



cle4equity.org

Impact Report

2021 - 2022

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Background

The We Wear The Mask movement was designed to give voice to people of color, foster healing and solidarity (i.e., social cohesion), spark perspective transformation regarding structural and internalized racism among all people regardless of race and ethnicity, and to advance racial equity in Northeast Ohio.

Our approach is based on community network organizing, community building and place-making practices which have demonstrated results in enhancing civic engagement, social cohesion and neighborhood safety and resilience. The movement utilizes the Make-Art-Talk-Race (MATR, pronounced "matter") community building practice developed by [Neighborhood Connections](#). Inspired by poet [Maya Angelou](#) who adapted Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask" in spoken word. The movement uses arts and storytelling as a vehicle, to provide a platform for healing and solidarity, all while producing beautiful, longstanding art.

The murder of George Floyd, among other acts of overt racism caught on film -- and have gone viral -- caused a great awakening for many white Americans. There is no better time than the present to capitalize on the renewed momentum regarding racial equity.

Unfortunately, people of color continue to unnecessarily suffer from the negative impact of racism. Luckily, in response to the civil unrest in recent years, the City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County recently declared racism as a public health crisis, further indicating that this is an issue that residents are interested in addressing.

Further, the 2019 and 2022 collaborative [Community Health Needs Assessment](#) (CHNAs) for Cuyahoga County identified eliminating structural racism and building trust as two of the five priorities.

This intervention was designed using art and storytelling as creative medium to engage neighbors at a grassroots level in a discussion about racism, a topic that is still often avoided, denied, or minimized.

What is the "mask?"

The "mask" refers to the metaphorical mask that BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of color), particularly Africans Americans, wear to survive and thrive (e.g., in the workplace, court rooms, encounters with the police, at the hospital). Sometimes it's worn for protection, other times to mitigate fears (real or perceived), trying to blend, or fit in, with white culture. Sometimes the mask is a refuge, a hiding place, a safe place. Some have likened wearing a mask to code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation.

Background

We Wear The Mask

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!



"Darianism" by Alexis Warren

Masking is not about being phony; it's about having "double consciousness," a concept coined by WEB DuBois. In his renowned book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he describes it as, "always looking at one's self through the eyes" of whiteness and "measuring oneself by the means of a nation that looked back in contempt." In essence, it's about having to live in a culture that still upholds euro-centric values, ideologies and systems as being "right" or "superior," exclusive of other narratives, histories and ways that people exist in the world.

Wearing a "mask" can contribute to internalized racism and loss of identity. There are times that the mask is removed because it can be suffocating. In the worst case, it can be worn so long that one forgets their true identity. This movement strived to provide a space to intentionally remove the mask and heal, grow, and funnel energy into embracing authenticity to advance the work of dismantling all forms of racism.

**"We wear the mask
that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks
and shades our
eyes..."**

Definitions

Perspective Transformation

The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1978)

Equity

Providing all people with fair opportunities to attain their full potential to the extent possible (CommonHealth Action, adapted from Braveman and Gruskin, 2003)

Inclusion

Active, and ongoing engagement with diversity, including intentional policies and practices that promote the full participation and sense of belonging of everyone (adapted from Riggs, 2012 and Xavier University, n.d.)

Four Levels of Racism

Internalized

Our private beliefs and biases influenced by our culture, including prejudice towards others of a different race, internalized oppression, or internalized privilege.

Interpersonal

This is the bias that occurs when individuals interact with others and their personal racial beliefs affect their public interactions.

Institutional

This refers to the unfair policies and discriminatory practices of particular institutions (schools, workplaces, etc.) that routinely produce racially inequitable outcomes for people of color and advantages for white people

Structural

Cumulative and compounding effects of an array of societal factors, including the history, culture, ideology and interactions of institutions and policies that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color.

Our Strategy

What began as a vision for one conversation between Black and white residents grew into various avenues for community engagement after Cleveland residents expressed an appetite for additional ways to remove the mask through art and storytelling.

