

ACCESS and the Arab American National Museum
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Introduction: On May 5, 2005 Arab Americans celebrated the inauguration of the first-ever Arab American National Museum in the country. Technically, the Museum's creation took almost five years to complete; starting in September 2000, when the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) purchased an abandoned furniture store and replaced it with a \$16.8 million midsize Museum. Establishing the Museum, however, could not have happened without ACCESS' understanding about the importance of the arts as an agent of change, and as a vehicle that builds and reconstructs communities, especially among marginalized people. In fact, ACCESS, primarily a social service organization established in 1971, incorporated cultural arts programming into its activities since the early years of its inception.

The location of the Arab American National Museum (AANM), across the street from Dearborn City Hall, a city that had been historically hostile to ethnic and racial minorities, is a testimony to ACCESS' determination and perseverance. The commitment of the AANM leadership and staff to create an institution that is ethnically specific, and at the same time inclusive and reflective of our nations diversity, is rooted in ACCESS' vision and history. Since its inception as an "Arab" organization committed to the empowerment the Arab American community, and to offer its services to Arab immigrants and Arab American poor and unemployed, ACCESS never envisioned itself, or the services it offers, to be exclusive. On the contrary it had always had an open door policy and offered its services for anyone who comes to its doors, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

The Founding Years, a Conversion of Progressive Forces: ACCESS was established in 1971 by a group of young, political activists who came from different, yet compatible, backgrounds. The group included community activists who were involved in the struggle to preserve Dearborn's South End neighborhood from the City of Dearborn's urban renewal plans; Arab American progressive activists who were involved in labor organizing, civil rights and anti war movements; and recently arrived Arab university students who were strongly influenced by Arab nationalism, the non-Aligned and liberation movements in third world countries. These early founders saw themselves as advocates for the poor, unemployed and new immigrants, and strongly believed that *all* people deserve quality services. They were committed to combining quality services with activism and advocacy work.

"The founders of ACCESS belonged to the generation that fought for civil rights. We were a part of the anti-war and liberation movements. We took to heart the pronouncements of the era, to work in our communities, to go out and change the world. It was important to us that we respond to the real, human needs of our neighbors, as their needs were reflective of the greater societal needs," says Noel Saleh, President of the ACCESS Board of Directors.

This year (2007) ACCESS marks 36 years of service, and celebrates its emergence as the largest Arab American not-for-profit organization in the United States. Since its inception ACCESS' mission has been to empower the Arab American community in all aspects of its economic, social, and cultural life. While the organization has grown from a small storefront organization to an agency with an annual budget of \$14 million and a staff of 190,¹ it never lost its progressive,

¹ ACCESS' various divisions include a Community Health & Research Center, Employment & Training, Youth & Education, and Social Services, and a National Outreach Network. However, the most expensive

secular, and grassroots inclusive approach. These principles that continue to shape the organization, as well as its recently founded Arab American National Museum, have their roots in ACCESS early history which can be summarized as follows:

- 1) ACCESS began in the South End of Dearborn, a relatively small working class community isolated from the rest of Dearborn by the Ford Rouge Plant and a large Detroit park. Until the 1960's the South End was home to a large and extremely diverse population and served as an international labor reserve for the Rouge Plant which in the 1940's employed 90,000 workers and was the largest industrial complex in the world. This isolation allowed for the creation of a closely knit community, with its own shops, places of worship and clubs. The South End working class community was also involved in labor and anti war movements, and had a strong sense of international solidarity. This made it possible for ACCESS to become involved and rooted in the community it served, not only in meeting the needs of the residents of the community, but also in being an advocate for their concerns and struggles.
- 2) From the early years, women have played a leading role in the organization. This is partially due to the progressive founding leadership, but also to the lasting influence of Aliya Hassan, a founding member and the first director of ACCESS. Born to Muslim Lebanese immigrants who settled in South Dakota, Ms. Hassan was a feminist, a political activist and a labor organizer. She was very much respected among Arabs and non-Arabs alike and presented a role model for many of the Arab American women. Another lasting impact of Ms. Hassan was her relationships with communities of color especially African Americans. Ms. Hassan was a close personal friend with Malcolm X and his family as well as with African American Muslims prior to joining ACCESS. This facilitated many of the later relationships ACCESS built with African American communities and other communities of colors.
- 3) Because of the founders' political and progressive background, ACCESS was a clear departure from the traditional Arab American organizations that dominated the scene in the 1960 and 1970s. These organizations were for the most part based on religion, family, or country and town of origin. ACCESS started as a Pan Arab, secular organization, with an international perspective and a strong commitment to building alliances and collaborations with non-Arabs, especially communities of color.
- 4) The founders of ACCESS had a comprehensive approach to peoples' needs. This was clearly reflected in the organization's mission of empowering the Arab American community in all aspects of its social, economic, and *cultural* life. Arts and culture were never seen as a separate need, or as not as a non-critical need to the individual well-being. Since its inception, ACCESS incorporated arts programming in its services including mural projects, exhibits, poetry and music for the communities they served.

