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Maplewood secures \$107,960 grant for 'Kid City'

Maplewood will soon be filled with the sound of laughter — the kind that heals, unites and spreads happiness.

As part of a new community outreach project, local youth will be installing pop-up “laughter museums” throughout the city, inviting citizens to connect through the universal power of laughter.

The installations are part of “Kid City,” an interactive arts initiative aimed at bridging cross-cultural divides and inspiring youth to weigh in on city issues.

It’s uncharted territory for Maplewood, but city officials are excited about offering residents a creative outlet for approaching ethnic diversity and turning it into a community asset.

The city recently acquired a \$107,960 grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board to hire professional artists with Z Puppets Rosenschnoz to help implement the laughter lab and a mock city council comprised of youth.

“This is our first foray into public art, at this kind of scale,” Parks and Recreation Director DuWayne Konewko said. “It’s exciting! I think that in itself will generate some interest.”

'Better solutions'

Back in March, Maplewood’s “Kid City” project was selected as one of 12 finalists for a \$250,000 Bloomberg Philanthropies Public Art Challenge grant. While this funding didn’t come through, the city had also submitted an alternative application to the Minnesota State Arts Board.

Now equipped with the promise of \$107,960, Maplewood officials and staff will be working closely with leadership from Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, a renowned Minneapolis-based performing arts company, and a multicultural artist team to engage local youth and adults with “Kid City.”

Konewko will be coordinating efforts with city staff and officials, as the project dovetails with the city’s new Parks and Recreation Master Plan, adopted this past January. It also aligns with the city’s Integrated Youth Development program, which is supported by Police Chief Paul Schnell, local teachers, school administrators, parents and city officials and staff.

The concept may seem a bit abstract, but it’s broken down into two concrete elements.

The laughter lab will be geared toward fifth graders. They will learn the art of clowning, puppetry and improv, then collect audio samples of laughter from residents throughout the city to be showcased in interactive pop-up installations.

Kid Council will be an improv theater camp for junior high students, where they'll generate creative solutions for civic issues identified by the mayor. High school students will capture the sessions on video and edit a clip to air on Community Access TV.

With a background in improv through past work with Z Puppets and the Autism Society of Minnesota, Mayor Nora Slawik said she's most looking forward to Kid Council.

"I've always said they might come up with better solutions than we do," she said.

Given the diverse makeup of the North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District student body, it's likely some students are well aware of adversity in the community.

Roughly 41 percent are students of color, and about 47 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Students and their families speak 35 different languages, with English, Hmong, Spanish, Cambodian and Chinese ranking as the top five.

Community buy-in

In order to come up with roughly \$10,000 in matching grant funds, Konewko says the city will be seeking donations from area businesses in support of the project.

He said conversations are already underway. Thanks to a newly approved solicitation policy, effective July 1, city staff members are able to ask for or accept financial contributions earmarked for specific city projects.

"It's an opportunity for [area businesses] to work directly with the city of Maplewood and Z Puppets to showcase what the city of Maplewood has to offer, with regard to our rich diverse demographics," he said. "It puts them in touch with our citizens and that works both ways."

Meanwhile, the city will continue searching for additional grants to add a third element to "Kid City" called "dream windows," which would involve displaying window art depicting residents' dreams and aspirations.

For now, the community's first introduction to Z Puppets will take place on Aug. 13 at the Bingo Bash and Movie Night. Artists will be sharing a preview of the laughter lab at the Maplewood Community Center starting at 5 p.m., and Disney's "Brave" will begin playing at dusk.

"It would be the community's chance to come and see what Z puppets does. That's exciting because it's hard to explain what Z puppets is all about," Slawik said.

Project planners will be meeting for a kick off meeting prior to the event, lining up more introductory events to take place throughout the fall.

By Jan. 2016, the laughter lab workshops will be in full swing, culminating in the installation of laughter kiosks in the spring and a city-wide "Laugh In" event hosted by the mayor, student participants and the artist team.

Kid Council will take place summer 2016.