

CREATIVE COMMUNITY FELLOWS

CASE STORY ►

Nic de la Fuente

► When **Nic de la Fuente** applied to the Creative Community Fellows program, he was at a critical point in the development of the Spaces of Opportunity project, the community gardening and gathering project he works on in South Phoenix. Nic needed more resources, including an “interdisciplinary team” with which he could seek ideas for solving system-level problems.

Spaces of Opportunity is a coalition of social service and cultural nonprofits that addresses the lack of affordable, healthy food available to neighborhood residents. As Nic explains it, urban farming happens in South Phoenix, but a majority of that healthy produce is sold in wealthier areas of the city. Through Spaces of Opportunity, “those who farm the land will be able to eat off of it.” Nic and his partners reclaimed an 18-acre dry, overgrown, vacant lot and have begun the process of turning

it into a thriving food oasis. The space will feature an outdoor amphitheater, outdoor kitchen, South Phoenix’s first farmers market and STEAM education for the local schools and community.

During CCF, Nic built critical skills in managing partnerships and gained a clearer understanding of the creative placemaking field. He has collaborated with other Fellows and mentors on graphic design, facilitation and strategic planning for Spaces of Opportunity. “Because of CCF I’m now engaging in dialog and directly collaborating with colleagues across the nation and across disciplines.”

Since the conclusion of the Fellowship, Nic has secured over \$500,000 in grant funding from ArtPlace America and the National Endowment for the Arts. Non-profit organizations, schools, and local farmers are already growing fresh produce on this

land for a variety of purposes: family and neighborhood consumption, distribution to schools, community health centers, local restaurants, and markets. All of these distribution points allow healthy food to reach a population with disproportionately high rates of chronic diseases.

Nic attributes much of his success with Spaces of Opportunity to the Creative Community Fellows program. Of his experience, he says, “The Creative Community Fellows Program was the most influential professional development I have ever received. The attention to detail by the NAS team and the strategic pairing of mentors with fellows creates an unprecedented opportunity for direct action and implementation of ideas garnered during the fellowship. Never before have I experienced something so focused on building networks and getting community projects off the ground.”

► “If Spaces is going to be as successful as I think it will, the NAS program will go down as the catalyst that propelled us to a whole new level.”



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Katarzyna Balug

► **Katarzyna (Kate) Balug** applied to Creative Community Fellows in order to take Department of Play from a side project into a program that is woven into civic conversation and action in Boston. She knew she needed the space and time away from daily obligations to regain focus and chart a path forward and she sought a diverse network of collaborators with whom she could trade ideas and expertise.

Kate is co-founder of **Department of Play**, a Boston-based collective that creates temporary play zones in public spaces for people to step out of the everyday and play out imagined worlds. In play, participants envision alternative futures, share life experiences and knowledge.

During CCF, Kate broadened her network of ideas and collaborators and craft-

ed her funding strategy. Regarding one aspect of the program, Launchpad, Kate says, "It reminded me to connect with my heart and soul, and how to communicate from those places in public speaking. Also, I made incredible contacts among the panelists and the Fellows alike."

Towards the end of the Fellowship, Department of Play got involved with *Boston Creates*, the city's cultural planning process. The city wanted the process to engage the community at an unprecedented level. Department of Play's role was to make community conversation about culture a cultural experience in itself – one that was inclusive, relevant and imaginative for all. For example, one intervention Department of Play staged involved bringing to life the ideas for the

future of the arts that residents posted online. Kate and her co-founder Maria Vidart Delgado dressed in costumes, curated framed images of the online submissions, and provided an opportunity for passersby to engage in critical dialogue around their differing visions for the city's future. They also brought on three additional artist-ethnographers to both expand and document the public participation process.

Kate's hard work resulted in a \$125,000 grant from ArtPlace America in 2015, to create temporary play zones in strategic public spaces along a transit corridor to address a lack of social cohesion among ethnic minorities in Boston, and engage their imagination in the civic unfolding of their rapidly developing neighborhoods.



► "It's as if the clouds have parted in my thinking about my project and now I see the way forward."