While our efforts have demonstrated success using art and storytelling to spark perspective transformation, we all have work to do to continue having productive, difficult conversations to dismantle racism.

We engaged the community every step of the way:

- Established a committee, inclusive of local artists, to design the call for artists and select winners
- Held two design charrettes with Cleveland's Buckeye-Woodhill residents to ensure murals reflected the community
- Identified community members interested in sharing their story of removing the mask or working to dismantle racism, listened, and designed community-centric watch parties

PROJECTS	DETAILS	OUTCOME
Call for Artists	Provide a platform for healing and solidarity for local Cleveland artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 45 art submissions received• 2 art exhibitions for 13 selected artists
Murals	Create longstanding, community-driven art to foster productive dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 community-derived public murals commissioned
<u>Masks Off Video Series</u>	Model productive dialogue to raise awareness of forms of racism and personal sense of empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 respective race-concordant conversations filmed• 3 watch parties held
Community Engagement	Reach community members to increase awareness of masking and empower authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 8 Radio Interviews• Social media engagement• In-person Juneteenth Celebration• Cle4Equity website

Call for Artists

"Dressing the Part" by Kenron Morgan



ARTISTS EXPRESSED THAT PARTICIPATING IN THE CALL FOR ARTISTS AND CREATING A PIECE THAT SPEAKS TO THE CONCEPT OF MASKING PROVIDED A PLATFORM FOR HEALING AND EMBRACING AND INSPIRING AUTHENTICITY.

"This was one of the most thoughtful pieces I've created, and [I] got into myself... It's amazing that I'm given the opportunity to share my perspective, and how I feel... For the very first time, I think my art has given me a voice -- that my art is my voice. Having had that opportunity to put my work out there and hear people tell me that it's great - it's an awesome feeling. I think now programs like this are opening up people to have a voice." - Mary

"The literary arts provide a way to heal! The healing comes from when people relate to what you're saying and applaud you for the talent... WWTM gave me the motivation to keep writing, to write more, to write better, and see it as a discipline... to become a major contributor to literary arts in Cleveland... I feel like my true self when I'm able to express myself fully and honestly and am rewarded for it. Creating and having that platform is the only place I feel like my true self." - Mansa

"This is the first time I've been able to present myself without the mask, and I'm going as is... as who I want to be in the most authentic way I can. And it's just getting better." - Kenron

\$5,350

Awarded to 8 Northeast Ohio artists

45

Submissions received from Northeast Ohio artists of which 13 winners were selected

The call for artists was open from November 2021 - February 2022. 45 artists depicted what it means to wear or remove the metaphorical mask through art. A committee, inclusive of local artists, helped establish guidelines and grading criteria for the We Wear The Mask Call for Artists. Selected artists demonstrated exemplary visual impact, linkage of the art to the theme, craftsmanship, and adherence to submission guidelines.

- 13 artists were provided the opportunity to exhibit or perform their art at two events
 - American Hospital Association's annual Accelerating Health Equity conference which included over 728 healthcare professionals and other attendees
 - Healthy Neighborhoods Juneteenth event which had over 350 attendees
- 3 local artists' work displayed in Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) buses and shelters

Feedback from Artists

ALL ARTISTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE CALL FOR ARTISTS EXPRESSED THAT RACISM (IN ALL FORMS) IS STILL PREVALENT AND GREATLY AFFECTS THEIR LIVES. CREATING AND SHARING ART SEEMS TO EMPOWER ARTISTS AND CREATE A BRIDGE TOWARD A SHARED UNDERSTANDING ACROSS RACIAL DIVIDES.

