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Divergent Labs – Annual Report 2020

Submitted to board of directors by Crystal Knoebel Western Ford on February 13, 2021.

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 2020, the Covid-19 virus took hold over the entire world triggering shutdowns and restrictions. Thus, the international retreat planned for Summer 2020 was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite this, Ocate Cliffs had the highest number of paying guests to date. Renting out the widely dispersed camp sites to about 60 guests over the entire summer via Hipcamp was fairly successful. Social distancing and masks were worn when appropriate, and rules regarding one group at a time using and cleaning the kitchen were put in place. No Covid-related problems were noted, and the majority of the campers really enjoyed their visit.

Star lived at the Rusty Nail for most of the summer with help from Crystal on several weekends. Two more tent pads were constructed, all trails were maintained and cleared (an annual task) and a few new trails were put in, and the front deck was expanded to about twice its original size. Two volunteers came at separate times and helped with various work projects over a few weeks.

In September, Ocate Cliffs was closed for the winter season.

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 a discussion forum for staff and volunteers (Rhizome Core). The acting steward for the program was Amik Nafte

Accomplishments: Many projects were in the works in 2020, but Amik Nafte, the mastermind behind Rhizome, passed away from a heart condition. The last board meeting that Amik attended was held on April 7, 2020. Very little discussion was held at this meeting in regards to the Rhizome Program, and no further progress was made due to the loss of communication with Amik and his subsequent passing.

For the record, here is a list of the major projects that Amik had worked on: Archipelago Autistic Project, Autistic Education Project and Autistic Rights Web Platform. Amik wrote a vast amount in regards to his ideas and vision of a better world, current and future projects - a portion of which is on <http://www.divergentlabs.org/rhizome/>.

The last information regarding GAIA can be found in the 2019 annual report and sadly, we have no further information on the status of this autistic island.

In remembrance, here is one paragraph from Amik that gives a taste of who he was:

The vision of Autistic Archipelago – “I will be looking for places with the heart, sanctuaries, people of the Golden rule – the islands of our Archipelago”. I wrote this, in the early spring of 2013 as I drove away from home that held no answers. There was no country for autistic man. And as I drove, crisscrossing the country in search of it, I came to Albuquerque and met people who were groundbreaking the Ocate Cliffs – an autistic island. It then became clear to me, that the country I searched for, will not happen on its own, and so my dream has evolved, and in time it grew to become a vision of the Archipelago with integrated communities, enterprises, places of work, services, schools, restaurants, theaters, and homes – run by autistic people, for autistic people – islands that together would form an emancipated country of our own – an Autistic Archipelago”.

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: Star had two minor clients during 2020 and has continued to work with Horizons of New Mexico in hopes of getting contracts through them.

Finances

Tech services brought in \$8944 in consulting income, while Ocate Cliffs brought in \$2243 in rental fees and just \$85 in donations. There have been no grants in a few years and the Ocate Cliffs program has a slight negative balance, so it will be imperative to increase rental income and donations to meet expenses in the next year.

Lessons learned and challenges

Networking: Due to continued challenges with networking, no tangible steps were made in this realm. However, it may be that some of the guests from Summer 2020 will spread the word to their families and friends and bring more people in Summer 2021. In our April 2020 meeting, the following suggestions were made of groups to attempt to recruit from: <https://neuroclastic.com/>; GRASP local groups: art, environmental; ASAN, TPGA, Autistic Women, NonBinary Network, Dan Flutie Foundation, ASPIRE, recruit writers, recruit tool custodians, Floortime practitioners and Archipelago site users.

Site maintenance: All water leaks found in 2019 at Ocate Cliffs have been fixed; however, the four large water tanks remain disconnected from the water system, and Star hopes to get a plumber on site before summer 2021 to reconnect the pipes. The mountain road up to Ocate Cliffs is in constant need of repairs and work due to the erosion that inevitably occurs due to the steep terrain. One of our neighbors has discussed with Star and Crystal his willingness to put his own money and work into the road in Spring 2021, and the hope is that he will follow through.

DL board: Rachel Pretlow resigned from the board in February 2020 as she had family concerns to take care of. Rachel had made a connection with Elevate the Spectrum in Albuquerque, and she and Star attended several meetings with them to develop a marketing plan; however, their involvement dropped off in early 2020 with no plan being finalized. It is unclear as to why they became uninterested in working with Divergent Labs. Board elections were held; however, the first motion regarding elections failed. This was resolved in January 2021 with a second motion and the election results were as follows: Christopher Strayer as chair, Jessie Bennett 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 crazy year! May 2021 bring even more growth and success!