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Impacting the Community Through Knitting

Ashley Guenther

Honors Project 2020

Introduction

For my honors project, I wanted to make a positive impact on my community. While there are many ways to go about this, such as a food drive or volunteering at various organizations, I wanted to add a more personal element to my project.

My dad works for a company that shelters homeless people, so I was very conscious of their needs as members of my community. I wanted to base my project around fulfilling some of those needs. Part of these needs include clothing, especially winter apparel. I wanted to meet this particular need because I often knit as a hobby, and thought that distributing hand knitted items would be a good way to add a personal element to my project. The items being hand knitted also adds an element of care that impresses the idea that the people receiving them are valued, which appealed to me.

Initial Idea



Hayward, Jill. "The Knitten Mitten Tree at Interior Savings Credit Union". *Barriere Star Journal*, 3 Dec., 2015, www.barrierestarjournal.com/ife/get-knitting-for-the-mitten-tree/.

As the creation and collection of the items involved a personal element, I wanted the distribution of the items to reflect the same idea. This led me to the concept of a knitting tree.

'Knitting tree' is a term that describes when a tree located in a public space is draped with knitted items. These items are donated and are free for people to take as needed. While I wanted my project to reflect this methodology, I also wanted it to take place in a

slightly more controlled environment. As such, I initially planned for the final project to take place in the lobby of a public building

with the items placed on a table, or perhaps draped over a cardboard cutout of a tree, and still available for people to take as they pleased.

Initial Results

The first step towards the completion of my project was collecting donations. While I was interested in collecting finished items, I also wanted to collect materials such as yarn and needles. Since knitting takes a certain amount of time and effort and is not a hobby everyone indulges in, I did not think I would be satisfied with the amount of items I would receive by just asking around for donations, so I was considering starting a knitting circle.

In order to begin my collection efforts, I contacted several different groups I thought would be able to help. This included several local churches, Warm Up BG which “is a student-led organization for [Bowling Green State University (BGSU) students] who have an interest in knitting and crocheting”, and various friends and family (Kahrs). Unfortunately, the responses, or lack thereof, that I received were not as favorable as I hoped. Most of the churches I contacted either replied that they did not believe they would be able to help or just did not respond at all. Although Warm Up BG’s goal is to “knit and crochet items primarily for charity”, the vice president did not think they would be able to contribute items for my project as the club had already decided which charity they would be donating to (Kahrs).

I had more luck when it came to my friends and family. Several friends and family members had extra yarn or a finished item they were willing to donate. One friend was even able to point me in the direction of Wendy Jenkins, who runs quilting and sewing classes from her home in Bowling Green. Ms. Jenkins’s students often donate materials to her. While these materials include thread and scraps of cloth for quilting, the students also give her materials for

other types of crafting, such as yarn, knitting needles, and crochet hooks. Ms. Jenkins was willing to donate some of these materials to me for my project. In fact, she was able to supply me with enough materials that I felt I could completely turn my focus to collecting finished items.

While I was working on collecting items, I was simultaneously trying to procure a location for the distribution of the items. As I was more focused on collection at this stage of the project, I only looked into a few places, including Goodwill and some more local churches.



Guenther, Ashley. "Donated Crafting Supplies", 2018. JPEG file.

The responses from these churches were similar to those I had contacted about collecting items. Goodwill also indicated they would not be able to grant me the use of one of their buildings for the distribution stage of my project. The company explained that they already had a few days in the year set aside for distributing clothing donations to the community and were not looking to expand this program.

Evolution of the Project

Although I made some progress with my collection efforts, I was encountering more failures than successes. This was also true when it came to finding a suitable location for my project. Knitting trees are not common enough that most people would immediately recognize the term. So, I believed much of the trouble I was having stemmed from people not really understanding the final goal of my project. I decided it would be best to alter the project slightly,

so that the end result would be more recognizable for others, which would hopefully make them more willing to help.

To this end, I found an organization called Chase the Chill whose ideology is similar to what I wanted for my project. Chase the Chill “is an annual...event that distributes handmade



Gerheart, Robert. "Chase the Chill Snowman". Chase the Chill in Winnipeg.

scarves in public places so that those in need...can help themselves” (Chase the Chill, The Original). This goal is very similar to the end result that I wanted to achieve with a knitting tree, but Chase the Chill is more recognizable as an event. This organization seemed to be exactly what I was searching for, so I looked into starting a chapter in Toledo.

Unfortunately, I ran into more issues when it came to starting up my own chapter. As part of starting a chapter, the Chase the Chill website states that the new chapter must get into contact with the original “Chase the Chill [chapter] in Edmonton [in order to receive] the Chase the Chill starter package” (Chase the Chill, The Original). However, the chapter in Edmonton was unavailable for the several weeks that I tried to contact them. Luckily, each Chase the Chill chapter is run independently, so I was able to contact an active member who pointed me in the correct direction towards the person I needed to get permission from to form an official chapter.

