

Preface

Today's water challenges require new ways of thinking and collaborations beyond the sector. The 2018 publication of *Advancing One Water Through Arts and Culture: A Blueprint for Action*¹ sparked great interest in partnerships between arts, cultural, and water leaders. Detailing how artists and water leaders were already collaborating, the Blueprint inspired new cross-sector capacity for One Water innovations. Despite a growing eagerness to build these partnerships, many in the water sector were unsure of where and how to start.

We launched the Water, Arts, and Culture Accelerator in 2020 as a community of practice for water leaders and artists to collaborate and learn how to work together. The Accelerator began amidst the rapidly developing COVID-19 pandemic and growing activism around racial injustices in the United States. In response to COVID-19, our staff quickly redesigned the Accelerator, which already had an explicit equity focus, to accommodate virtual peer-to-peer learning. However, the pandemic brought its challenges, as utility partners had to juggle competing priorities and financial impacts. Artist partners, too, had to rethink how they worked with communities when they could not gather in person, and some even altered their processes for creation.

Partnerships grew and something powerful emerged. As their thinking and perspectives evolved, utilities and artists began to implement new solutions in real-time to enhance community engagement, improve project design, and reshape innovation processes. We at the Alliance also experienced this. In parallel with the Accelerator, the Alliance launched an Artist-in-Residence program,² embedding our first artist on staff. The next year and a half challenged and expanded us. It opened us to new ideas, which led to new approaches. It reconnected us with the **joy** and **purpose** that first brought us to the One Water movement, which ultimately made our work more powerful.

We know that achieving a One Water future is possible when we bring everyone to the table. We hope the stories of these four inaugural Accelerator partnerships ignite courage and inspiration in water leaders across the country to think outside the box and try something new. After all, to reach an equitable and sustainable water future we must first reimagine the possibilities and then enact them.

One Water, One Future.



Mami Hara
CEO, US Water Alliance



Oluwole A. (OJ) McFoy
General Manager, Buffalo
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US Water Alliance

Acknowledgments

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The Alliance extends a heartfelt thank-you to the inaugural participants of the Accelerator. The following individuals brought tremendous expertise and courage to this work. Their willingness to dive into the unknown and work through tensions and challenges made this a success on a local level and left the water sector with true models for One Water innovation. For their time and insights, we thank:

- **Glen Abrams**, Deputy Commissioner, Communications and Engagement, Philadelphia Water Department
- **Kelsey Burnett**, Content Specialist, Central Arkansas Water
- **Hamid Ebrahimifar**, Artist
- **Tamika Edwards**, Special Advisor to the CEO on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Central Arkansas Water
- **Robert Franklin (Rob Dz)**, Musician/Educator/Activist/Socialite, KBD Multimedia Group
- **Jenie Gao**, Artist, Creative Director
- **Martye (Martin) Griffin**, Director of Ecosystem Services, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District
- **Catherine Harris**, Pollution Prevention Specialist, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District
- **Herbie Hickmott**, Senior Graphic Designer, Philadelphia Water Department
- **Tanya Hollifield**, Artist
- **Jane Hurley**, H2Outreach Specialist, Central Arkansas Water
- **Maura Jarvis**, Community Outreach Specialist, Philadelphia Water Department
- **Alex! Jiminez**, Artist
- **Kathy Lake**, Pollution Prevention Manager, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District
- **Beth Lambert**, Associate Director, Museum School 3D, Arkansas Arts Center
- **Tiffany Ledesma**, former Public Engagement Team Manager, Philadelphia Water Department
- **James MacAdam**, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation, Tucson Water
- **Grace Maiorano**, Communications Consultant, Philadelphia Water Department
- **Trapeta B. Mayson**, Poet/Teaching Artist/Community Organizer, City of Philadelphia 2020–2021 Poet Laureate
- **Fernando B. Molina**, Public Information Officer, Tucson Water
- **Doug Shakelford**, Director of Public Affairs and Communication, Central Arkansas Water
- **Hedi L. Rudd**, Deputy Director, South Madison Programs, Badger Rock Neighborhood Center
- **Kelly Wiehe**, Project Manager, Public Information and Conservation Office, Tucson Water

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Introduction

From aging infrastructure and stricter regulations to climate impacts and equity issues, the water sector is facing urgent, multifaceted challenges that call for new ways of thinking, acting, and investing. Climate change in particular is a *creative* challenge—what got us here will not take us where we need to go. We have limited time left to repair past harms and take the bold action required to get us to a healthy and thriving future. The nation is also at a unique moment, with a historical influx of federal funding for water infrastructure and an opportunity to significantly reshape how our water systems operate in the future. Collaboration and partnerships remain some of the best available tools to address these challenges and open the possibilities of a One Water future.

Over the past four years, the US Water Alliance explored how integrating arts and culture can help utilities navigate the increasingly complex water challenges they face. In a partnership with ArtPlace America, we detailed seven ways that water and wastewater utilities are currently using arts and culture to solve water challenges.³ The resulting report also included more than 30 real-world examples of artistic collaborations throughout the water sector, including engaging communities in participatory processes around understanding and stewarding water, helping utilities repair trust with communities, and assisting utilities to think differently about water resource planning or mitigating the impact of infrastructure projects. These projects inspired many, however, artists and water leaders continued asking how to begin and how to build effective partnerships.

To that end, the Alliance launched the Water, Arts, and Culture Accelerator in 2020. The Accelerator supports utilities and artists to work together and use cultural strategies and creative practices to address water challenges in their locality.

The Alliance selected four utilities to participate in the inaugural Accelerator: Central Arkansas Water, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District, the Philadelphia Water Department, and Tucson Water. Utilities onboarded by participating in the ArtPlace America Summit, then received support from Alliance staff and consultants to design a process for refining their goals and selecting an artist, or artists, to work with during the Accelerator to design and implement a pilot project. Together, these four cross-disciplinary teams undertook a 10-month process of peer exchanges, workshops, and mentoring that sought to:

- Spark creativity and innovation in the water sector through engaging artists and cultural strategies;
- Help utilities connect more authentically and equitably with their communities;
- Strengthen supportive relationships between utility peers across the country;
- Build skills for cross-sector collaboration between the arts and water sectors.

Seven Ways Arts and Culture Can Advance One Water

1. Help people understand and connect to water
2. Inform water resource planning with new perspectives
3. Engage communities in participatory processes
4. Build bridges across different perspectives and stakeholder groups
5. Mitigate the disruptive effect of construction projects
6. Integrate water infrastructure into the fabric of a community
7. Support community activism

Source: Advancing One Water Through Arts and Culture: A Blueprint for Action

The inaugural Accelerator focused on water in a changing environment and engaging directly with communities that have been historically underserved by water utilities and other public services. Water access and contamination issues are more prevalent in low-income and communities of color.⁴ Communities around the nation are also struggling to deal with how climate is impacting their communities today as well as what it means for the future. Water is often one of the first places climate impacts are felt by the public. Artists and culture bearers have unique methodologies and perspectives that can help utilities bridge divides, identify innovative and holistic solutions, and engage and mobilize communities to act around a shared vision. COVID-19 and racial equity are also defining features of the Accelerator, informing how partnerships grappled with and respond to this historical moment.

This compendium includes overarching insights from the Accelerator, as well as case studies detailing the partnerships in four cities:

1. **Reimagining Water Access in Little Rock, Arkansas**
2. **Becoming a Hub for Community Connections and Creativity in Madison, Wisconsin**
3. **Healing and Repair from a History of Flooding in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**
4. **Meeting the Community on Its Own Terms in Tucson, Arizona**

Each case study includes:

- **Accelerator Team**—Highlights the partners from both sectors.
- **Background**—Provides brief context of the city and utility, as well as the climate-related water challenge the partnership sought to address.
- **Artist Spotlight**—Offers an opportunity to “meet the artist.”
- **Artist Recruitment and Selection**—Describes how utilities identified and pursued partnerships.
- **Approach**—Discusses how the utility and artist built their partnership and/or worked with communities.
- **Pilot Project**—Presents the intervention or solution utilities and artists developed together.
- **Lessons Learned**—Shares key factors that made the partnership successful.
- **Challenges and Tensions**—Gives an honest look at what can make partnerships difficult, as well as ways utilities and artists worked through these barriers.

“““

Engaging with artists and culture is a natural extension of our long tradition of innovation at the utility—of seeking the best tools available to address the situation at hand.

Catherine Harris, Pollution Prevention Specialist, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

Accelerator Insights and Outcomes

The inaugural Water, Arts, and Culture Accelerator fostered excitement and commitment for cross-sector work among both artists and utilities. While the case studies detail specific learnings in each location, a few cross-cutting insights are summarized below.

Partnerships are important social infrastructure for the water sector and take time to build.

Building successful water and arts partnerships requires grounding in clear intentions, a willingness to learn on both sides, and ongoing relationship care and maintenance. Finding artists and structuring a successful partnership took significant time for the utilities, as well as support from one another and the Alliance. Utilities and artists alike had to learn the other sector's language and worldview. Many found that spending time getting to know one another prior to project development was critical to find common ground. By understanding one another's drivers for working on water, artists and utilities could better pinpoint leverage points to create change together.