"We have a long way to go in addressing [racism]... it's timeless! So many generations in my family... in regards to standards of beauty, expectations around education, it was always about going after the 'American dream,' by thinking and acting like our oppressors. Growing up I was told that."
- Mansa

"[Internalized racism is] wearing a mask to disguise your feelings and not putting yourself out on Front Street because you don't know what reaction you're going to get... On the job, you're there, but you're not actually seen... That invisibility makes people feel very uncomfortable and code switch, change language... I have to change who I am as people see me. But now, for me and a lot of Black women now, we want to be our authentic selves - what you see is what you get... People are starting to change. Programs like We Wear The Mask are bringing people together to talk about racism... now I think people are looking at solutions to bridge a gap between different groups of people...and art is a way that may do that." - Mary

"When I am going to a job interview... I tailor my look to what I think that they want. And then, if it's me going out to a certain restaurant...I put on a little air about myself... I feel like I'm a chameleon...I don't think I should have to do that, but I mean it's just how the world is." - Nikki

"Wearing a mask is a way of blending into a personality that is comfortable for everyone else, and to make sure that you're comfortable too." - Kenron

"[When we code switch], we blend into our environment, but we are also blinded to who we are because we lose track of who we are in the process." - Alexis

"It's always been me going above and beyond to not only excel but to excel [for] others in order to have my value seen and to be treated like a human being... Just by being, I intimidate people... How do I make myself less intimidating? Maybe put on a shirt and tie, go get a haircut, make sure I announce, don't talk like this, talk like that. Those are the kind of mental acrobats I've gone through." - Mansa

"We have to show images that are empowering for us, that show equity for the next generation of Black people, and they need to see themselves [represented]; otherwise, we'll never be treated equally... If we were to just have a discussion, your point of view - your introspection - is going to be different from mine, but with a visual, you can feel it better than I can tell it to you. Visuals can transcend speech."
- Marcel

SEVERAL ARTISTS EXPRESSED THAT WEARING A MASK IS DETRIMENTAL TO THEIR HEALTH, BUT THAT CREATING ART SECURES THEIR IDENTITY AND INSPIRES WELLBEING.

"It was stressful wearing a mask and not being able to express myself... I would come home, especially after a bad day, and would not feel like myself and would not feel like I had true value in the world... 'this person is not even you...' ... It's an identity crisis!" - Mansa

"When I finished [the poem], I actually felt a little bit of big mountains of stress fall off of me. So it's kind of therapeutic because I don't think I've ever really talked about how I feel about, you know, racism, and... the daily putting on this face, putting on this mask to suit whatever environment... so that was good... And then when I got the phone call [that I won], I was like, 'What are you talking about?' ...I wasn't expecting to win. But I was totally grateful for the committee to choose my poem, and I hope that somebody reads it, and knows that 'maybe that's how I feel, too,' or 'Wow, You know this is a Black mom, and this is what she has to go through...' [It could] make them start questioning, 'Why is that? Why does she have to live her life like that daily?' So if I can impact just one person... just the fact that I know that it's out there, it's gonna do something for somebody. I know that for sure." - Nicki



Making the murals

Two public murals were created by Stina Aleah by way of Graffiti HeArt. The designs were inspired by community conversations with neighborhood residents. The first mural in MidTown Cleveland was featured on Cleveland 19 and NBC Nightly News interview with Lester Holt. The second mural, located on a 750-foot wall at Woodhill and Buckeye, is the first of many planned by Elevate the East, a community-guided public arts project spearheaded by Cleveland Council President Blaine Griffin and executed by Burten, Bell Carr Development Corporation and LAND studio. It was created to preserve the neighborhood's legacy and echo community social justice themes. The mural component was done in partnership with Healthy Neighborhoods, Graffiti HeArt, the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) who generously donated and prepared the wall, and Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA).

65

Residents attended the City Architect master planning meeting where the We Wear The Mask project was introduced to the community

43

Buckeye-Woodhill residents participated in 2 design charrettes to inform mural design

"Woodhill is going through changes. Inviting the community in [preserves Woodhill's history since] developers are coming in and tearing down something that has been there... The mural wall is a footprint of the legacy of the history of Woodhill. To [see] authenticity when you pass by..."

