it.
- Communication between meetings was a major theme of the conversation. Adrienne, for example, pointed out that meeting between conversations is not always transparent. Because the group is haphazardly organized, and because there's a gap between who shows up at meetings and who can be counted on to complete work, communication between meetings often takes place in private messages on Facebook, and can get cliquish. Consequently, a couple members--most notably Samantha--agreed to take on the task of finding more open forms of online communication that we can use to communicate between meetings.

In the end, at Bob's suggestion, we agreed that this was too big an issue to tackle in a single meeting. We hope to resolve this question over the next approximately three months. Between now and the next meeting, we all agreed to write down what we think our own individual role in the group is, so that we could examine the gap between our ideal structure and our actual structure. We also agreed to ponder how we want the flow of communication to work in our group, including (but not limited to) what medium we should use to communicate between meetings.

Update on Assorted Projects:

Party in the Archives: Want to be part of our archive digitizing project? Don't know how? Come to Adrienne and Ana's home on March 5 and receive training! Brigitte will be on hand to train newbies, and we'll work on Carol and Camille's archival materials. If possible, BYOS (bring your own scanner).

Refugee Project: At our January meeting, we asked Brigitte to get in touch with her boss Doreen, and with Heather at Burchfield Penney, to talk about how our respective organizations could coordinate our efforts to partner with refugee artists. Brigitte can't get in touch with Doreen, and Heather reports that Burchfield Penney has taken no concrete steps. This project is in freeze mode.

Anne Balay Speaker Event: Adrienne reports that she hasn't had much luck getting organizations together to collaborate on this event. The groups who have expressed interest in bringing Anne Balay to town include Coalition for Economic Justice, Clean Air Coalition, and Buffalo IAC. UB is potentially interested, too, although if they get involved, they will probably expect any resulting event to be centered on the university. As far as unions go: no luck. Adrienne can't conclusively determine whether Pride @ Work exists. She has written to a couple union activists, including the leader of an organization for union women, but not received so much as a reply. Additionally, she has contacted WNYCOSH but received no response.

Adrienne is feeling pretty burned out. She is wondering: a) whether any other project members would help her conceptualize the event and/or find organizational partners; b) whether she should continue trying to find individual partners, or just try to get extant together, with the hopes that they can shoulder part of the burden of finding collaborators. No other member has yet committed to helping plan the event--though multiple members agree that the event should take place!--but Brigitte has agreed to meet with Adrienne next Wednesday and be a sounding board for ideas. As for question (b), the group thought that the best next move would be to bring interested partners together to collectively decide on next steps.

Doing a Thing for Pride:

If we want to participate in this year's Pride, now is the time to discuss our plans. We decided against marching in the parade on Sunday because the younger members are disgusted with the apolitical nature of the parade, and the older members' knees reject the notion of marching. Instead, we are weighing a few ideas:

- Tabling at the Pride festival. It will likely cost some money, but we could turn our table into a little history exhibit, and plug a huge membership meeting in mid-summer.
- Participating in the Dyke March, either by simply making a banner, or via more formal means
- Several members of the group--Adrienne, Ana, Liz, and Brigitte--will be going to the Queer People, Practices, and Lives conference in Columbus in May. We could present our panel/workshop locally around Pride. Possibly at Dreamland--they have a Sunday Salon series and are looking for speakers.

We have not made a clear decision vis-a-vis this question yet. But as a preliminary foray, Nissa is going to find out how much tabling at the Dyke March and Pride Parade will cost.

Media Editing Workshop:

Isabel, our film director extraordinaire, has agreed to do an editing workshop for project members. This will not only be awesome, but it will help Isabel share the burden of filmmaking, as she doesn't have time to edit all the footage for the trans oral history project. She will talk with Squeaky Wheel about setting said workshop up, and get back to the group!