Access Your Talent – A Community Talent Show Featuring Refugees in Toronto: The Potential Impact of Performance Art on Mental Health

Jennifer Atkins, MPH, RD & Yousra Dabbouk, MPH, RD
Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services

BACKGROUND

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services aims to improve health outcomes for the most vulnerable immigrants, refugees, and their communities through our vision of health with dignity. Each year, we participate in an annual fundraising campaign for the United Way’s Community Fund which supports a network of 200 agencies who provide vital social services to hundreds of thousands of people throughout the city of Toronto including single parents, women who have been abused, young children and teenagers, the elderly, the physically challenged, the homeless, and many newcomers and refugees.

In October, 2011, Access Your Talent! – A Community Talent Show was created as a vehicle to carry out fundraising activities and garner community participation and celebration. Through generous donations and discounted services from local businesses and corporations, the event was delivered in a theatrical atmosphere and raised a total of $1500 toward the United Way Community Fund. Fundraised dollars were a combined effort of community members, clients, staff and their family and friends; the amount stands out as remarkable given the low income status of the neighbourhood.

The show provided a rare forum for refugees to engage in creative expression, healthy competition and fun and as we later reflected, served as a potential method to enhance the mental health of those who participated. This is a reminder that positive impacts on health may arise outside of conventional ‘health promotion’ programming.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Leading up to the event, community members were invited to attend auditions. Artistic leaders from the community were invited to present as ‘judges’, a radio and television undergraduate student was interviewed and invited as emcee for the night and 70 local leaders from the community were invited to present as ‘judges’, a radio and television appearance to participate in events that allow for an expression of creativity, healthy competition and play, the potential impact of performance events is great.

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services’ Access Your Talent! offered a clear and community-building space for just such an opportunity.

While not deliberately set out as a therapeutic intervention to address mental health and integration of refugees, Access Your Talent! provided a learning opportunity for that potential, and served as a reminder that positive impacts on health may arise outside of conventional ‘health promotion’ programming.

LIGHTS!  CAMERA!  ACTION!

Access Your Talent! was hosted on an October weekday evening for 4 hours and was open to all community members, clients, staff and their family and friends. The show featured twelve acts including: dance, guitar and song, a mandolin melody, spoken word, drag performance and sketch comedy. Local businesses were featured, prizes were won and money was raised. Well over 100 people attended the event, despite the heavy rains throughout the evening.

PERFORMANCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

A growing body of research suggests that community-based performance and theatre provide a platform for self-expression, talent recognition, esteem building, social inclusion, and a chance to re define past experiences, and future aspirations.

For refugees in exile, who often face social isolation and do not have the opportunity to contribute in events that allow for an expression of creativity, healthy competition and play, the potential impact of performance events is great.

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MOVING FORWARD

Evaluation of Access Your Talent! was conducted by observance of the attendance rate, monies raised, and informal conversations with performers, attendees and community contributors. By all accounts, the event was deemed an immense success, leaving in its wake, requests for talent shows to be featured as an annual event.

Internal debriefing between teams unveiled an entirely unanticipated outcome which warrants further exploration and intentionality – that of the effect of performance on the mental health of newcomers, refugees and immigrants.

Program planning for refugees and immigrants should consider the implementation of community events and talent shows as a particular, as an underutilized vehicle for health and resettlement initiatives. Such an approach presents a powerful stage from which to assess, plan, and evaluate a myriad of impacts on the health (including mental health) of refugees.

Future talent shows may work collaboratively with counselor therapist teams to hone the therapeutic effects, and follow up on the impact and meaning of participation.

CONTACTS

For more information, email: ydabbouk@accessalliance.ca
jatkins@accessalliance.ca
www.accessalliance.ca