- Ms. Marilyn Burns, community leader and design charrette participant

2

Community-Derived murals commissioned to inspire conversation and create longstanding art

"I think it's important that when you go into a community and you're doing a piece that speaks to the community, it's important to hear their voice and know what this piece would do to them... there's no better way to connect with the community than to ask them... I think this piece... brought a conversation together that we may not have known it was a mask that we were wearing, but to be able to be liberated enough and shed it, is something that we all can relate to." - Stina Aleah, lead mural artist

*"While the wall is often viewed as a barrier, it can become a canvas for the community."
- India Birdsong, General Manager and CEO, GCRTA*

3

Masks Off Watch Parties held to foster discussion and heal from all forms of racism

140+

Community members attended a Masks Off watch party

\$6,325

Awarded as scholarships to Masks Off video series participants and residents to continue personal development and healing (including 10 individuals connected to grief recovery support)

67%

Attendees reported being more aware of internalized racism after attending a watch party

75%

Attendees reported feeling more empowered to tell their personal story of enduring or healing from internalized racism

Masks Off Video Series

Healthy Neighborhoods in collaboration with YOUR STORY ON FILM and STIMULI Film, Inc. produced two community conversations, one focused on the experiences of African Americans and their transformation process leading to the removal of masks. The second conversation comprised of a group of white people responding to their role and responsibility in dismantling racism. The video series was designed to model productive dialogue for people who are still apprehensive or unsure about talking about racism, and to raise awareness about the ongoing stressors associated with masking. The videos are open to the public and clips may be used for watch parties, employee training, or to inform other initiatives focused on racial equity

The Healthy Neighborhoods committee hosted 3 watch parties in Summer 2022 at Red Space Cleveland and provided residents of all races and ethnicities an opportunity gather in community and to reflect and share their own experience with racism.

All residents who attended a watch party and were surveyed reported at least sometimes thinking about the metaphorical "masks" of conformity that people of color often wear (i.e., internalized racism) to thrive and survive in society. 69% usually or always think about it. All attendees surveyed reported wearing a metaphorical mask at some point in their lives, and all attendees were at least sometimes consciously aware when they take off the "mask." 81% of attendees report wearing a mask to advance at work or school, and 63% of attendees reported wearing one for safety or protection, or to fit in. Most respondents (82%) reported that feeling safe enough has prompted them to remove the mask.

Nearly all (94%) respondents reported being more inclined to learn more about the four levels of racism after attending a watch party.

350

Attendees at
Juneteenth Celebration

19

Minority and women
owned businesses
provided with vendor
opportunity

400+

Followers on Instagram and
Facebook and thousands of
accounts reached

17,500

Radio listeners reached
across 64 hours of 8
WOVU radio interviews
aired with committee
members discussing
racism and 1,500
2-minute PSAs

3,700

Cle4Equity website visitors
from January 2021 through
November 2022

Community Engagement

The Healthy Neighborhoods committee engaged the community through various outlets throughout the duration of the project, including social media, in-person gatherings, newsletters, and radio. To culminate the various elements of the We Wear The Mask movement, YOUR STORY ON FILM has also published a mini-documentary to capture the entire project.

Additionally, the committee hosted a culminating event to celebrate the various components of the We Wear The Mask project at Morning Star Baptist Church in Cleveland on Juneteenth 2022. After attending the celebration, all respondents surveyed reported being more inclined to learn about African American history and all respondents were either extremely or very likely to attend a similar event in the future. All respondents surveyed were at least sometimes aware of the metaphorical "masks" of conformity that Black people often wear to thrive and survive in society.

Attendees of the Juneteenth Celebration provided feedback and overwhelmingly encouraged others to stay true and to not change for anybody. Showing up as our authentic selves means being comfortable enough to be ourselves and not allowing society or external pressures to control how we show up. It preserves our authentic image of ourselves. Showing up as our authentic selves means being able to show up as Black and recognizing ourselves as beautiful.