Co-designing projects laid the groundwork for new kinds of relationships between utilities and artists and created entry points for engaging communities in critical discussions around water and climate. Validation and resources from the Alliance were important because utilities were able to experiment with new approaches and innovate in ways they would otherwise not have been able to. Peer support in the Accelerator cohort mitigated perceived risk, helping utilities realize the potential of this opportunity.

Creative processes are worth investing in at water and wastewater utilities.

Participating utilities realized the value that the creative *process*, not just artistic product, can have for their work and plan to utilize them more as a pathway for innovation moving forward. Understanding that art is about more than beautification was challenging for some utilities to grasp initially. However, as the utilities experienced a change in their own thinking and perspectives through working with artists, they realized how powerful creative approaches can be for seeing problems and solutions in new ways. As a result, at least two participating utilities have already committed to investing their own resources in continuing their arts work: Madison is institutionalizing an arts program and Tucson has committed resources to extend their relationship with their artist for another year.

Artists benefit from national learning platforms and opportunities to step up as One Water leaders.

Participating artists noted they were stretched in thinking and challenged to enhance their skills through the process in ways that ultimately increased their efficacy. Skills like community engagement, facilitation, and multi-stakeholder communication were essential for the projects' success. Artists found value in opportunities to connect with peer artists across the nation who were also working on water issues and/or with various community and agency partners. Supporting and learning from one another helped advance their efforts and expand their imaginations. Working with utilities meant artists had to navigate institutional structures and high expectations for what they could do.

Artists also found that by helping utilities stretch, they too could stretch and grow. All the artists intend to continue working on water issues beyond this current project and see themselves as leaders in the One Water movement.

Case Studies

8 Reimagining Water Access in Little Rock, Arkansas

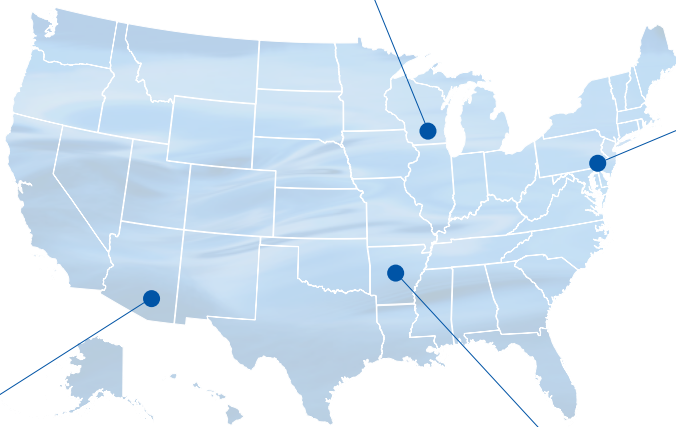
15 Becoming a Hub for Community Connections and Creativity in Madison, Wisconsin

22 Healing and Repair from a History of Flooding in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Madison, WI



Philadelphia, PA



Tucson, AZ



Little Rock, AR



Reimagining Water Access in Little Rock, Arkansas



Photo credits: Central Arkansas Water

Central Arkansas Team

Artists:

- **Hamid Ebrahimifar**
- **Tanya Hollifield**

Central Arkansas Water:

- **Kelsey Burnett**, Content Specialist
- **Tamika Edwards**, Special Advisor to the CEO on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- **Jane Hurley**, Education and Outreach Specialist
- **Doug Shackelford**, Director of Public Affairs and Communication

Background

Central Arkansas Water (CAW) serves the city of Little Rock and the surrounding area. Its source water is drawn from the nearby Lake Maumelle Watershed, which the utility has taken steps to preserve and protect over the last decade. This includes charging ratepayers a Watershed Protection Fee to enable the purchase of additional land for conservation around the lake, as well as to conduct environmental and water quality monitoring.⁵ CAW educates the public about critical links between forest health and surface drinking water quality and the importance of downstream conservation. Its community education program includes running a biannual Citizens Water Academy for adults, water-themed educational festivals for elementary school students, and professional development trainings for teachers throughout the state. CAW also participates in the community in other ways, partnering with groups like Keep Little Rock Beautiful, The Big Catch Fishing Derby and Health Festival, and the popular Downtown Food Truck Festival.

The utility saw the Accelerator as an opportunity to further expand community connections and deepen relationships, especially in areas that existing programming did not reach. New to working with artists, the utility was not sure what to expect from the partnership. Nevertheless, staff were excited about the possibility of activating the area around its headquarters in downtown Little Rock.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

To select an artist, the utility pulled together an advisory committee with members from the Downtown Little Rock Partnership, the economic and urban development entity focused on improving the downtown area. This group came up with the idea for commissioning a mosaic mural that would depict the watershed and the history of water management in the area. The utility reached out to the Arkansas Museum for Fine Arts, which helped them identify two artists to work with: Tanya Hollifield and Hamid Ebrahimifar. The artists had worked together in the past, and both had collaborated with community members in mural making. They also were both deeply engaged with social justice issues in the community. Hamid participated in the initial phases of the project, but Tanya took over as the primary artist due to his capacity constraints.

Approach: Crate-Digging

As Tanya began the work of getting to know the utility and meeting with community groups, she realized that on its own, simply creating a beautiful mural would not fulfill the team's goal to utilize art to address a critical water issue for an underserved community. Tanya began to dig more deeply through historical research and personal conversations. Looking to the past can help ground one's understanding of water issues and offer better solutions moving forward. Benny Starr, the US Water Alliance's inaugural One Water Artist-in-Residence, likens this to "the art of crate-digging," a process he uses when creating hip-hop music. In the water sector, Benny finds that "crate-digging can deepen our understanding and contextualize our position in our work. Often, we cannot move forward without carefully and critically examining our history. This helps us be creative as we build on and innovate our way through purposeful and powerful work."

Tanya's crate-digging uncovered a few critical water issues. First was the Pegasus Pipeline, which has been out of operation since a spill in 2013 leaked tens of thousands of gallons of crude oil less than 10 miles from Lake Maumelle, the primary water source for 450,000 residents in Central Arkansas.⁶ The pipeline's new owners, Energy Transfer Partners, are exploring putting it back online, something that the utility believes is a big risk to the watershed and the half a million Arkansans who rely on it for water. Community groups also informed Tanya about chronic issues with water leaks in the downtown area due to aging pipes and severe winter storms. Finally, Tanya came to learn that many of Little Rock's most vulnerable communities lack access to clean and affordable water. Near the CAW headquarters, this is especially apparent for unhoused people and people who have had their water shut off due to an inability to pay their bills. The utility is prohibited by state law from turning people's water back on until they have received full payment, limiting its ability to address the situation through debt forgiveness.

Tanya discussed her discoveries with CAW staff. After considering the range of possibilities, the team settled on equitable access to drinking water as the focus of the project. They then began discussing ways to address this issue and involve communities around the mural site in possible solutions.

Artist Spotlight: Tanya Hollifield



**How do we create community through art?
The key word is we. Art with the people, for
the people belongs to all.**

Artistic Practice(s):

Tanya is an artist working with drawing, painting, mixed media, and public art murals. She studied at the Arkansas Art Center, Arts Student League of New York City, and University of Arkansas.

Portfolio: <https://www.arkansasartscene.com/home/interview-with-artist-tanya-hollifield>

Instagram: [@TanyaHollifield](https://www.instagram.com/TanyaHollifield)

Pilot Project: Water Access on a Forest to Faucet Mural

Wanting the art to not only depict the issue but be part of the solution, Tanya proposed embedding a water bottle filling station within the mural. The utility was thrilled about this idea and began working on the engineering side to implement the vision. The immediate neighborhood around CAW headquarters has a high population of unhoused people and is located near a bus stop. People often wait for buses for hours, making it a perfect place to reach many who most need access to free water. In Tanya's words, "the idea of clean, safe water available 24/7 in a highly trafficked area is exciting. We are turning art into something for health, safety, and community well-being."

At this point in the project, it became clear that designing and installing a mosaic would be very time-consuming and require expensive materials, leaving the artists insufficient time and resources for community engagement. The team made the collective decision to pivot towards a painted mural. This freed up the artists' time, which could then be spent working with the utility on community outreach and engagement activities.

Residents in Little Rock helped create the Forest to Faucet mural.
Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water



The Power of Arts and Culture: One Water Partnerships for Change

Over 70 people from various age groups and backgrounds participated in the process of creating the mural over the course of two months. Community members used stencils and paintbrushes to depict the water images that most resonated with them. As they worked, Tanya distributed reclaimed and sanitized water bottles to people passing by. The finished mural, called Forest to Faucet, depicts how water flows from its origins in the forest through the pipes for multiple community uses. It includes a portrait of beloved Little Rock environmental and social justice activist Derek Brooks and a participatory chalkboard where the community can write messages and answer prompts about water.

