



Divergent Labs - Annual Report 2015

Submitted to board of directors by Star Ford on 27 January 2016.

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.

In its second full year, DL kept on track with modest stable growth in all three programs. There were no changes in the board, and we didn't add any new programs.

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: We ran our second work retreat with 18 participants. We received our first grant from a foundation. We launched the "two friends campaign" to give away logo shirts. We completed the foundation of the staff house and water system.

More information: The web site has more history and pictures - www.ocatecliffs.org.

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: About ten projects and motions for new projects were under development during the year. The GAIA project saw more construction and use of the retreat space in the Adirondacks.

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 is Star Ford.

Accomplishments: We paid about \$66,000 to disabled workers. We hired a marketing person.

Finances

The technical services program represented the largest amount of money coming in and out, with about \$154,000 in consulting revenue. Ocate Cliffs received more income from the grant (\$5,000) and gifts than we had the time or ability to spend, so that program has some seed money for next year.

Lessons learned and challenges

- **Depth.** The most important effects that the programs are having are probably the healing, making of bonds, and inspiration that happens within people who participate, particularly for people who have visited Ocate or GAIA. This is impossible to measure; we are shy to articulate. The idea of participation as a benefit to autistic people can be completely lost on those who are looking for a more one-way kind of support. For example, people who call begging for us to provide a job for their son are dissatisfied that we don't offer handouts, but all we offer are avenues for their son to participate as an equal. How can we express that being part of the solution in the world is connected to solving your own individual problems?
- **Networking.** It's difficult to network. There are still relatively few people who have heard of DL, and being autistic we quickly reach the end of our contact lists and have a hard time building bridges out to other groups and resources. This presents barriers in grant-writing (reaching the end of the known sources of funding), and technical marketing (having no new leads). DL is still operating somewhat in a bubble, not in a very public way. The ongoing challenge is to make those bridges that help the organization be known to more people.
- **Getting beyond talk.** It is difficult to collaborate and move beyond talk, even if the talk builds agreement. We easily hear supportive comments like "That's so wonderful what you're doing," but it can feel like even if the audience is cheering, the actors might not have learned their lines. We in the movement do not yet have a cohesive shared understanding about what to do about the problems associated with being autistic in the world. Our tentative responses are new, possibly radical, and often not energetically embraced or understood. The ongoing challenge is to move from merely looking like we're doing something positive to having concrete effects.
- **Supports.** Trying to fit into a world that doesn't fit is a real disadvantage, not just a difference. For example, an Ocate retreat participant missed a flight and didn't come for reasons related to autism (stress, executive function, and so on); this might have been preventable had we been operating in a more accessible way and not expecting everyone to be able to fit into the world "normally". Likewise, the life upheavals that are typical in our population and which can result in being unreliable in a job have inhibited the tech services program from meeting customers' expectations, despite the actual qualifications of the workers. The challenge is to find the supports necessary to allow people to mesh with the demands of the wider world.