

FINAL Video_Alica Hall

[00:00:00]The organization came about through, um, the, uh, entity, the Youth Challenge Fund. So it was a fund that was set up back in around 2006 to address an increase in gun violence in the city. And so the province at the time, uh, made a \$45 million investment, uh, to support young people, specifically, um, Black youth, uh, and in developing, you know, programs in their neighborhoods, in priority neighborhoods in Toronto. Uh, as well as, you know, the fund ended up having a focus on capital projects, so wanting to build infrastructure, um, for, for Black youth across the city.

And so one of the areas, um, as the fund developed, they wanted, they had a sort of legacy round of funding. And that was really focused on projects, um, to [00:01:00] support, uh, the Black community over the longterm. So, you know, projects that would, um, you know, have a legacy post the fund's existence. And so one of the areas where they identified there was a gap was the arts.

And so they reached out to a group of artists, uh, about the idea of creating a Black art centre in the city. And so, uh, part of that original, um, sort of group of artists was, um, you know, Weyni Mengesha, who you might know as the artistic director of Soulpepper, um, Ian Kamau, Amanda Parris, who you might know as, you know, a, you know, journalist, uh, playwright, author, um, d'bi.young. Um, so a variety of, you know, artists that are really, uh, you know, have played an important role in the arts community and the Black arts community in Toronto. Um, and they together wrote an application for funding to create a Black arts centre and sort of outline what they thought was critical for that space to contain.

[00:02:00] Um, and then they got approved for funding and, uh, eventually they, um, went through that process of figuring out what, what do we name this thing? And so Ian Kamau, uh, actually proposed the name of Nia Centre, Nia being a Swahili word that means purpose. And so, uh, we say that we support people who have found their purpose through the arts.

In the early days, it was a really grassroots, um, you know, starting to pilot different kinds of programming, uh, out in community. So one of the first programs was a, a photography program, um, that utilized, uh, digital cameras. So, you know, I think, you know, going back 10 years, DSLRs weren't so common, you know, you couldn't get them for \$500 at Best Buy. So they were quite expensive. And so bringing them out into, uh, you know, Lawrence Heights, um, you know, a neighborhood just sort of north of where we are now, um, to do programming around helping young people understand the fundamentals of digital photography. Um, as well, we had a partnership [00:03:00] pretty early on with Gallery 44, which is, uh, a photography centre in downtown Toronto, but they centre on film photography. So it was an opportunity for young people to actually go into dark rooms and get familiar with, um, developing their own film. We also did, um, camps. Uh, we went into local schools and did workshops with artists. So it was really just about testing, um, the ability of the organization to bring artists, uh, to work with young people, to develop a healthy sense of self, to learn new artistic skills and to really bring a community of emerging artists together.

We refer to the Canon, right? When we refer to different art forms. And when we think about the Canadian artistic Canon, um, it's not very, it's not a huge fan in, right. Like, well, you know, Canada's a pretty, fairly young country. Um, and when we look at the Black artistic Canon, it's also, you know, fairly small.

[00:04:00] Um, and so I think there's a real, uh, value that Nia has provided in being able to bring artists together and to affirm what they're doing and to provide a platform for Black artistic production. Because what I've found is that a lot of artists, no matter what discipline they're in, are very isolated, right?

They're, they're really, you know, entrepreneurs in their own regard. Um, and they're not connected to a community. So if you're a producer, a music producer, you're working in your studio, you may have your clients, but you're doing your thing. And if you're a painter, you're in your studio by yourself oftentimes, painting. And so people are not always then, um, you know, clear about, you know, how their work relates and connects to a broader sector. How does their work connect to their community? What is their community saying about it? How do they actually, you know, also build those relationships with community and as well buyers and, and, and, you know, patrons of their art.

And so I think that the most [00:05:00] important thing that Nia Centre, um, you know, has done in, in this past 10 years is, um, or past 13 years, um, is to, uh, bring that network of artists together, whether it's young people who are aspiring to become artists or, um, you know, people who have made that decision, uh, being able to connect into, um, you know, programs and workshops that help them to better understand how to build a career as an artist, um, you know, opportunities to exhibit and showcase their work and connect to more mainstream institutions.