Over 200 people attended the mural unveiling event, including local business leaders, engineers, artists, parents of the student artists, and immediate area residents. The unveiling was held as part of the utility's participation in Imagine a Day Without Water in October 2022 to help raise public awareness about the importance of water and investment in water systems (<https://imagineadaywithoutwater.org/>). CAW hosted an afterparty at a neighborhood restaurant, where "groups of people who did not know each other were breaking bread together," according to Director of Public Affairs and Communications, Doug Shackelford.

The mural allows residents and groups to interact with water topics.
Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water



US Water Alliance

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Prior to the unveiling, the team engaged students in four Little Rock elementary schools to create their own artwork about water. The finished pieces were exhibited inside the utility building for the mural unveiling ceremony. Student artwork was then moved to the Central Arkansas Library Gallery for longer-term display and to reach a broader audience.

CAW staff also worked with Garver, a local engineering firm, to procure reusable water bottles with the Forest to Faucet logo, which it distributed to attendees at the mural unveiling. Afterward, Tanya, CAW, and Garver staff packed hundreds of bottles with small necessities like socks and snacks for unhoused residents in the area.

CAW plans to keep activating the mural site with public events and sidewalk takeovers. Tanya will use her remaining time and project budget for additional community engagement using the chalkboard. She is already planning an educational workshop on water issues in a bathroom at a local park using the stencils made for the mural.

Lessons Learned

Stay focused on the purpose and flexible on the “how.”

The Arkansas team initially spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to implement the mosaic mural idea, which was an exciting idea for the team, but did not ultimately fit within the project budget or priorities. Once the team let go of that concept, the project took off. Jane Hurley, Education and Outreach Specialist for the utility, says, “I didn’t realize how bogged down we were getting with the mosaic idea—and it was an expensive one. Once we realized directing the project’s energy toward public impact was a top priority, we refocused on engagement. Now, we are pulling in partners and learning more about community needs. It is exciting—we are thinking in new ways about how to provide continuity of water services.”

The utility’s openness and leadership support from CEO Tad Bohannon allowed the team flexibility to trust this process and embrace changes along the way. The team kept Tad informed throughout the project but let him know the project would differ from normal utility processes, which are “very spreadsheet driven.” Doug noted that they, “had to look at things through a different lens. Our company values are ‘high performance, values-driven innovation.’ Instead of an engineering problem, we had to apply those values to our work with artists and the community, and that meant taking a different route.”

A powerful idea can lead to powerful partnerships.

Initially, Tanya felt overwhelmed; engaging the community was a daunting task for a single artist. But once the team coalesced around the issue of water access and the inspiring idea of the water faucet, they were able to bring in a diverse array of partners: the Little Rock School District, Garver Engineering, the Arkansas Regional Innovation Hub (who produced stencils for the mural), other artists, and passersby in the area. Each of these groups brought their own stakeholders to the project, expanding the circle of outreach. The number and diversity of people at the launch event testified to the extent of community buy-in and excitement about the engagement. The bottle filler was an innovative feature of the mural that attracted extensive media coverage, including a full-color article above the fold in the state’s largest newspaper, mentions in the local morning shows and on National Public Radio, and coverage by CBS and MSN. Additionally, Tanya was interviewed by the state’s arts magazine, reaching another distinct audience. “We got more than our money’s worth in earned media,” Doug notes.

Clean tap water flowing from the mural. *Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water*



Art is a catalyst for ongoing progress.

Prior to the mural installation, the building and surrounding parking lot were vacant and unused. Now, people pass by and stop to look at the mural every day, offering utility staff the opportunity to regularly engage with the public. Doug says the utility is “ecstatic” and that they “now see opportunities to use creative processes and artistic interventions to engage the community everywhere. This project opened the door. The CEO was at the launch and now understands art as an integral part of CAW and our educational program going forward.” Kelsey Burnett, CAW’s Content Specialist, agrees on the long-term internal value of the utility’s engagement with arts and culture. “This project expanded how we think and work internally around public engagement and communications,” she says. The utility and Tanya are already talking about possible installations of other public faucets around the city. Tanya believes “these should be the norm, ideally with artwork around them.”



Tanya engaged with several school groups in water conversations at the mural. *Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water*

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This project expanded how we think and work internally around public engagement and communications.

Kelsey Burnett, Content Specialist, Central Arkansas Water

Challenges and Tensions

Fitting utility capacity and work style comfortably within artistic processes.

The project heavily relied on one utility team member as the primary liaison with the artist. When that team member got pulled into other obligations, it was sometimes difficult for the project to remain on schedule. The design and planning depended on timely approvals and responses, but this sometimes was not possible for the utility. Jane acknowledges, “I often didn’t appreciate what the artists needed from us. I didn’t understand the importance of what they were asking for.” She also says some of this has to do with utility operations often requiring more deliberation and bureaucracy than artists may be used to. She says, “utilities don’t do anything quickly.” For example, it took a significant amount of back and forth to determine whether the utility would be able to put in additional resources if the project undertook the installation of the mosaic mural. This lengthy process delayed the artists from being able to move forward with the design and planning.

Clarifying team expectations and roles.

The Accelerator prioritized relationship building and co-creation rather than the utility hiring an artist to execute a predetermined scope of work. One consequence of this was that it took some time for the artists and utilities to understand what the expectations were of them and what their role would be. Tanya and Hamid were looking for clear direction from the utility, who, not having worked with artists before, was looking for guidance from them. There was also a lack of clarity about which party would be responsible for which parts of the work, making it difficult for the artists to complete the budget and project plan. After a few months, at the recommendation of the Alliance, the artists created a contract that specified roles and project responsibilities for each party to sign (the Accelerator contract was between the artist and the Alliance and did not specify activities). This additional contract enabled the team to create a detailed budget and move forward with project planning. It is a lesson that while flexibility leaves room for creativity, team roles, expectations, and communications protocols need to be discussed and agreed upon early on.

Varying capacity among artists and utilities for community engagement.

Community engagement through arts partnerships is not an end-all. Tanya had been a long-time community activist and had worked on public murals prior to this installation. However, she did not have deep experience facilitating community engagement processes. She acknowledged early on that this was a learning curve for her. “Even though I’ve been an activist for a long time, I’ve learned how hard it is to engage with community groups when the project isn’t fully defined or feels abstract. We were working to provide a platform to include people, to pull people in by getting them excited about the project,” she says. Tanya was deeply

committed—she frequently reached out to the Alliance team and other Accelerator artists for advice and support. However, her experience, as well as the experience of other teams, is a reminder that community engagement is a skill and practice that takes time to develop and carry out. Engagement is also not the sole responsibility of one partner. Providing support in the form of coaching or providing artists with resources to hire other partners who have this skill set may be necessary when projects require this competency. In addition, as the partner that will have a sustained relationship with the community, it is critical that utility staff members directly participate in community engagement as well.

The Forest to Faucet mural featuring Derek Brooks, local environmental and social justice advocate. *Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water*



Becoming a Hub for Community Connections and Creativity in Madison, Wisconsin



Photo credits: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

Madison Team

Artists:

- **Robert Franklin (RobDz)**, Musician/Educator/Activist/Socialite, KBD Multimedia Group
- **Jenie Gao**, Artist, Creative Director
- **Hedi L. Rudd**, Deputy Director, South Madison Programs, Badger Rock Neighborhood Center
- **Additional Creative Collaboration Advisors** are listed here: <https://shopone.wpengine.com/current-projects/catalytic-projects-creative-collaboration-advisors/>

Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District:

- **Martye Griffin**, Director of Ecosystem Services
- **Catherine Harris**, Pollution Prevention Specialist
- **Kathy Lake**, Pollution Prevention Manager

Background

Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District has reliably protected public health and the environment through continuous innovation and use of the best available tools and techniques for almost a century. Like most utilities, increasing pressures on water resources, new sources of pollution, and threats such as climate change, as well as an increased call for public transparency, demand attention. The utility is embracing a One Water approach to continue fulfilling its mission into the future, which includes seeking solutions in the community. Issues like reducing salt, chemical and trash contamination, and lowering energy costs associated with water treatment all require public buy-in and cooperation. By engaging and empowering diverse water stewards, protecting water is something that individuals see themselves playing an active, important role in and lending expertise to. “Building relationships in the communities we serve helps build a collective vision for what should be and what is possible,” says Kathy Lake, Pollution Prevention Manager at the District.

When the District outgrew existing facilities and necessitated the construction of a new maintenance building in 2015, the historic building now known as “Shop One” became available for new uses. This building is being repurposed by the utility as an active community space to educate and connect water stewards.

To activate the Shop One space and engage communities in their service area, staff knew they had to try something new. They also recognized that creative approaches and methodologies were a critical tool for helping them solve today’s challenges and achieving their One Water goals. Initial research included participating in the Alliance for Artist Communities’ Emerging Programs Institute, visiting other treatment plants’ community spaces, and engaging with a senior interior architecture design class from the University of Wisconsin, Madison’s School of Human Ecology to envision how the space could be transformed. These activities and the US Water Alliance’s *Advancing One Water Through Arts and Culture* blueprint opened the District to the possibility of working with artists.

