



Artist in Residence: Focus on Homelessness

In 2018, the City of Tacoma engaged two artists, Susan Robb and Roni Chelben, to fulfill an Artist in Residence position (AiR). The artists were embedded within the City, working collaboratively with staff to find creative ways to address issues related to homelessness in Tacoma. The AiR was meant to be both proactive and responsive, and address issues of Creative Site Reclamation and Community Engagement.

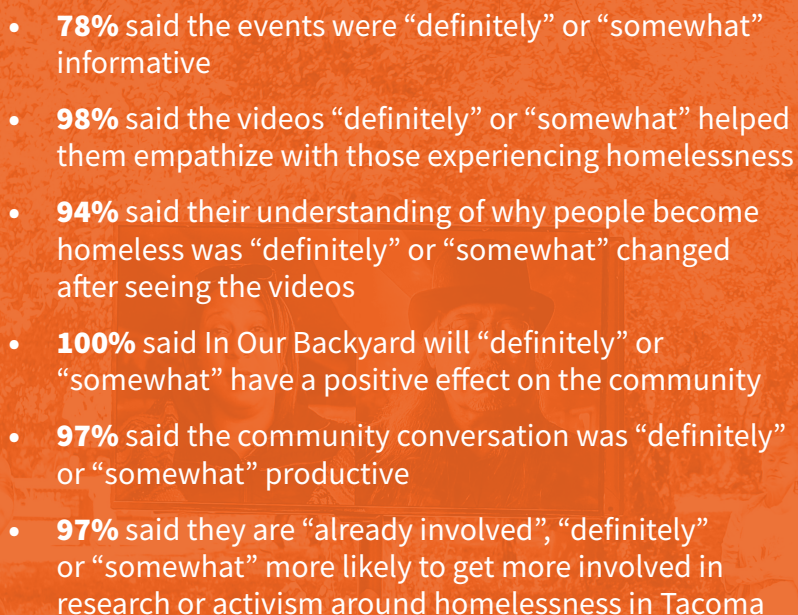
Community Engagement AiR

Roni Chelben was the Community Engagement lead artist. She worked on creative solutions to address issues in the lives of people who are experiencing homelessness practically, emotionally, socially, or otherwise; and led community engagement to create a more empathetic relationship between housed and homeless community members. Her residency produced *In Our Backyard*, a community engagement project that brought people together for conversations about homelessness, its causes, challenges, and possible solutions. Events featured participatory performances created and performed by individuals experiencing homelessness; video art installations presenting conversations between housed and homeless residents, hosted in each other's backyards; and facilitated community conversations.

The project brought the experience of homelessness to the forefront, with the goal of sparking a conversation and public awareness around the challenges of homelessness and the social responsibility of the community at large toward its homeless residents. www.inourbackyardtacoma.com

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- **5** free community events (Tacoma Rescue Mission, Blueberry Park, Tacoma Community College, Portland Avenue Community Center, Tollefson Plaza/Tacoma Art Museum)
 - **415** event attendees
 - **8** interview videos between housed and homeless participants
 - **10** theater performers in *In Our Backyard*
 - **44** theater workshop participants experiencing homelessness
 - **26,700** Facebook reach for events

Survey results from *In Our Backyard*

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- **78%** said the events were “definitely” or “somewhat” informative
 - **98%** said the videos “definitely” or “somewhat” helped them empathize with those experiencing homelessness
 - **94%** said their understanding of why people become homeless was “definitely” or “somewhat” changed after seeing the videos
 - **100%** said *In Our Backyard* will “definitely” or “somewhat” have a positive effect on the community
 - **97%** said the community conversation was “definitely” or “somewhat” productive
 - **97%** said they are “already involved”, “definitely” or “somewhat” more likely to get more involved in research or activism around homelessness in Tacoma



“A lot of the work that I do is to just to try to create a dialogue, a cathartic dialogue, that leads us to a place where we actually want to find solutions... I’m finding that the actual biggest need right now is community action and education.”

-James Pogue, director of homeless outreach for Comprehensive Life Resources, chairman of the Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness, and facilitator at *In Our Backyard* Blueberry Park event

Creative Site Reclamation AiR

Susan Robb was the Creative Site Reclamation lead. She acted as an on-call artist and designer to help develop solutions for creative placemaking and site reclamation, to reclaim areas as positive community space. Susan’s residency produced Site Activation Plans, Implementation Plans, activities for outreach events, and tangible work. Site Activation Plans include current site conditions, multi-pronged engagement approaches, and creative ideas for activation of sites experiencing chronic encampment and/or illicit activity. Implementation Plans are specific recommendations for sites. As a set, the work contains a “toolkit” of creative approaches that could be used for many different sites.

- 5 Site Activation Plans
- 3 Implementation Plans
- 3 sites with work completed and new outside investment/ownership
- 2 community engagement events
- 1 citywide map of reclamation sites with recommendations

Thanks to new partnerships with the Port of Tacoma, Business Improvement Area, Spaceworks Tacoma, and AHBL, look for these upcoming improvements downtown:

- Permanent public artwork in Fireman’s Park
- Media art gallery and pollinator garden at 12th & Commerce
- Bike tunnel and pop-up retail space at 10th & Commerce