All of that to me is about supporting the Black artistic Canon in Canada and allowing for the experiences of Black Canadians to have a clear place in our artistic landscape. Uh, and that's the work that I believe we need to build on, um, to create, you know, a sort of clear legacy.

There are a lot of talented Black [00:06:00] women who work as artists, who work as art administrators. And we have as an organization benefited from their leadership and their dedication to this project from day one. And I would be remiss if I didn't mention that our team right now is, you know, a hundred percent Black women led and it's bomb.

It makes sense for Nia Centre to exist in Toronto, because Toronto is home to the largest community of Black folks in the country. Um, and there's definitely a desire to be able to, you know, leverage the programming and the physical space of Nia Centre to reflect the experiences of Black Canadians from across the country.

And we envision, uh, you know, that happening over the course of the next five years, for us to be able to grow, to be national and be able to showcase the works of, you know, artists from British Columbia or Saskatchewan or Halifax. Um, and I, and I think that [00:07:00] comes with being able to forge of course, partnerships and relationships with Black artists working in different disciplines from across the country.

We have a partnership right now with the McMaster Museum of Art, um, in Hamilton. And so we're doing a, uh, Curator in Residence Program with them, um, that culminates in a group show of Black collage artists, um, that will be of artists from across, uh, across Canada. So, um, starting to pilot some of those intentions now in different programs that we see.

I think we've piloted a lot of new initiatives and I'm really proud—that I'm really proud of. Um, I guess one general category I would say is our ability to connect Black artists to new audiences. So whether through the Black art fair that we did in 2019, where we showcased over 25 artists, and had roughly 400 people come through over the course of a weekend. Um, I think those [00:08:00] opportunities to connect Black buyers to Black artists and help them to, you know, build relationships, get familiar with their work, buy their work, uh, is an important way to build a, um, you know, a career, support an artist's career, um, and get our community enthusiastic and sort of familiar with those, um, artists in our community, or artists in our city. Um, and you know an extension of that as well is some of the partnerships I've been able to forge with private corporations, um, and bringing, you know, uh, Black artists into spaces that they wouldn't typically have access to, or wouldn't typically be, uh, showcased. So whether that's, you know, an accounting firm or a bank, or, um, you know, a law firm. Uh, you know, I think combining those exhibits with an opportunity to talk about Black history and the absence of Black arts and culture in their space, right? Because a lot of these firms purchase a lot of artwork and don't have any artwork from, from Black artists. And so, um, you know, we see this as an [00:09:00] opportunity to both do some education with them, uh, as well as bring work, artwork into those spaces.

So I think that, you know, um, that ability to connect artists to, to new audiences is something that I'm really proud of. And then I would also just quickly mention that our residency program is something that I'm really proud of. Um, you know, we, we just utilized in our existing building. So, you know, before—it's being renovated—it was a public health facility.

So very much a, you know, drab kind of, you know, random sinks in different rooms and, um, you know, looked very much like, you know, still look like, uh, you know, a health centre. Um, but we, we renovated some of those, um, studios or just left them as is, and people utilized that space. Um, and so over the course of the two years we had, I believe 10 artists, um, participate in our residency. Folks like Aaron Jones, who's a collage artist, and Shantel Miller, who's a visual artist. Um, and so bringing [00:10:00] artists from different disciplines together, um, was really cool, to see how they interacted and sort of shared and grew with each other. Um, and I think ultimately, again, building that sense of community that we talked about earlier,

Our team has done a really good job of, of pivoting through the pandemic. We, you know, were so proud of ourselves because we had like a whole year of programming lined up before the year started and, um, were really excited to kick it off. And then of course the pandemic happened and we had to close our space and basically, you know, at least for the first quarter, just sort of wipe our programming calendar clean and be like, okay, what, what are we doing now? What's needed? What do people, um, need access to? What role can we play in connecting them to services, in responding to their needs? Um, and so we quickly

pivoted and created like a resource list. Cause we noticed that there were a lot of funds that were being developed [00:11:00] and, you know, services specifically for artists. And so why not just collate those, um, uh, opportunities together for quick reference. And we also put out a survey to better understand what artists needed in this moment and you know, that would help us develop programming.