As Pollution Prevention Specialist Catherine Harris puts it, “engaging with artists and culture is a natural extension of our long tradition of innovation at the utility—of seeking the best tools available to address the situation at hand.” However, never having done this before, the District felt like they needed more support to move from this inspiration to a concrete plan. With support from Chief Engineer and Director Michael Mucha and seed funding from their operating budget, the District applied to the Accelerator to help catalyze first steps.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

In the fall of 2020, the District recruited nine Madison area artists and cultural leaders to serve as Creative Collaboration Advisors to help them think about the Shop One space and how to engage artists in their work. The Advisors’ charge was not to develop specific creative projects, but rather to help the utility create a vision and plan for creative programming and working with artists over the long term. The District identified Advisors through extensive community outreach and intentionally selected individuals with diverse perspectives and experiences. The group reflected a range of disciplines and communities: many had a background in community organizing or social justice work as a part of or in addition to their artistic practices. The District paid Advisors a stipend to meet 12 times over the course of nine months with utility representatives and a consultant who facilitated the process.

Since construction in 1958 (originally a pump house), the building now known as Shop One has served many functions for the District—from a laboratory to a mechanical shop. The next phase of this building is to serve as an educational space to interface with the community. *Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District*



Artist Spotlight: Jenie Gao



Our role was to help align the utility’s intentions with its impact.

Artistic Practice(s):

Jenie Gao is a contemporary artist specializing in public art, printmaking, social practice, and storytelling. Through her interdisciplinary work, Jenie advocates for fair pay and equity for artists, as well as building generative communities that work better for everyone.

Portfolio:

<https://jenie.org/>

Approach: Multiple Artists and Co-Designers

Advisors first co-created a set of values to guide the design process and the selection of projects and artists. They agreed that the process and future work should:

- **Center the Artist**—Value different perspectives and ways of knowing and create fair and respectful relationships with artist partners.
- **Co-Create with Communities**—Build meaningful and respectful relationships with communities that honor people and place.
- **Make the Invisible Visible**—Illuminate hidden systems of water stewardship, including those that have led to inequities and challenges today.

Throughout the 12 meetings, the Creative Collaboration Advisors team developed these recommendations for catalytic projects:

- **Artist/Educator Residency**—Supports an annual, year-long residence (www.onewatermadison.org/about-residency).
- **Creative Projects Process**—Offers a method for commissioning new works.
- **Participatory Community Engagement**—Provides outreach to build relationships.
- **Branding and Communications Project**—Builds awareness and creates a conversation between the District and surrounding communities.

Shop One Building at Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District during/after original construction in 1958. *Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District*



Pilot Project: Shaping Shop One and Partnership Priorities

The Advisors created materials and processes for the Artist/Educator in Residence and for Catalytic Project Process commissions, as well as updated guidelines for the utility's ongoing Participatory Community Engagement. Their role, as artist Jenie Gao puts it, was "to help the utility avoid pitfalls and align their intentions with their impact." The utility posted the Artist/Educator Residency Request for Qualifications (RFQ) in mid-October 2021,⁷ designed to "set clear expectations while creating space for creative autonomy and agency," according to Gao. The artists also helped the utility ensure that the compensation structure and amount aligned with the work expectations and that finalists were compensated for their work preparing full proposals—even if they weren't selected—recognizing the creative labor that goes into the process and the value for the utility of hearing different approaches.

The response to the RFQ was extraordinary in terms of the number (23), diversity, and quality of applicants. The wide range of artists submitting applications—filmmakers, textile artists, photographers, sound artists, muralists, and sculptors—also expanded the utility's imagination about the kinds of projects that they could do. After reviewing the proposals from four finalists, the utility selected tattoo artist and illustrator nipinet landsem as their first Artist/Educator in Residence in February 2022.⁸ Advisors prioritized the Artist/Educator Residency as a starting point, because long-term engagement provides the opportunity for the utility to build capacity to work in a new way and for the artist/educator to become familiar with and involved in the utility's priorities and programs through multiple dimensions. The goals of this inaugural residency include helping the utility "develop the tools, practices, and processes needed to integrate artist collaborators into the District's workflow" and to "identify learnings and best practices to improve future residency opportunities."

The utility plans to continue launching catalytic projects per the recommendations collated in a final report,⁹ compiled as a product of the year-long Creative Collaboration Advisors process and their participation in the Arts Accelerator.

Artist Spotlight: nipinet landsem



“ ”

Through art, beauty, and celebrations of diversity and culture, this residency explores themes of water as a living part of the community and how diversity of experience informs each community member's personal connection to the water they use every day. I hope to get people talking, and that the community and the District both feel more secure in the potential for an ongoing relationship after my residency is over.

Artistic Practice(s):

nipinet is a local tattoo artist, illustrator, storyteller, and community educator in Madison. A descendant of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, they bring a rich heritage to their work as an Indigequeer Anishinaabe and Michif artist.

Portfolio:

<http://www.nedpines.com>

Lessons Learned

Ensure highly ethical engagement for arts partnerships.

Responses to the RFQ and residency structure validated the District's process of involving artists in the design from the beginning. "We had so much positive feedback from the applicants and the broader artistic community. People said it was highly ethical. That is 100 percent because we worked with artists," says Kathy. This outcome was the result of hard work from the utility and the Advisors, including being willing to stay in the relationship and work through tensions and challenges that came up along the way. Hedi Rudd, one of the artists, said midway through the process: "The artist advisory team holds values deeply rooted in social justice. We are doing our best to bring this to the water sector. Are they ready to hear the message we have to share?"

Lay a foundation for success.

The time that the utility spent building relationships and co-creating the process with artist partners on the front-end created the preconditions for a successful long-term arts and community engagement program. "We now have a process and blueprint that can sustain us for long-term, multi-year work. We have a pool of artists. We have tried to create a good reputation for the District in these spaces. We always knew that we were going to do Shop One, but now we've laid the groundwork for it to be well-received by the community. We've set ourselves up for success," says Martye Griffin, Director of Ecosystem Services at the utility. Jenie agrees, adding, "the utility wanted to do things right. We helped them build a process to make that happen."

Be open to the process and let it spark an internal culture shift.

Beyond the tangible outputs, engaging in this process shifted the perspective of District staff in unexpected ways, including making them aware of the deeper changes that the utility must make to conduct the deep community engagement work it has said it wants to do. "I'm realizing through this process that ensuring community-centered work means continuing to transform our structures on a much more profound level. To do these things long-term, the community must be part of the institution, but our current way of working is not always compatible. We need to dismantle systems of oppression from the inside out," says Martye.

Challenges and Tensions

Working at the speed of trust.

Utilities and artists have very different ways of thinking and working, and it takes time to learn each other's languages and build trust. There are also inherent power dynamics in relationships between institutions, artists, and community members that take intention and care to mitigate. Because the background of many of Advisors included community and social justice work, there was a heightened awareness of inequities and a commitment to ensure the process placed equity for both artists and communities at the center. This meant the process sometimes had to move more slowly than originally planned or desired, or even take a step back to move forward. Towards the end of the Accelerator, Martye noted that they realized "'moving at the speed of trust' is essential. And trust is something we need to take time to build." The outbreak of COVID-19 at the start of the process meant that all meetings had to take place virtually, which further complicated the relationship-building work. The Alliance's *Water Equity Taskforce: Insights for the Water Sector* report provides more information on how trust relates to water equity.¹⁰

Acoustic panels suspended from the ceiling in Shop One represent the Madison chain of lakes: Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, Kegonsa, and Wingra. Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

Sparking innovation in traditional processes.

Utility processes across the country are often entrenched and bureaucratic, which can make working in new ways or with new partners difficult. Catherine, the project manager of the Madison Accelerator Team, noted that trying to work with artists to organize creative and community-focused projects can go against the grain of how the utility works. She says, "in trying to implement these ideas, we can frequently bump up against 'the way things are.' Some policies haven't been questioned for a long time, like requirements to participate as a vendor or our approval processes for new projects/procurements. This process is prompting a re-examination of how we do things that wouldn't have otherwise happened and has relevance beyond the Artist/Educator Residency. These are important conversations to have if we want to be more equitable and inclusive."

The Advisors' values established at the beginning of the process helped guide the utility in navigating these challenges. For example, when seeking to determine how to navigate insurance requirements for artists operating as independent contractors, the utility undertook extensive research to identify how to be fair to and inclusive of artists that may not have their own insurance. The utility also re-examined the intellectual property terms in its contracts to be equitable for artist partners.



Managing perceived risk.

Perceived risk can preemptively shut down creativity, experimentation, and innovation. Especially in a state like Wisconsin where the public sector is smaller than most states', utilities are cautious about doing anything that could be perceived as "risky" with public money. Even though the team was confident about the value of engaging the public and knew it needed to make the upfront investment in relationship building to do it well, not knowing the outcomes in advance pushed them to the edge of their comfort zone. The Madison team noted that the Accelerator was helpful in this regard. "The fact that the Alliance was contracting with the artists and had already established a blueprint for arts work allowed us to have a ready-made business case

for what we were doing. That made it easy for leadership to say yes," explains Catherine. Utility staff also had the foresight and the support from utility leadership to build capacity in the utility's budget for catalytic projects before embarking on the process.