Ismael Ahmed, Executive Director and a founding member of ACCESS, states, *"The way we see it, art and culture are as important to our health as fixing a head injury. Art reaches across community and race. The value of getting groups to cross these lines is very meaningful. As long as there is segregation, as long you believe that one culture is better than the rest, your*

and elaborate project that ACCESS ever ventured into was establishing the Arab American National Museum.

ability to change things, to enjoy life, to be more as a person, will be hampered. This separation causes suffering. And if you are suffering, you can't be everything you can be."

ACCESS Cultural Arts Program

Recognizing the importance of the arts in the daily life of all people, ACCESS established its Cultural Arts Program² in 1987 to "foster better understanding about Arabs and Arab Americans through education and the arts." Even with its limited resources at the time, the organization saw the Cultural Arts Program, which later developed into the Arab American National Museum, as important as any of the other services offered by the organization. The steady growth in the Cultural Arts Program, its role in the life of the organization, and later its maturing into a full blown Museum is in itself a testimony to the organization's long term commitment and understanding of the importance of arts and culture in building and sustaining healthy communities. Such commitment is reflected in the Cultural Arts Program's mission document:

"At ACCESS, our core values reflect our belief that all people, including those marginalized by low income, ethnic origin, or immigrant status deserve high quality service- including the opportunity to experience and participate in cultural and artistic programming. We further believe that the cultural heritage of all people should be preserved and shared with others. We value the arts not only as an aesthetic expression of the human experience, but also as a tool that empowers people, reconstructs communities, and instills pride, especially among marginalized people".

Since 1987 the ACCESS Cultural Arts Program provided the growing Arab American community, as well as other communities, with quality arts programs and exhibits that are relevant to their artistic experiences, identity, and culture. Over the years, the Program has gained a reputation for the high quality of its programming, and for its ability to use the arts to bridge ethnic and racial communities. The Cultural Arts Program, and later the Museum, have also been instrumental in helping other Arab American organizations in various US cities to provide effective cultural and educational programming. All of this has secured financial support from local, state, and federal funding sources. ACCESS Cultural Arts Program received numerous awards, including the prestigious Governor's Award for Arts and Culture in 2001.

The primary strength of ACCESS' Cultural Arts Program has been its ability to respond to the demographic changes in both the Arab American community and the larger community. The creation of the Cultural Arts Program was, in fact, a response to the significant increase of Arab immigrants, and reinforces ACCESS' principle that all people deserve quality art. It also reflects ACCESS' belief that art is a powerful tool which empowers people and instills community pride. Upholding these ideals, ACCESS' Cultural Arts Program was successful in moving Arab American art from the confines of its own community to mainstream local and national cultural and educational institutions. In turn, it has been able to influence the perception of mainstream institutions regarding what defines quality art. It has also been able to broaden the diversity of their audiences, as well as introduce their habitual audiences to new forms of artistic expression. An example of such collaboration is the Arab Music Festival, which has been held annually since 2004 in collaboration between ACCESS Cultural Arts, (and later the Museum), and the University of Michigan Musical Society. This collaboration has presented annual performances and residencies of Arab and Arab American musicians. ACCESS also has been an active

² In May 2005, the Cultural Arts Program was integrated into the Arab American National Museum upon the Museum' opening.

member in national collaborations and arts organization including serving on the Executive Committee of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP).

ACCESS is aware that the influx of immigrants to this country has not been limited to the Arab American community. This growing number of new and diverse ethnic communities has created a thriving diversity in our nation that has influenced ACCESS' cultural arts programming and its relationships with non-Arab cultural and community-based organizations. Through collaboration with a variety of these organizations, ACCESS has been able to present the arts to a diverse audience in new and innovative ways.

An example of ACCESS local work is the Cultural Exchange Network (CEN). In 1992, ACCESS joined forces with New Detroit Inc.³ to establish the CEN, a coalition of seventy (70) ethnic cultural and community organizations. The CEN is dedicated to bridging the racial and ethnic polarization in our area by bringing the diverse communities of southeast Michigan together to promote understanding and appreciation of different cultures. The CEN works together on a number of cultural events, the most significant among them is the annual Concert of Colors, a three-day free world music festival that draws audiences from every ethnic and racial group in southeast Michigan, as well as neighboring states. ACCESS' work with the CEN has laid the groundwork for several of the Museum's programs, including *Global Thursdays*, an Annual Multi-cultural Performances Series, which is comprised of weekly performances held in the Museum's auditorium. *Global Thursdays* allows the Museum to work regularly with the various ethnic and community based cultural organizations in metro-Detroit, and to provide the diverse communities with programming that is relevant to their varied cultural and artistic experiences.