I was later glad that I needed to contact so many members to set up my chapter as I learned that the organization and timing of the individual Chase the Chill events each chapter runs are left to the members’ discretion. This gave me some leeway regarding the location of my event, which was the part of my project I had been having the most trouble with so far. The final location of my event would determine how I organized the distribution of my project, so it was

good to know that I did not have to limit my options in order to stay true to Chase the Chill's methodology.

Results After Project Modification

After changing the plan for the final stage of my project from a knitting tree to a Chase the Chill event, I tried to broaden my options for item collection. The Chase the Chill website advised that “[local] yarn stores are often a hub of activity related to crafters in a community” and are a good way to “connect with crafters in [the] community”, so I spoke to some Michael's employees about the possibility of setting up a few collection bins at their store (Chase the Chill, The Original). Once again, I was told that this would not be possible, but I was advised to look into knitting and sewing circles within local churches for donations. As contacting churches had not been working out well for me, I tried to exclusively contact churches that I or some of my friends were members of in order to increase the possibility of being replied to. While this did help ensure that I was responded to by those I contacted, most churches still expressed an inability to contribute donations. CedarCreek indicated the possibility of starting a group at their church that they would “be able to point others [towards]...as they express an interest” (Trout). However, I had already started organizing a knitting circle through an organization that I was part of.

At this time, I was a member of a campus organization called Active Christians Today (ACT). This organization had several members who I knew enjoyed knitting, so I asked and received permission to use the organization's campus house every Wednesday night for a knitting circle. This was one of my more successful attempts to collect donations. However, it was somewhat inconsistent as very few people attended multiple meetings in a row, and several

people left unfinished projects. As the meetings took place in Bowling Green during the school year, the meetings themselves were also often inconsistent depending on my own schedule.

I also decided to branch out with the friends I was asking donations from at this time to include several people I knew from school clubs. This proved to be a good decision, as I was able to receive several items from friends who were a part of the same scholarship program, Academic Investment in Mathematics and Science (AIMS), as myself.

I continued to receive items from other friends and family, as well as added to the donations with items I knitted myself. When I had over thirty items, I finally felt that I had enough to start turning my focus more towards finally finding a suitable distribution location.



Guenther, Ashley. "Items to be Donated", 2020. JPEG file.

Jodi Paley, a member of the Chase the Chill chapter in Redwood City, California who I had been in contact with, was willing to describe some of her chapter's common locations for collection and distribution. She explained to me that "a couple of [her chapter's] collection sites are in libraries" and "the [distribution] sites..[they've] used the past few years [include]...[three] libraries", so I contacted the Reynolds Corners branch of the Toledo library (Paley). The employees were able to refer me to Nicole Naylor, the West Toledo Branch Manager. Unfortunately, I did not have as much luck with my local library as Ms. Paley's chapter had with theirs. Ms. Naylor informed me that she did not "think that the library is the right...fit for this type of project" and suggested a good place to reach out to "would be the local food banks" (Naylor). Following this advice, I tried to reach out to Cherry Street Mission as I have volunteered there before, but I did not receive a response.

As mentioned above, my dad works for a company that works with the homeless and knew that I had been looking for a location to distribute my items. A man he knew from work, Michael Badik, is the Director for Community Engagement and Client Support at the Neighborhood Health Association in Toledo and was able to refer my dad to the Mildred Bayer Clinic for the Homeless as a potential location. After hearing this, I was able to get into contact with Cassandra McKinstry who is the manager at Mildred Bayer. Ms. McKinstry granted me permission to use the clinic's lobby to distribute my items to patients.

Further Complications

The date that Ms. McKinstry and I had initially decided on was March 17, 2020. My plan was to set up the donations at a small table in the lobby with a sign advertising free winter clothing. I had hoped to be able to hand off the items and receive statements about how these donations impacted different people and the community in general.

At this time, Ohio was beginning to set up countermeasures to the spread of Covid-19, and a few days before my project was set to happen, the Mildred Bayer Clinic for the Homeless began to implement new safety measures. Unfortunately, this meant I was no longer able to distribute the items as planned. As Ohio residents began to quarantine themselves, it was also unlikely that I would be able to find another location where I could finish my project as planned.

Final Project

While I was not able to distribute my items, I still wished to donate them to the Mildred Bayer Clinic. The clinic has a donation closet that Ms. McKinstry was more than happy to place my items into, saying that the donations “[were] sincerely appreciated” because “[winter apparel]

goes fast” whenever they open the closet to the public (McKinstry). Although I was not able to gauge the impact of my project directly from the people I wanted to help, Ms. McKinstry was able to describe my project’s impact from the clinic’s perspective.



Guenther, Ashley. “Mildred Bayer Clinic for the Homeless Staff Receiving Donations”, 2020. JPEG file.

She explained that the “goal of the Mildred Bayer Clinic for the Homeless is to continue to make a difference in the lives of needy individuals in the Toledo area by providing the basic health and welfare needs” and that donations such as these help the clinic achieve that goal (McKinstry). She also described how the clinic has “seen many lives changed for the better...with the help of donations [like this]” because they

allow the clinic to continue to “provide the basic needs of health and welfare for less fortunate individuals in our community” (McKinstry).

