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Healing Blues Project pairs homeless, musicians

JANUARY 26, 2015 *By toddcohen49 in EDUCATION, FUNDRAISING, NORTH CAROLINA Tags: DAVID FOX, GREENSBORO COLLEGE, HEALING BLUES PROJECT, INTERACTIVE RESOURCE CENTER, JONATHAN EPSTEIN, TED EFREMOFF, THE HEALING BLUES LEAVE A COMMENT*

By Todd Cohen

GREENSBORO, N.C. — In the lyrics of “Cross Road Blues,” a classic Delta blues song, the image of a country crossroads has come to represent a place where a musician can hitch a ride, or kneel and pray for mercy, or even sell one’s soul to the devil in return for musical talent.

For the Healing Blues Project, an initiative at Greensboro College, the blues itself has served as a crossroads that has brought together homeless people and musicians to create songs that give voice to people living in crisis. The effort is raising awareness about the challenges they face, and raising money for a local nonprofit that serves the homeless.

Spearheaded and co-founded by Ted Efremoff, an assistant professor of art at Greensboro College, the Healing Blues Project paired homeless people, who served as storytellers, with blues musicians, who worked with them to co-write songs.

With both the storyteller and songwriter for each song getting copyright credit, the songs then were recorded by local, professional musicians from Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem for a CD, with all revenue from sales benefiting the Interactive Resource Center, a Greensboro nonprofit that provides a range of services for people who are homeless.

So far, the effort has generated \$10,000 through concerts and the sale of 350 copies of “The Healing Blues,” a CD that features 15 tracks with titles such as “Bitter Route,” “I Come from a Place,” “I Die a Little,” and “If Only Mother Had Told Me.”

Efremoff says he got the idea for the project after receiving an email in December 2013 from the Open Arts Society in Durham soliciting proposals for art installations in storefronts in Greensboro on the theme of the blues. The installations would promote the annual blues festival held each May by the Piedmont Blues Preservation Society in Greensboro.

In addition to proposing an installation, Efremoff also proposed teaming homeless people with musicians to write songs, and setting up a series of “blues cafes” where they could collaborate, try out songs and read poetry.

Writing workshops were held at the Interactive Resource Center and other locations, with the storytellers sharing their stories with the musicians, who wrote songs based on those stories.

David Fox, a professor of music at Greensboro College and co-founder of the project, produced the CD last summer at Earthtones Studio in Greensboro. An art student from the school served as intern on the project, music students assisted in the studio and performed on vocals and horns, and another art student created the CD cover.

Business students helped organize shows to raise money for production of the CD and, as a class project this semester, communications and art students are making a documentary about the project.

The CD, which sells for \$15, is available at cdbaby.com, at the Greensboro College Bookstore and its website, and at local music stores.

“We’re an institution that’s interested in outreach,” says Efremoff, a “social practice” artist who focuses on creating situations in which people can interact with one another.

“Through this project,” he says, “we were able in a cross-disciplinary way to involve the sociology, business, art, music and communications departments, and work collaboratively in the community to create a work of art that is benefiting some of the citizens who have the most need in our community.”

Jonathan Epstein, a musician and visiting associate professor of sociology at Greensboro College who co-created and performed on two songs on the CD, says a common theme on the CD is “why are we invisible?”, and that the project gave homeless participants a forum for telling their stories.

The project shows the power of community-building, says Epstein, who focuses his work on using the arts to express sociological concepts explicitly, rather than implicitly.

“You start at the grassroots level and move upwards, as opposed to the other way around, because that’s how you get communities involved in projects,” he says. “You make it theirs.”