

Community Innovation Network

Innovation in Action

Bolton Elementary School, Cleveland



What would it take to get professional musicians to perform a concert in an urban elementary school? In some cases, a partnership like this might take significant time and energy from senior leaders across multiple institutions. In this case, however, the Community Innovation Network is cultivating a new culture of deeply collaborative community change, where community leaders and change agents can make an impact with the resources and assets they have. We are doing this through the power of collaboration. It is often faster, and more efficient to accomplish a project with one or two people from a single department or organization. Going alone avoids the need to build consensus and manage conflict. And authentic collaboration requires time and attention to the work of cultivating mutual relationships across a variety of differences. However, we know that collaboration has the power to produce change that is more impactful, sustained, democratic, and equitable. Authentic collaboration also engages and empowers the community leaders and stakeholders who are closest to the issue. We draw wisdom from the African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” This belief inspired us to develop the Innovator’s Monthly Meetup as a platform for change agents and community leaders to collaborate and create, together.

The Innovator's Monthly Meetup is a monthly gathering of people who are working for social change. The Community Innovation Network facilitators use community network building practices to hold space for powerful connections and shared learning. The event moves locations each month, with a different Community Innovation Network partner hosting each gathering. During each meetup, attendees have the opportunity to host a Learning Circle conversation about a topic they’d like to learn more about by tapping into the wisdom in the room. Once the Learning Circle topics are identified, other participants have the opportunity to “vote with their feet” to determine which conversation they want to participate in.

Natalie was joined by Rachel Kribbs and Sydney Link from the Cleveland Institute of Music, Lamont Davis from Case Western Reserve University’s FOCUS Programs, Ariel Clayton Karas from OPUS 216 and Classical Revolution Cleveland, and Lexy Lattimore, professional dancer and current Community Innovation Network intern, among others. This small group of change agents had such an engaging conversation during a learning circle at the meetup that they were inspired to continue meeting to develop an opportunity to collaborate to bring music programming to a school in the Fairfax neighborhood.



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Lexy Lattimore from the Community Innovation Network supported the group through a series of meetings until a new partnership emerged. The group learned that Bolton Elementary in the Fairfax neighborhood was planning to host their first off site Black History Month Concert on February 25th at the nearby Olivet Institutional Baptist Church. Sydney, Ariel, and 3 other musicians from the Cleveland Institute of Music and Classical Revolution Cleveland connected with the school and gave an interactive presentation to the students about how to approach performing with an ensemble, including how to stand and carry oneself, how to engage an audience, and that an ensemble is a community, with each performer playing a vital role. They also performed a variety of music, ranging from classical pieces by Mozart and Bach to contemporary works by Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, and Lil Nas.



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This group of musicians, educators, and community builders hope to expand their collaboration to other Cleveland neighborhoods and schools in the future once COVID-19 restrictions are loosened, and funding is available. Reflecting about the experience, Sydney shared that the Bolton students were a wonderful and extremely receptive audience, and that “having the opportunity to go into the community and share this amazing stuff that we do every day is just really special to me.” This collaboration is exactly the kind of outcome we hope to see from our Innovator’s Monthly Meetups, and we look forward to sharing more stories of collaboration as they emerge.



For more on this story, please see [Ariel's blog post about this on Classical Revolution Cleveland.](#)

The learning circle during the October 11th Innovator's Monthly Meetup where this group first met and came together for this project.