Analysis of Issues

The largest issue within this project was the lack of interest from people. This project was heavily dependent on the investment of others in all of its stages; I needed to corroborate with people when collecting the items, finding a location for the final project, and even needed to consult people as I was designing the project. In all of these stages, most people I reached out to had an extreme lack of interest in my project, to the point where over half the people and

organizations I contacted did not respond. This resulted in several other issues for the duration of the project.

The first of these resulting issues is the timeliness of the project. The lack of interest in the project delayed multiple stages within it. During the collection stage, a lack of interest meant either not receiving items or receiving partially finished items, as was sometimes the case in the knitting circle. This stage was the easiest for me to mitigate as I was able to continue to slowly add to the donations with items I knitted myself as I searched for people willing to donate. The stage that was most affected was the distribution stage. I could not finish with my project until I found a place where I



Guenther, Ashley. "Unfinished Items", 2019. JPEG file.

could distribute the items. Every time I was rejected by a potential location, the project was delayed. Unfortunately, this could not be mitigated; I needed to continue to contact people and wait until someone responded favorably.

Another issue stemming from the disinterest of people has to do with the fluidity of the project. Originally, I perceived the reluctance of others to take part in the project as the product of my idea being something they likely had not heard of before and so had little information about. In an effort to amend this issue, I modified my project from a knitting tree to Chase the Chill, which was more well known while still having a similar ideology behind it. The final product of the project was also heavily dependent on where and when it would take place, both of which were impacted by the interest of the people I reached out to in order to secure a location for the project, as mentioned above.

For instance, if I had been able to distribute the items at the library, I was planning on a fairly hands off approach where the items would be dispersed around the area by draping them around benches, trees, and fences, similar to Chase the Chill's usual methods. However, if the final location was in a lobby, I was planning on a more hands on distribution where the items would be laid out on a table I was manning and people would be able to come by and choose what they liked. This fluidity was one of the most stressful parts of the project as I had to be constantly adjusting my plan for the project while I looked for a location.

There were also separate, random issues that interfered with my project. The first was a knee injury which limited my mobility and severely compounded my work in the semester I received it, resulting in my deciding to delay my project from Junior year to Senior year. The second was Covid-19, which caused both a delay and a restructuring of the project. As mentioned above, I was originally, going to distribute the items in the lobby at the Mildred Bayer Clinic for the Homeless in March. However, Covid-19 led to multiple changes in the way the clinic ran, and the only safe way for me to distribute my items was to give them directly to the clinic so that they could distribute them later in the year along with the other items in their donation closet.

Finally, the amount of disinterest in my project, compounded by its resulting issues and the random problems, had a large negative impact on my morale for this project. I considered scrapping my project and switching to something that was not service driven multiple times throughout this process because I continued to encounter problems, especially in the form of those I reached out to not responding. However, I still wished to make an impact on my community and so persevered until I was able to collect and distribute the knitted items, even if not in the way I had originally planned.

Other Takeaways

The progress of my project was much different than I had originally expected, in multiple ways. I was especially surprised by all the problems I faced as they were not the issues I had been expecting to run in to.

While I had expected to be turned away by a few places I contacted about my project, I had not expected this to apply to the majority of places I contacted, especially since nearly every organization I contacted had some investment in either bettering the lives of people within the community, or improving the community itself. I was also surprised that finding a location to hold my project would be the portion I had the most trouble with. I had expected the most difficult part of my project to be collecting since the items I was collecting were hand made, which takes time and effort, and cannot be substituted with bought goods.

I was also not expecting the amount of changes my project went through. While the events that led to these changes, namely the amount of disinterest expressed and Covid-19, were unexpected, I thought it was interesting how much I could shift the form of my project while still maintaining my original ideology throughout the project and accomplishing my overall goal. It was, however, disappointing that the reaction to my project seemed to remain the same as well, despite whichever form my project was in at the moment. Even though the disinterest towards my project did not seem to change as I had hoped, I still think that adjusting my project was a good idea. This is because creating a Chase the Chill chapter and planning the event gave me a more concrete direction for the design of my project, as well as more people I could go to for advice.

Conclusion

After I had finished my project and reflected on its process, I was surprised to realize how heavily my progress was tied to my friends and family. While I was the one who designed



Guenther, Ashley. "Family Member Knitting a Hat", 2019. JPEG file.

and implemented my project, my friends and family members were the reason I was able to complete it.

Although I tried multiple avenues, ultimately, my collection efforts for both materials and completed items were satisfied almost entirely through friends, family, or people my friends and family referred me to. Finding a location for my project followed this same pattern. While unexpected, I am grateful

that so many people close to me took the initiative to help me with my project, as they turned into the driving force behind it.

Overall, and despite the many problems that arose, I am satisfied with how my project turned out. Although the final stage of my project was different from the knitting tree I had originally envisioned, I still accomplished my goal of making a positive impact on my community through knitting for the homeless.

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