Kathy points out that while engaging in work with artists may *feel* risky, *all* change involves risk. "Change is scary, but the more we can tell our story, the more other utilities will realize that they can do this, too. There are great benefits on the other side. Utilities know they need fresh ideas and new ways of working to address the challenges of water management today. The District's experience suggests that this is a risk worth taking."

Shop One is an interactive space where communities and utilities engage around water. The goal of the space is to engage and empower water stewards. *Photo credit: Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District*

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We had so much positive feedback from the applicants and the broader artistic community. People said it was highly ethical. That is 100 percent because we worked with artists.

Kathy Lake, Pollution Prevention Manager, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District



Healing and Repair from a History of Flooding in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Photo credits: Philadelphia Water Department

Philadelphia Team

Artist:

- **Trapeta B. Mayson**, Poet/Teaching Artist/Community Organizer, City of Philadelphia 2020–2021 Poet Laureate

Philadelphia Water Department:

- **Glen Abrams**, Deputy Commissioner, Communications and Engagement
- **Herbie Hickmott**, Senior Graphic Designer
- **Maura Jarvis**, Community Outreach Specialist
- **Tiffany Ledesma**, former Public Engagement Team Manager
- **Grace Maiorano**, Communications Consultant

Germantown residents compose their own verses at poetry workshops. *Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department*



Background

Like many places, Philadelphia is experiencing a range of climate impacts: more extreme storms with increased rainfall, hotter summers, and rising sea levels in tidal areas. These problems are expected to accelerate in the coming decades. Climate change is also a well-known “threat multiplier” for other kinds of inequality. For example, during heat events, some neighborhoods in Philadelphia are 22 degrees hotter than other areas of the city due to a lack of green space and tree cover.¹¹ Impacted neighborhoods are often low-income and/or communities of color. Similarly, some neighborhoods are much more likely to experience infrastructure flooding due to shifting precipitation patterns and insufficient combined sewer capacity to manage rain events. As Maura Jarvis, Community Outreach Specialist at the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD), explains, “climate change is not only a public health issue, but also an issue of racial and social equity.” The utility is working to engage more deeply with communities facing inequitable exposure to water-related natural hazards and create equitable mitigation and adaptation strategies.

PWD’s interest in the Arts Accelerator stemmed from a desire to look for creative interventions and deeper community connections with Germantown residents, a predominantly Black community in Philadelphia with residential areas prone to flooding. A large swath of Germantown was developed over the Wingohocking Creek, which became part of the city’s combined sewer system in the late 1800s.¹² However, the system was not built to handle the size of today’s population or increasingly heavy rains. Frequent flooding that the neighborhood now experiences is projected to become more severe as climate change progresses. While the utility is working to address longer-term physical infrastructure issues, empowering residents with critical knowledge to protect themselves is key to reducing the impact of present-day flooding. In the utility’s words, they hoped that working “more deeply with the community on this topic through an artistic process would create significantly stronger partnerships in impacted neighborhoods and ultimately more successful flood mitigation measures embraced by local residents.”

PWD previously participated in the initiative that led to the US Water Alliance's report, *Water Rising: Equitable Approaches to Urban Flooding*, working with city partners and community representatives from Germantown to identify flood mitigation priorities and strategies to address these chronic issues.¹³ The utility also had experience using arts and creative strategies to engage people around water through initiatives like *Drink More Tap* (<https://water.phila.gov/drops/drink-more-tap/>), which uses new murals and original music to inform residents about the high quality of Philadelphia's tap water. Staff had some sense of what arts and culture engagement could look like, and they were excited to try new community engagement approaches through their participation in the Accelerator. PWD saw the opportunity to operate differently by working with a community-based artist to engage residents more holistically in the creative process and generate a healing conversation.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

PWD engaged community residents as decision-makers from the beginning, involving them in shaping the Request for Proposals (RFP) and selecting the artist. In 2020, the utility launched a *Germantown Community Flood Risk Management Task Force*¹⁴ to provide opportunities for community leaders to engage with city officials around concerns associated with flooding. The goal of the Task Force is to increase information sharing, expand flood preparation knowledge in the community, and reduce flood impacts in Germantown in a manner that is informed by community stakeholders. In December 2020, the utility invited the Task Force to come together and brainstorm around the Accelerator opportunity, and this input informed the call that PWD put out for an artist.¹⁵ To make sure the call was widely promoted in Germantown, they led outreach at local coffee shops, churches, and other community hubs. The utility also sent targeted communications on NextDoor and via email to customers in the ZIP code. PWD received 15 submissions from a variety of artists, community members, organizers, and business owners.

The utility asked Benny Starr, the US Water Alliance's Artist-in-Residence, to join their selection panel, which also included utility staff and members of the Germantown community. Together, this group selected Trapeta B. Mayson, Philadelphia's 2020–2021 Poet Laureate, who lives in the Germantown neighborhood and has a deep practice of engaging the community in her work. She was thrilled by the opportunity to do something in and with her own community. "What drew me to this was the idea that I can be in my own community and partner with an organization that has resources to engage people deeply. Oftentimes, artists who live in impacted communities don't have resources to do as much as they want to or can."

Grace Maiorano, Communications Specialist at the utility, notes, "Benny really helped us think differently about how we evaluated what we received. He helped us break down what we were looking for and why. That made it easy for the group to select Trapeta as our artist. We weren't looking for an artist to submit a project plan; we wanted someone who could help co-design something with the residents of Germantown." PWD knew that working with an artist to meet community engagement goals required them to be active participants in the project as well. Artists bring unique skills and perspectives to the table that can engage communities in new ways, but PWD knew that Trapeta, nor any artist, could singlehandedly "solve" the complex water challenges facing the community, nor did they expect her to be the sole or primary liaison between the utility and the community. From the beginning, PWD understood Trapeta as an important partner in a community-utility relationship already underway, and that would continue long after the Accelerator project was finished.

It was very helpful for the PWD team that the Alliance contracted directly with Trapeta, as it gave the utility more flexibility than their typical contracting process for a short-term project. Tiffany Ledesma, former Public Engagement Team Manager for the utility, says, "the fact that we didn't have to go through our standard contracting process gave us the freedom to take our time planning with Trapeta and even extend the timeline because the project called for it. It allowed us to be more creative and take more risks on who we partnered with and how. Ultimately, it made improved the design."

Artist Spotlight: Trapeta B. Mayson



I can be in my own community and partner with an organization that has resources to engage people deeply.

Artistic Practice(s):

Trapeta is a poet and social worker, combining these perspectives in her work as a community-based teaching artist. She uses poetry to speak to the lived experience of everyday people, build community, promote healing, and create social change.

Portfolio:

www.trapetamayson.com

Photo Credit: Ed Cunnicelli

Approach: Community Storytelling

The team began the partnership by setting up weekly meetings to get to know each other, refine their goals, and brainstorm. Trapeta wanted to engage with the community as soon as possible, viewing them as key co-creators of the project. Her background as a licensed clinical social worker and poet whose practice is embedded in community-based arts led her to suggest centering the project around community storytelling: the story of the neighborhood's historic creek and development, the story of the utility's challenges and efforts to address the flooding, and most importantly, the personal stories of the residents. To realize this idea, the team developed a structure that would invite community members to co-create the story of the neighborhood's relationship with water.

Pilot Project: *Wingo-WHAT?! Water History Art Transformation*

Eventually, the team settled on the name *Wingo-WHAT?!* for the project, a play on the unknown history of the covered creek. The acronym stands for Water History Arts Activation Transformation (WHAT) and expresses the team's hope that the project will help catalyze greater "connection and accountability to the land, to our stories, and to the community."

The team held one virtual and five in-person storytelling and poetry workshops at three locations in the neighborhood: a library, the Farm at Awbury Arboretum, and a park near an intersection that frequently floods. At the Farm, goats accompanied participants on a walk by the only visible remains of the Wingohocking Creek, where they stopped periodically to read poetry. At each workshop, Trapeta guided participants through expressing their memories and experiences of water through prompts like: *When flooding happens, this is what it means to me...* and *What I want people to know about this community is....* Prompts provided a jumping-off point for conversations and for participants to create their own poems. Trapeta says, "I wanted to understand what the flooding meant to them, in *their own lives*. We know there is a lot of trauma associated with that. But I also want residents to determine what story we tell about the neighborhood. How do the residents want to reframe what they are experiencing?"

To help draw people in and set a welcoming tone, Trapeta hired internationally acclaimed jazz musician and Germantown resident Monnette Sudler and percussionist Karen Smith to play at the workshops. As one resident danced to the music, she talked about how she had lost all her possessions in a part of her house because of a flood. Trapeta recalls, “it was heartbreaking and beautiful.”

Utility staff were present at the workshops to listen and provide residents with information and resources about flooding, including how they can prepare and protect themselves and what the utility is doing to address long-term flooding and infrastructure needs. Over 100 people attended these in-person workshops.

