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Divergent Labs – Annual Report 2019

Submitted to board of directors by Rachel Pretlow on January 21, 2020.

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.

Ocate Cliffs Program

Purpose: Ocate Cliffs is a retreat center in northern New Mexico. It is now 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:

In Quarter 2, the Rusty Nail received a final inspection. After completing installation of some facility improvements, Star received a final certificate of occupancy. As a consequence of the water system being out of service from leaks, four water tanks with a total capacity of 21,900 gallons were installed on site. The international retreat planned for the summer was also canceled in this quarter because of low registration.

In Quarter 3, several guests, including a few volunteers from a prior year, stayed at the Rusty Nail. Although the house was open for rental on some weekends, nobody rented the space. Star signed to advertise on Vrbo and Airbnb. To accommodate more visitors, additional beds were constructed. Other construction improvements in Quarter 3 included the completion of the tool shed, the clearing of the “café” room, and the repair of a water leak.

Star and one director (Rachel) approached a partnership with the board of directors from Elevate the Spectrum in Albuquerque. A committee was formed to assist in marketing Ocate Cliffs.

In Quarter 4, Ocate Cliffs closed due to snow. Several committee meetings with Elevate the Spectrum took place, which included the request from the Elevate members for a draft of a business plan for Ocate Cliffs.

More info: Check out the website for 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 acts as an idea incubator; and is supported by a unique technology platform developed internally (Autistic.zone), and a discussion forum for staff and volunteers (Rhizome Core). The acting steward for the program is Amik Nafte.

Accomplishments: Work continued with Project 2019, with a mission of renewing the Self-Determination movement. Efforts shifted from the presentation of material for Grievance and Solutions to engaging in active strategies to abolish “autism institution” and promote the movement.

In one such effort, Amik submitted a proposal to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to initiate Phase 2 of the Self-Determination Program that has been funded by RWJF since 1996. Along with this proposal, Amik sent a letter to the Alliance for Citizen-Directed Supports (ACDS) requesting support in the form of grants and materials for Phase 2 of the program. A representative from ACDS responded with interest in the program but an inability to offer tangible support. Amik shared in November that the proposal did not get funded from RWJF.

Another action of Project 2019 was the grassroots campaign #Support SDDD (Self-Determination for Persons with Developmental Disabilities). Amik solicited requests to advertise this hashtag on social media and to include in requests for support from the RWJF.

The alliances with several organizations for disability advocacy, including the Alliance for Self-Directed Education (ASDE), the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), and the ACDS, were renewed or considered for renewal as Organizational Members. To facilitate engagement with other members of the movement, Star and Amik worked to upgrade and re-engineer Autistic.zone. Additionally, access to Rhizome retreats was made available to members of these alliances.

Amik proposed a dual strategy for Project 2020, including: 1) to initiate the definition and the development of assistive access software, and 2) to explore the legality of exclusions/exceptions clauses in governmental program regulations involving self-directed persons. These strategies aim to achieve solutions within the current self-determination structure.

Amik also proposed the ORGANIC project concept. This program is being developed to increase access to organic, sustainable foods through donated funds accessed via a credit card. Several Directors are assisting with the ideation of this program concept.

On the GAIA project site, the yurt sustained damage during the course of winter weather. Construction on a new, stronger structure took place from the early spring to the fall with the assistance of volunteers. A few repeat guests stayed at the site, and beavers re-established their dams.

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: In February, Star returned to contract work with toptal.com. Star also signed up with Horizons of New Mexico, an agency that offers priority contracts with the State for disabled-owned businesses. There was one contract with Purdue University, although Star later determined that this contract would need to be dropped in favor of those with different service implications.

Finances

The technical services program had \$44,064.10 in consulting revenue. Ocate Cliffs had a total loss of \$-5,242.54. See 990 form for details.

Lessons learned and challenges

Networking: More strides have been made this year to address the challenge that we have historically experienced with networking. Relationships have been initiated with individuals interested in supporting the Ocate Cliffs and Rhizome programs. We continue to distribute our brochures locally and have a consistent following on Facebook and to our newsletter.

Site maintenance: There were ongoing water leaks at Ocate Cliffs and weather-related damage at the GAIA site that required repairs and reconstructions. These improvements required many investments. Ultimately, the new additions are upgrades from the previous infrastructure at both sites.

DL board: The board discussed several large internal concerns, including inactive board members, diversity, and elections. Dan Rask, who had been predominantly inactive in the board chair position, submitted a letter of resignation. The board again broached the topic of diversity, which included identifying the areas of need for diversity (e.g. racial) and ideas for how to invite a more diverse board. Due to continued challenges with networking, no tangible steps were made in this realm. Board elections were held. These involved some degree of contention; however, all motions to elect Directors into their positions were approved. These positions include Chris Strayer as Chair, Crystal Knoebel Western Ford as Secretary, and David Hamilton as Treasurer.

Many thanks again to all our board members, volunteers and supporters who have helped us achieve all that we have this year! May 2020 bring even more growth and success!