"Showing up as my authentic self means not allowing the environment to control how I show up [to make me] question myself or my abilities..." - Juneteenth attendee

"Showing up as my authentic self means to be strong and comfortable in my own skin. My authentic self doesn't care what people think about me." - Juneteenth attendee

"My Black is enough."

-- Juneteenth Celebration youth attendee

60%

Grant funding allocated directly to women and minority-owned businesses

\$80,394



Acknowledgements

Healthy Neighborhoods is a committee consisting of community members representing an array of organizations throughout Northeast Ohio. Healthy Neighborhood's goal is to develop messaging that illuminates social determinants and their impact on place and health, while providing opportunities for community members to engage in issues around health and equity.

For the past 5 years, Healthy Neighborhoods has created content intersecting the topics of race, place, and health in ways that allow the broader community to have transcending and enlightening conversations. Our past two projects include a short animation, [Do You SEE What I SEE](#) (which highlights social determinants of health) and [TOXIC - A Black Woman's Story](#) (which dispels myths around the infant mortality crisis in Northeast Ohio).

Healthy Neighborhoods Committee

- Center For Community Solutions – *Emily Muttillo*
- Cleveland Department Of Public Health – *Frances Mills & Nicole Diaz*
- Cuyahoga County Health & Human Services – *Sabrina Roberts*
- Moms First – *Megan Walsh*
- Neighborhood Family Practice – *Michelle Wilcox*
- Graffiti Heart – *Allison Hennie*
- Greater Cleveland Partnership – *Freddy Collier*
- The Cleveland Foundation – *Deepa Vedavyas*
- University Hospitals – *Danielle Price, Rasheeda Larkin, Lena Grafton, Martina Pace, Tyler Coy*
- Your Story On Film – *Chris Benninger*

Team member demographics:

- Graffiti HeArt, the fiscal agent for this project, is a 501(c)3 run entirely by a diverse, volunteer administration and board. The board consists of 8 members 6 women, 2 men; 2 Black, 1 Latina, 3 LGBTQ+.
- The lead artist for the mural project, Stina Aleah, is African American.
- 60% of the Healthy Cleveland (Healthy Neighborhoods committee) is comprised of people of color. All committee members are professionally and personally engaged in efforts to enhance health equity.
- 80% of participants involved with Elevate the East are African American and 78% live in the focus area.

We couldn't have done this without our partners:

Cleveland Department of Public Health's Healthy Neighborhoods committee, Graffiti HeArt, Burten Bell Carr Development, Inc., Saint Luke's Foundation, WOVU 95.9 FM Radio, LAND studio, the National Endowment for the Arts, GCRTA, and the Cleveland Foundation.

Acknowledgements

Winning Artists and Categories

Top Prize Winners

- Mansa Bey
- Kenron Morgan
- Alexis Warren

Adult Category

- Mary Addison-Carter
- Nikki Vallot

Youth Category

- Laurelle Leegrand
- Eiden Leegrand
- Larry Wilcox

Art exhibit and media exposure

- Abena ("Solo") Awuku
- Rozenia Cunningham
- Marcel Glenn
- Andrea Johnson & Stephen Greenberg
- Kevin Knuckles

Masks Off Video Participants

- Vedette Gavin, *Moderator*
- Brandon Crump
- Rita Knight Gray
- Neal Hodges
- Tracy MacArthur
- Ashley Todd

- Adele DiMarco, *Moderator*
- Mara Leventhal
- Sean Shapiro
- Jan Thrope
- Andrew Zelman

Critical Collaborators

- Cuyahoga Arts & Culture
- Deep Roots Experience
- Elevate The East
- Honey Bell-bey, Poet Laureate Of Cuyahoga County, OH 2020
- Kings & Queens of Art
- Morning Star Baptist Church
- Neighborhood Connections
- Ohio Arts Council
- Tender Hearts Crusades & Refresh Collective
- The Indie Group
- Village Of Healing