Trapeta will now use the community’s poems to create a collective long-form poem that will be shared back with the community through various methods like sidewalk art that is revealed when it rains, vinyl decals with poetry throughout the neighborhood, and online. This will be a way of reflecting the community and their collective narrative back to residents. The project culminated in a big block party in June 2022. Trapeta, participants in the poetry workshops, musicians, and other artists joined PWD and the community as they celebrated the power of poetry and storytelling.

Learn more about *Wingo-WHAT?!* here: <https://water.phila.gov/wingo-what/>.

Germantown residents read their original poems at the *Wingo-WHAT?!* community event in June 2022. *Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department*



Lessons Learned

Time invested in team building and planning pays off.

From the start, the Philadelphia team committed to weekly meetings together, even before they had a concrete project developed. In the beginning, most of this time involved listening to each other’s goals and learning about each other’s processes, as well as sharing what they knew and had discovered about the neighborhood during the investigation process—one of the exploratory exercises that was part of the Accelerator. This created a strong working rapport and trust between utility staff and their arts partner. By the time they were ready engage with the community, they felt highly prepared and aligned in purpose and values. Trapeta’s professionalism and experience with community-based projects was integral to the success of this relationship. Both parties made this project a priority: the utility staff committed to these meetings and worked around Trapeta’s teaching schedule, while Trapeta used paid leave to take time off from her day job for longer meetings.

Artistic processes can create space for healing and connection.

Chronic infrastructure flooding has impacted the Germantown community greatly, and there is widespread mistrust of the utility and other city officials because of historic neglect and underinvestment. One of the key goals of the project was to build trust, which first required acknowledging past mistakes and giving the community space to share their feelings and experiences. While not all of the community’s traumatic experiences were related to the utility, PWD understood the importance of holding space for these multi-layered and sometimes difficult conversations as a part of trust-building. According to Tiffany, “we are thinking about healing the past and preparedness for the future at the same time. We want to build trust with the community and help them feel prepared for future flooding. And we want them to feel that they can count on the City to help them through those events when they do occur.” The poetry workshops were an effective way to do this, she says, because “you can’t heal what you can’t feel.”



2020–2021 Philadelphia Poet Laureate Trapeta B. Mayson reads an original poem at the *Wingo-WHAT?!* community event in June 2022. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department

Spoken word and poetry allowed for more personal, authentic conversations than a typical utility workshop or meeting focused on infrastructure solutions would have. People were able to express deeper feelings and find points of human connection. Emotions were sometimes raw; tears were shed by both community members and utility representatives. But these conversations created an invaluable foundation for a relationship that the utility can continue to develop in future work. It also provided an important reminder for utility staff of the importance of what they do and why they do it.

PWD is now advancing a very large capital project to address infrastructure flooding in the impacted area of the Germantown neighborhood. Deputy Commissioner of Communications and Engagement Glen Abrams notes they integrated community engagement earlier in that process because of the Accelerator project's success. He says the Accelerator provides "foundational work that we can build on" to engage the community in the process. PWD will use the creative techniques learned in this process—like using conversation cards with prompts—while working to reinvigorate upcoming Task Force meetings.

Art is a catalyst, not a panacea.

From the beginning, the PWD team felt it was important not to trivialize the community's experience with flooding by giving the impression that they thought an art project alone would heal past harms or solve the profound challenges it faces. They knew the artistic process could be a powerful piece of the puzzle *if* accompanied by acknowledgment of past failings and concrete investments to improve equity in the future. Because PWD is concurrently working on an infrastructure plan to address flooding, staff were able to situate the artistic project in relation to that larger arc of work.

PWD also accepted it was not enough for Trapeta to be the ambassador of the utility. Utility staff had to be in the room to hear directly from community members, understand their experiences, and connect on an emotional level. As Tiffany says, "we can't outsource our community engagement or put the artist in the position of responding to people's hurt and anger. It wouldn't be fair to the artist or the community." Moreover, the utility staff in the room had to think beyond solving infrastructure challenges by being "sensitive to humanity and trauma-informed."

Being a licensed clinical social worker from the neighborhood, Trapeta could skillfully facilitate complicated dynamics in the community meetings, even when difficult emotions came up. She emphasized this might not be something all artists feel comfortable facilitating. "Not everyone is prepared to handle that level of emotional release, that anger," Trapeta says. "For artists, it is important to be aware of how you are entering the community. Some artists may want to go deep, but it can be harmful for the community if you don't know what you are doing."

Residents joined musicians at the *Wingo-WHAT?!* community event in June 2022. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Challenges and Tensions

Making the internal case for the value of deeper community engagement.

The team involved in this process understands and embraces the value and importance of embracing creative and artistic processes, as well as engaging communities in this way. PWD staff saw firsthand the transformation that can occur. However, Glen notes that they are struggling to know how to translate this information to others in the utility who “usually see outreach as a means to an end” by getting a plan approved or informing the community about a new program. Tiffany concurs, saying, “it is challenging to convince others who don’t get why we should be spending time and resources on the arts. Evaluation using metrics that matter to them will be important to make the case to engineers and technicians.” PWD will analyze insights and lessons learned and communicate about the work to a wide range of audiences and stakeholders.

Bringing light to an intermittent issue that may not be top-of-mind.

Germantown has issues aside from climate change and flooding, some of which feel much more acute and urgent. As a result, it was sometimes challenging to attract the community’s attention to the topic. Trapeta notes, “sparking conversation around a specific issue that only comes up for people at certain times (like when there is a historic rain event) when there are so many other immediate issues impacting them on a daily basis—gun violence, gentrification, food security, and jobs—can be difficult. Flooding isn’t always top of mind or may not feel like the most important thing in their lives, despite its devastating impacts when it occurs.”

Overcoming mistrust.

One of the workshops took place at the intersection of Crittenden and Haines streets, a block that experiences a particularly high incidence of flooding. The workshop was hosted in a park that is bordered by a wooden gate. Many residents walked by and seemed curious about the workshop but declined to cross the gate to engage with the utility team, even when invited. One man who participated and took the utility’s survey told Maura: “You know what? They were

really good questions. They were asking about climate change.” By connecting authentically with communities, PWD was able to ignite discussions on issues like climate change that are often overshadowed by more immediate concerns for residents. Maura interprets it this way: “there is a lot of trauma in this community, and the City hasn’t always been there when bad things happen. We tried twice. A lot of people still didn’t come out, although some were curious. That just means we need to do it more often.” Consistency and reliability—the utility showing up regularly and following through with their word—are key to building more trusting relationships.

At the Wingo-WHAT?! celebration, PWD staff participate in ongoing and meaningful community engagement. Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Adapting to real-world events.

Like all the Accelerator teams, COVID-19 made meeting in person challenging, but the Philadelphia team felt like in-person connections were necessary for their project, so they met outside and made other accommodations for safety. As they were preparing for a workshop in a flood-prone area, Hurricane Ida hit. “We realized that some residents might be busy dealing with property damage and flood fallout afterwards,” says Maura. The utility considered canceling the workshops, but instead simply postponed and went ahead the following week. Because Ida had made the flood risk an immediate reality, the conversations with residents were “profound.”

“““

The poetry workshops were an effective way to do this because you can't heal what you can't feel.

Tiffany Ledesma, former Public Engagement Team Manager, Philadelphia Water Department

Rain-activated community poems and project information remain etched on sidewalks in flood-prone areas around Germantown.

Photo credit: Philadelphia Water Department



Meeting the Community on Its Own Terms in Tucson, Arizona



Photo credits: Tucson Water

Tucson Team

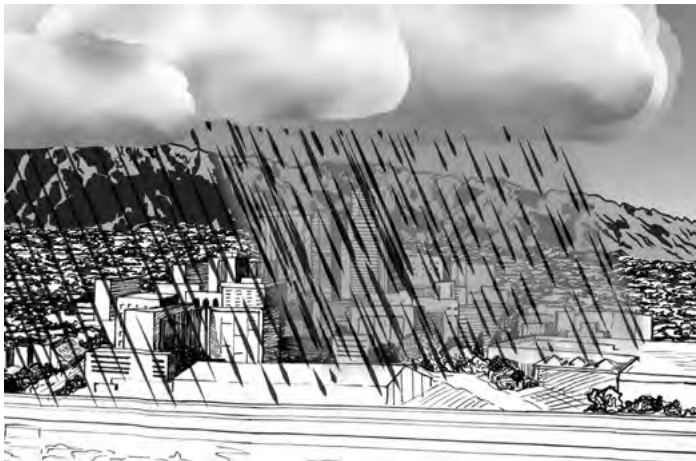
Artist:

- **Alexandra (Alex!) Jimenez**, Chicana printmaker, illustrator, and graphic designer

Tucson Water:

- **James MacAdam**, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation
- **Fernando Molina**, Public Information Officer
- **Kelly Wiehe**, Project Manager, Public Information and Conservation Office

Animation still from the *Monsoon Mixtape*, a series of songs by Tucson musicians that celebrate the city's summer rains. *Credit: Alex! Jimenez*



Background

In the semi-arid Sonoran Desert, water conservation is always front-of-mind for Tucson Water. Climate change and urban development have increased heat, droughts, and led to more unpredictable monsoons, which historically provided much-needed seasonal water to the region. Although Tucson has made significant strides on improving water resilience, drought-like conditions make water stewardship and community-wide planning for climate change ongoing and urgent. Recognizing that “how we adapt together as climate change intensifies will require new strategies and tools,” Tucson Water applied to the Accelerator to engage the public more directly in caring for and protecting their watershed and strengthening conservation efforts.

