



Divergent Labs - Annual Report 2014

This first annual report for Divergent Labs covers our history since inception on 7 November 2013, through 2014.

Submitted to board of directors by Star Ford on 23 February 2015.

Divergent Labs exists to advance the economic status, educational status, spiritual growth, human rights, and representation in the public sphere of disabled and disenfranchised people. With a majority-autistic board of directors and a structure that allows for many parallel programs run by different managers, the organization will experiment in many ways with creating our economy and culture for ourselves, building organic links among the tribe of autistic people.

Within the realm of autism-focused organizations, Divergent is unique. Like other autistic-run organizations, we aim to make the world a safe, accessible place that accepts neurological diversity, rather than looking at autism as a problem to fix. The collection of those organizations includes the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) which has a focus on policy and self-advocacy training, and GRASP, ANI, and AAAC, which work in areas such as social relationships, personal support, and culture. Divergent has an overlapping but slightly different mission of hands-on working together on projects, making economic relationships and growing social fabric through those ties.

Our concept is not the economy of exploitation, or of just getting as much as we can, but rather about building a sustainable mutualistic economy by autistic people and our allies for all of us and for humanity at large. We seek to be a solution for problems far beyond our own community.

Organizational accomplishments

The first year of Divergent Labs included these organizational accomplishments:

- Recruited a six-member volunteer board of directors.
- Incorporated in New Mexico, and complied with all startup paperwork with all the tax and oversight agencies, and established a bank account.
- Applied for and received IRS non-profit status. Also had a partnership with New Mexico Autism Society as a fiscal sponsor.
- Created and then adjusted by-laws with an effort to make the majority-autistic board cognitively accessible.
- Established three programs: Technical services, Ocate Cliffs, and Rhizome. (more details on program accomplishments below)
- Created three web sites: the organization's site (www.divergentlabs.org, which doubles as the tech services web site), Ocate Cliffs, and Rhizome.

- Created a "tribe" database that tracks our family of contacts in various circles, separately for each program.

Ocate Cliffs program

Purpose: Ocate Cliffs is a retreat center under construction in northern New Mexico. It is being built and will be run by an autistic staff. As a summer-long autistic workspace, it will be a laboratory for accessibility with lots of opportunity for personal growth. The manager is Star Ford.

Accomplishments: Divergent Labs signed a lease with Star on the land, and commenced building during 2014. The well was drilled, and the water system installed. A toilet house was constructed, making it possible for groups to camp on site. A work retreat was held and six volunteers constructed trails, outdoor furniture and a tree house. Star contracted with a builder for the staff house and completed floor plans and prepared the site for the foundation.

More information: The web site has more history and pictures - www.ocatecliffs.org - and there is a follow up videos from the work camp, which can be seen here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2J25JvvMBA

Rhizome program

Purpose: The purpose of the Rhizome program is to provide a way for people to introduce projects consistent with Divergent Labs vision and to help them to bring these projects to fruition. The program is essentially a discussion forum acting as an idea incubator.

Accomplishments: The Rhizome program was launched with a management panel, now expanded to five members, a web site and email list. The individual projects are as follows:

- Archipelago Autistic project: This project is about creation of physical Autistic spaces. Led by Amik Nafte, it aims to create autistic community starting on a piece of land in the Adirondacks in New York. In 2014 a large yurt was built with an attached kitchen house. The site is an ideal learning grounds for children and youth, situated inside an unique and thriving natural habitat, and will be welcoming autistic children and their families, as well as autistic adults, as the summer grounds for convening with the natural world.
- Autistic Education project: This project is about creation of autistic alternative to mainstream education of autistic children and youth, which honor and develop those students as whole people, instead of focusing on deficits. Discussion was held and contacts made within the Waldorf school movement.
- Driftwood Photo Contest project: A photo contest promoting preservation of natural beauty, and the art of nature photography

Technical services program

Purpose: The technical services program connects disabled technical workers to work opportunities, for people with demonstrated professional-level skills but not being able to work office jobs. The manager, Star Ford, ran a software and web consulting business for many years and now is the program manager, providing the same level of service to clients using Divergent subcontractors.

Accomplishments: In our first year, the clients from Star's prior company were rolled over successfully

to be Divergent clients, and we worked on a few contracts, paying out a total of \$11,696 to disabled workers.

Finances

Financially we are healthy but still small. The tech services program brought in \$53,468 which was used for autistic subcontractors and Star's salary. Ocate Cliffs spent \$1,333 in running a work retreat, which was funded by a few small contributions and a chunk from Star's previous business. There have been no grants awarded yet.

Lessons learned and challenges

- There is no magic way to make the board and management "accessible" because each person's needs are unique. By changing the voting process, it may have made it more accessible, but there is more to be learned about this.
- We have achieved a fuller and more realistic understanding of the difficulties we are facing, which arise both from our own approach to life and the approach of our society to 'different' populations and life in general. To overcome these may be much harder than previously thought. The more funds and resources the society may allot to "remedy" this, the more suppression and isolation we'll face from those who are in a position to effectively appropriate it and propagate the autistic role in society; it is a vicious cycle.
- Part of disability in job settings comes from unjust discrimination, and part from actually being of less value to an employer than a non-disabled peer. With autism, skills can be distributed so unevenly that an accomplished engineer might lack a necessary qualification like day-to-day reliability or the ability to manage stress with a deadline, which can seriously harm the client's business. Within the technical services program, there are some standard accommodations that can be made in the work environment, but we learned that it has to go far beyond that. The program is still new and needs to work out the balance between being accessible to the worker and still providing timely high-quality products.
- Another lesson that is needing to be learned is how to connect with people who can do marketing and publicity; this applies to all our programs. For example, there is a high demand in this economy for high level software design, but we don't have a network that allows us to connect to that demand. Because of this gap, most of the people on our list of potential workers have not yet gotten an opportunity to work. Publicity is difficult for autistic people in general. We know that our programs and ideas have been inspiring for a lot of people, but we found that this feeling doesn't travel outside of our existing circles without continuous efforts to publicize.
- Fundraising and writing grants is a related area that is hard for autistic people in general, and we haven't connected yet with people who open doors to donations and grants.