Um, we started doing, you know, a few things to creatively inspire folks. So, uh, we did community check-ins. We did creative challenges. We, you know, sent cameras out, disposable cameras out to, uh, and art supplies out to some of the young people in our programs to keep them creative and inspired, cause they were definitely like, what is the point of doing any of this? We're all gonna die. So, you know, I think that first quarter was, was particularly difficult. So we tried to just, you know, keep people feeling inspired and connected and sort of, um, aware of the resources that were available to them.

Um, we also created a video called Keep That Energy, um, which was, uh, filmed entirely remotely. Um, [00:12:00] so it's kind of like the, our first challenge of creating and commissioning work, um, during the pandemic. And it was meant to honour, um, the ways in which we're depending on artists to get through this pandemic, we're all reading more and listening to music and watching shows. And so, uh, we created a short film that features I think 10 Black artists in the city, um, all of them creating sort of through, uh, their, the realities of lockdown, um, to highlight, um, the ways in which they're keeping that energy going. And we wanted to thank them, whether they're creating or not.

When we were talking to young people about what they were experiencing during the pandemic, one of the things that came up was just the sense of like isolation and not really feeling inspired about the future, um, being concerned, and they named it, being concerned about their mental health. And so we leveraged some of like the, um, funding available for, you know, COVID recovery to apply for a wellness program because a lot of our [00:13:00] programs are centred on artistic development. So you're either learning a skill, connecting to a mentor or, you know, writing, some, there's some kind of creative output. So we wanted to create a space where it was much more about, um, just learning about how you're feeling, articulating that, looking at, you know, self care strategies. Um, and so we, uh, created the wellness program. And Wellness Connect, um, happens on a weekly basis and participants can sign up to do things like, you know, yoga, um, cooking classes.

Um, we sent them a bunch of supplies so that they could create their own essential oil mixes. So they looked at the impact of scent on their mood and, and sort of, um, everyday vibe. Um, we've done things like, um, looking at, yeah, at sound baths. Um, so looking at how sound can affect your mood. So it's really holistic in, uh, connecting to them to, um, to explore different experiences, um, that, uh, that [00:14:00] impact their health and wellbeing. Um, whether it be sort of physical and, or, you know, leveraging any of the different, um, senses or learning new skills or trying meditation. So it's really experiential, um, but also connects them to peer mentors. Um, should they have, you know, a challenge that they want to talk about or, you know, a situation or a particular session is difficult for them, they can go into a breakout room and chat with someone who's been trained to support. So it's about, all about improving their capacity, um, to, to create a healthy environment for themselves. It

connects them of course, to a group of young people who are also on that journey. Um, and then of course there's, there's professional supports as well if, if they should need that.

You know we are currently under construction or renovation, I should say, we're renovating our facility. Um, and we expect to be open in spring of 2022. So, you know, just over a year from now. [00:15:00] And I think that having a physical space will really change, um, you know, the way in which we operate and, and provide a, sort of a new capacity for the organization to support artists, um, and to have a space that's actually designed for art making, I should say, cause you know, we've had a space, but it's just not actually conducive to, to creating, um, or wasn't designed for artists to create or showcase their work in. Um, but I think moving forward, you know, my hope is that the facility and the centre, through its programming, can really reflect, you know, the diversity of perspectives and experiences and narratives of the Black community, which in Toronto, we're so lucky, is so diverse. You know, we're people that come from East Africa and West Africa and the Caribbean, and we're mixed and we're Francophone and we're Muslim and we're queer and we're Christian and we're trans, and there's just so many identities within the community. And I think that having, um, [00:16:00] you know, a space that's dedicated to, to, you know, those narratives and those stories and that's uniquely Canadian, um, meaning that it has all of those voices within it, um, is going to be something that's really important to, um, the Canadian arts landscape in the, in the years and decades to come. So I'm excited to see, um, what magic comes from, uh, Black folks gathering in an artistic capacity, which is like nothing else.