However, before Tucson Water could engage with the community to envision the future, it had to reckon with its past. Like many cities, the utility has a complicated legacy with many of its lower-income communities and communities of color. The utility had chosen two areas to focus on with the Accelerator project: Ward 1 and Ward 5. Water has played a significant role in the culture and history of these areas, even before Tucson was founded over 200 years ago. The flowing Santa Cruz River and surrounding springs sustained the early residents and settlers. Groundwater wells supported agriculture and industrial uses as the area grew.

This area also has a history of water contamination, primarily due to past industrial practices. Starting in the late 1940s, an industrial aircraft cleaning solvent called Trichloroethylene (TCE) was illegally dumped in southern Tucson, where Wards 1 and 5 are located. A substitute compound considered to be safer than TCE was then used in the 1970s, resulting in the introduction of a second contaminant called 1,4-Dioxane. The area has also been contaminated with PFAS compounds, likely originating from aircraft fire suppression practices around the Tucson International Airport. Since 1994, Tucson Water has been operating a Superfund site charged with cleaning up the contaminated zone. It currently operates 10 extraction wells and an advanced oxidation treatment plant that has successfully contained the contamination plume and reduced concentrations of contaminants in the area. While the contaminated wells were closed and the city's drinking water has been safe for decades, residents remain skeptical. The utility knew it needed to focus on healing this legacy of harm and rebuilding trust with these communities so they could be partners in water stewardship and equity moving forward.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

The utility first explored working with the Arts Foundation for Tucson and Southern Arizona to select an artist. But information and support received when attending the ArtPlace Summit encouraged utility staff to explore the wide range of artists doing community-based work, and more importantly to explore including the community in the process from the beginning. As a result, the utility decided to create a selection panel including four community representatives from the two target Wards alongside Kelly Wiehe, Project Manager at Tucson Water and lead representative for the city on the Arts Accelerator Team. Community representatives provided input into the RFP and selection criteria, reviewed applications, interviewed finalists, and selected the artist.

The panel received 19 applications, which they narrowed down to three finalists before ultimately selecting Chicana multimedia artist Alexandra (Alex!) Jimenez. Alex! has a strong sense of place in Tucson: her family has been in the city for four generations, and she currently lives in Ward 1. She uses photography, illustration, printmaking, and design to create works of art that speak to her heritage and sense of community. She is also trained as a scientist and cares deeply about water conservation.

Approach: Deep Listening

To engage the community around water, the team had to meet people where they were. Having grown up in the community, Alex! knew that contamination was likely to be the most top-of-mind water issue for many community members. "Right now, the public is disconnected from both water and the utility. The monsoons used to be more regular, but now we are experiencing droughts. We go months without rain. And on top of that, there is a lack of trust from the community towards the utility due to historical contamination of water quality in the same areas now experiencing a lack of water," says Alex!.

Artist Spotlight: Alex! Jimenez



Community needs must supersede other agendas. Then we can see how a project can begin to meet those needs.

Artistic Practice(s):

Alex! is a former scientist turned printmaker, illustrator, and graphic designer living in Tucson, AZ. Her heritage as a fourth generation Tucsonese grounds her work in the Sonoran Desert. As a Chicana artist, she uses her Mexican heritage to explore issues of identity and culture in the Southwest.

Portfolio: <https://www.Alexclamation.com/>

In the summer of 2021, the community-utility relationship was further complicated when the utility discovered new contamination of PFAS chemicals in the water supply, prompting them to shut off several wells and upgrade their treatment facilities to handle the chemicals. The utility was proactive and transparent in dealing with the problem, but the legacy of mistrust led to a strong public reaction, setting a challenging stage for the team's community engagement. Alex! says, "we know that water contamination always affects impoverished communities the most. In Tucson, we are dealing both with having had a contaminant 20 years ago and finding a new contaminant now. This weighs heavily on the community's mind. I have realized that the first step in this process needs to be hearing from the community. Community needs must supersede other agendas, and then we can see how a project can begin to meet those needs."

Alex! began by listening to the utility and communities. She and the utility had regular meetings to discuss water challenges in the two Wards, as well as how community priorities could be addressed. Alex! reached out to community groups and met with neighborhood associations. At first, she did not broach the topic of water with the community, which she worried might feel too abstract or even trigger people's trauma. Instead, she listened to what people cared about and focused on building relationships. A significant part of the community in these Wards speak Spanish, and sharing stories, experiences, and needs in their primary language was important for communication and trust-building.

This listening process took more time than expected, but the utility realized the value in these open-ended conversations, which provided deeper and more authentic interactions with the public than the utility's typical channels. James MacAdam, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation says, "I don't want these conversations with community members to stop. We want to figure out how to institutionalize this [after the Accelerator] so we can continue to engage with the public in this way."

Pilot Projects: The Chubasco Channel and On-the-Ground Art Engagements

The Chubasco Channel

Out of these conversations, a couple projects emerged. Keeping with the core theme of listening, the team decided to engage communities in the identified areas through a compilation of shared experiences with water and Tucson's changing weather patterns.

In the summer of 2021, the team invited the public to record the sound of "chubascos" on their phones. Chubascos are intense thunderstorms that pass over the Southwestern United States in the summer months. The storms are driven by hot, dry air that mixes with moisture traveling northward via strong winds from the Gulf of Mexico and Sea of Cortez, forming monsoons.¹⁶ The monsoons are referred to as chubascos in southern Arizona and New Mexico, due to Portuguese influence in the region ("chuva" in Portuguese means "rain"). Chubascos are quite localized, so while one neighborhood may experience torrential rain, a nearby neighborhood may just experience wind or experience nothing at all.¹⁷



Participants enter The Chubasco Channel Monsoon Experience, which plays segments of the Chubasco Channel monsoon recordings and lightly mists visitors as they pass through. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*



Participants emerge from The Chubasco Channel Monsoon Experience, which plays segments of the Chubasco Channel monsoon recordings and lightly mists visitors as they pass through. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*

Community members across Tucson submitted these monsoon sounds as well as memories of an experience during a monsoon like “playing in the water after a storm passes or getting caught in a downpour with someone you love” on a project website [<https://www.tucsonaz.gov/water/chubasco>]. Along with community members, Alex! and a team of audio storm chasers recorded the monsoons throughout the summer. Alex! is now working with a sound engineer to process the collected audio into a long-format soundscape. The Chubasco Channel will allow people to listen to the monsoons during the dry months and will serve as a citizen-generated archive of the increasingly scarce monsoons. The team also commissioned six local musicians to use the audio archive to create original music for a 2022 Monsoon Mixtape. The team hopes these ways of engaging with the monsoons will help the community positively connect to water and become more conscious of the way climate change is impacting local rain patterns.

On the Ground

Alex! also wanted to engage the community in person in conversations around water. Inspired by the work of artist Amanda Lovelee in St. Paul, the utility purchased an “art bike” that Alex! will use to travel around and collect stories about people’s experiences with water, using prompts like: *What makes you hopeful about water?* and *What makes you fearful about water?* James puts the goal this way: “What I want to come out of these conversations is that the community has a sense of belonging—that the utility belongs to them. I want people to know that Alex! is there on our behalf. And I want us to stay in this conversation for the long haul—I want to be having conversations with people, too.”

Alex! felt strongly that it was important to be a consistent presence in the community, so while the art bike was being constructed, she hired three youth art ambassadors to help her run community events on the city’s south side. Alex! painted sidewalks weekly in the Fairgrounds neighborhood, culminating in a community painting event where participants created a mural featuring a poem written by a resident. She then moved to the Rose neighborhood for three weeks, inviting students to join her in painting a bridge walkway after school. A resident donated the wall of their house for another community-painted mural.

Tucson Water Artist-in-Residence Alex! Jimenez with bilingual poet, performance artist, and DJ Logan Dirtyverbs Phillips. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*



Día de San Juan Celebration

The Accelerator project culminated in a celebration at *Día de San Juan*, a traditional festival in June to celebrate the start of the monsoon season.¹⁸ It included a sound installation on the now dry Santa Cruz River, debuting the Chubasco Channel soundscape and the Monsoon Mixtape. This sound installation underneath a bridge utilized projections to create an immersive monsoon experience.

Lessons Learned

Go where people are.

The Tucson team did this both literally and figuratively. Alex! went to meetings of community groups and attended community events. She staged her art-making events in local neighborhood parks at times when people would be available to attend and will continue to take the art bike to community gathering sites. Moreover, rather than coming in with a preconceived idea of what the project should be, Alex! took the time to get to know community members and to listen to what mattered to them. Out of that process, a collection of interventions emerged that tapped into and reflected the community's positive *and* painful experiences with water. Without this kind of process, it is unlikely that such authentic engagement would have happened. The team talked about how different this relational engagement approach was from how engineers often see it as a means to an end, which merely informs the community of a new policy or asks them to accept an infrastructure proposal. In contrast, Alex!'s approach was an effort to get to know people and their concerns without an agenda.

Be intentional about ethical community engagement.

From the beginning, Alex! thought deeply about how to engage the community effectively and ethically. In Accelerator peer exchanges, she asked questions of other artists about how to get buy-in from community members not just from upper-level staff at nonprofit organizations. Peers acknowledged this is a challenge everywhere and offered suggestions of ways forward, including partnership through existing community events and activities. Alex! consulted one-on-one with Trapeta Mason, the artist with the Philadelphia team who had many years of experience with community engagement work. Alex! also grappled with how to ethically acknowledge and compensate for the labor being asked of community members to participate. She asks, "when is it appropriate to compensate people for their stories? To offer an honorarium for participating?"

I want to acknowledge community members' time and the value of their cultural knowledge. I would like people to feel like they've been given something."

Part of ethical community engagement means respecting the existing knowledge and expertise of the community and not just thinking of them as the beneficiaries of knowledge provided by the utility. For example, often low-income communities are already exceptional conservationists. Alex! says, "on the south side we have a term, *repaje*, which is a Mexican word for making something new out of leftover parts. We already have genius in our local community. People know about water harvesting and conserving water because they live in a one-room adobe house with nine children. When the water utility comes in with experts to talk about greywater reuse or water harvesting, I want to know how we connect that with the community knowledge that already exists."

Stay open and adapt in real-time.

Tucson Water had never worked with an artist before, though staff had some ideas going in about how they would select the person (from a roster) and what the focus of the project would be (water conservation). As they participated in the Accelerator, however, staff began talking to community members and realized that they needed to change their approach. They revamped the application process to ensure community members directed the selection, and once Alex! was on board, the utility and artist took time to get to know each other and explore possibilities for many months before refining a project idea, even though it extended the project timeline. Kelly Wiehe, Project Manager for Public Information and Conservation at the utility notes it was not always easy to work this way. "The utility usually operates more formally, defining projects and drafting RFPs according to the desired outcomes," she admits. Attending the ArtPlace Summit was a unique experience and gave them the confidence to try more process-oriented work, which they feel yielded much better results. Kelly says, "I am a very process-oriented person and comfortable iterating strategies. It isn't always easy to communicate specific goals or desired outcomes to others, but if you focus on trust, it usually works out." James agreed, saying, "I loved that it was open-ended. I really enjoyed the process."

Commit to an Artist-in-Residence over the long-term.

Halfway through the partnership—and even before a community project had been fully designed—the utility decided that the experience of working with an artist was bringing so much value that they wanted to continue working with artists on an ongoing basis. First, they matched the US Water Alliance’s Accelerator funds to extend Alex!’s term for another year. Tucson Water is also working with the city to identify resources to support an ongoing Artist-in-Residence program. Increasing the utility’s creative capacity and approach to community engagement provides a new lens through which to look at a shared history and new ways to think about a shared future.

Challenges and Tensions

Right-sizing expectations of artists, communities, and projects.

Alex! is the first to admit she has a lot of ideas, and yet there came a point in the project where she realized they needed to pare things down and focus. She has a background as a bookkeeper, and after calculating the time spent on outreach, relationship building with the utility, and other necessary onboarding tasks, the team realized that some of the project ideas they came up with were not feasible within the time-frame and budget. Building trust in underserved communities is a long-term goal; the team understood this aspiration would not be accomplished within the course of a single project. They had to think about what intermediate steps would put them on the right path.

In part because she grew up in the community, Alex! was highly sensitive throughout the process about engaging people in a way that *gives* something to them rather than asking for something *from* them. She says, “building trust is very hard to achieve, especially with a community that is stressed economically and socially and lacks time. We need to have reasonable expectations about what an art project can accomplish. I will consider it a success if people walk away with a good experience. Art is a low-pressure and fun way to learn something new. I want to leave people feeling excited because they live here. That is something we can continue to build on over time.”

Creating space and time for utility staff to engage, including and beyond the project team.

Although Tucson Water was dedicated to the project and supportive of Alex!, staff sometimes struggled to find time to meet regularly or provide specific guidance. The PFAS crisis compounded this, as several team members were pulled in to deal with it in real time. This left Alex! unsure of the parameters of the project or how she should engage with the community. The team eventually found its flow, but Kelly notes that the utility must work to better support artists in the future and maintain a more “reciprocal” relationship.

The utility team learned a lot from working with Alex! and would like other utility staff to have the opportunity to benefit from collaborating with an artist and learn from the artistic process and perspectives as well, but the pace and orientation of the utility’s day-to-day work makes this a challenge. Kelly notes the arts work “has stayed somewhat capsulized within the Public Information and Conservation Office. Alex! did a great virtual presentation that was well-received, but keeping this project front-of-mind for other staff was at times challenging.”

Connecting the project to longer-term goals and priorities.

Before working with an artist, the utility did not have clearly-established expectations and had not outlined goals for partnerships. The utility was open about their desire to hire an artist to help them explore new ways of being with the community. This allowed for a project to emerge from the community listening process. However, a clearer idea of what the utility wanted to gain from collaboration and how that connected to their larger goals of trust-building and authentic community engagement would have helped give Alex! direction and refine ideas earlier. As Kelly says, “we knew we wanted to listen to and build trust with people in particular areas, but how does that roll up into the bigger picture of our mission as a utility? How do we continue that work after the project is finished? Next time, perhaps we would spend more time on the front-end engaging with the artist internally, with staff learning arts methodologies that might help us develop new ideas and approaches.” Because Tucson will continue working with artists in the future, they intend to spend some time thinking strategically and planning for integrating arts-based work with their larger goals and mission.

“““

I don't want these conversations with community members to stop. We want to figure out how to institutionalize this [after the Accelerator] so we can continue to engage with the public in this way.

James MacAdam, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation, Tucson Water

Guests gather underneath the Cushing Street Bridge along the Santa Cruz River for the release of the Monsoon Mixtape. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*



Conclusion

Arts and culture hold tremendous power for advancing equitable and sustainable water solutions. As partnerships in the Water, Arts, and Culture Accelerator grew, something powerful emerged. By expanding their perspectives, utilities and artists began to hone in on new ways to utilize their skills. Together, they began to implement new solutions in real-time to enhance community engagement, improve project design, and reshape innovation processes.

Tapping into this kind of innovation and power is especially important today, as challenges in the water sector—and across the nation—are growing and are exacerbated by climate change. Water is often one of the first places climate impacts are felt by the public, particularly for low-income and communities of color. This offers the water sector an opportunity to step into the realm of possibility and stretch the boundaries of what can and should be. As creators, artists have processes and practices for doing just that.

As the 2018 Arts Blueprint identified, “cultivating a field of practice also means creating spaces and mechanisms that enable effective cross-sector collaboration. This will require creating shared standards of practice, disseminating lessons learned from demonstration efforts, cultivating leadership and cultural shifts within institutions, leveraging resources and policies to remove barriers, and incentivizing more of this work.”

The Accelerator put this into practice by supporting utilities and artists to work together and use cultural strategies and creative practices to address water challenges in their locality. Artists and culture bearers have unique methodologies and perspectives that can help utilities bridge divides, identify innovative and holistic solutions, and engage and mobilize communities to act around a shared vision.

What these examples show is that there are many ways to build a successful partnership between artists, cultural leaders, and water managers. **Time, dedication, courage, and support** are critical enabling conditions to ensure success. Importantly, more opportunities to showcase and learn from these partnerships are needed.

Meaningful changes were seen across all four cities. While they are continuing to learn from the Accelerator experience, the utilities have already committed to investing their own resources to integrate arts and culture as an ongoing practice. Likewise, artists are continuing to use their skills and perspectives to benefit the One Water movement.

May these examples ignite courage and inspiration in One Water leaders across the country to think outside the box and try something new.



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About the US Water Alliance

The US Water Alliance advances policies and programs to secure a sustainable water future for all. Established in 2008, the Alliance is a nonprofit organization that brings together diverse interests to identify and advance common-ground, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. Our members and partners include community leaders, water providers, public officials, business leaders, environmental organizations, policy organizations, and more. We:

Educate the nation about the true value of water and water equity, as well as the need for investment in water systems. Our innovative approaches to building public and political will, best-in-class communications tools, high-impact events, media coverage, and publications are educating and inspiring the nation about how water is essential and in need of investment.

Accelerate the adoption of One Water principles and solutions that effectively manage water resources and advance a better quality of life for all. As an honest broker and action catalyst, we convene diverse interests to identify and advance practical, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. We do this through our strategic initiatives and One Water Hub, which offer high-quality opportunities for knowledge building and peer exchange. We develop forward-looking and inclusive water policies and programs, and we build coalitions that will change the face of water management for decades to come.

Celebrate what works in innovative water management. We shine a light on groundbreaking work through storytelling, analysis of successful approaches, and special recognition programs that demonstrate how water leaders are building stronger communities and a stronger America.



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