These are only some of the examples of the work done by ACCESS and its Cultural Arts Program. Since the Program was established twenty years ago, it has successfully shifted Arab American art from margin to mainstream, and has increased the participation of Southeastern Michigan citizens in cultural activities outside the familiar limits of their own communities. In addition to its annual programs, the Cultural Arts Program regularly partnered with mainstream performing arts organizations in bringing musical and theatre performances to our area. Further, it continually worked with a diverse range of metro Detroit's urban and suburban communities to expand the audiences of ethnic art and world music. ACCESS has numerous collaborations with other mainstream, ethnic and community based cultural organization, and has used the arts to create coalitions and to bring various racial and ethnic communities to work together. As Dr. Anan Ameri, previous Director of ACCESS Cultural Arts Program, and founding Director of the AANM states: "*We are not in the business of entertainment, we are in the business of building and reconstructing communities*"

In short, ACCESS' Cultural Arts work laid the foundation for the Museum and has enabled the Museum to:

- Provide Arab American artists with opportunities to perform and present their work in mainstream venues and to broad and diverse audiences
- Influence mainstream institutions' perceptions of what constitutes quality art
- Increase appreciation and awareness of Arab American artistic production in various media

³ New Detroit Inc., is a coalition of leaders from civil rights & advocacy organizations, human services, health & community organizations, business, labor, foundations, education, media, and the clergy. It is a private, non-profit, tax-exempt organization formed in response to Detroit's urban rebellion in 1967.

- Address and increase exposure of a variety of new forms of artistic expression
- Use the arts to build bridges with other ethnic and racial communities

Why an Arab American National Museum?

The last few decades have witnessed the creation of a number of ethnic museums like the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., to mention only a few. These culturally specific institutions are for the most part a response to the exclusion of minorities from mainstream institutions and museums.

The Arab American population is estimated at 4.2 million, over 490,000 of whom live in Michigan alone. It is clear that Arab Americans represent a significant group within our population. Despite the fact that there are an estimated 15,000 museums in the United States, there was not a single museum which documented the history and contributions of Arab Americans

Michigan was the logical place to build the Arab American Museum. Dearborn is not only home to ACCESS but also home to a diverse and highly concentrated Arab American community and serves as the commercial, social, and spiritual capital of Arab Americans. Journalists, students, and scholars who are interested in Arab Americans come to Metro Detroit and Dearborn to conduct research and publish articles.

Arab Americans have been an integral part of metro-Detroit's history since the 1880s. Early Arab immigrants worked as peddlers, grocers, and unskilled workers. Their number increased dramatically after the First World War. They were attracted to the area by the booming automobile industry, especially Ford's eight-hour, five-dollar work day. Many settled in Dearborn at the foot of the Ford's Rouge Plant. Later, Arab immigrants continued to arrive, even in times of economic recession, attracted by the security provided by the extended family and fellow villagers who had already settled in the area. Today, Arab immigrants, as well as Arab Americans from other states, are drawn to the metro Detroit by a sense of belonging provided by the size and diversity of the community, and its well established educational, religious, and cultural institutions.

In spite of their long presence and substantial contributions to this country, Arab Americans have, historically been subjected to negative stereotyping. This stereotyping and vilification has increased dramatically in the wake of September 11th. True, they are not the only minority that has suffered from stereotyping and negative portrayal, however, it is not "politically incorrect" to attack Arabs or Islam, whether by the media, Hollywood, or public officials. This has undoubtedly affected Arab Americans and their image in this country. Recognizing the importance of museums in educating the public, ACCESS felt the need to establish the Arab American National Museum as an educational and cultural institution that "*documents, preserves, celebrates, and informs the public on the history, life, culture, and contributions of Arab Americans. We serve as a resource to enhance the knowledge and understanding about Arab Americans and their presence in the United States.*"⁴

By bringing the voices and faces of Arab Americans to mainstream audiences, the AANM is committed to dispel many of the misconceptions about Arab Americans and other minorities.

⁴ AANM mission statement

The Museum brings to light the shared experiences of immigrants and ethnic groups, thus paying tribute to the diversity of our nation. It also addresses the need to provide the public with accurate information about Arabs and Arab Americans, which often is not easily accessible to the public.

Planning for the Museum, which began in 2000, was in itself very challenging. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, made these challenges much more profound and complex; and the need for such an institution even more critical. Already subject to negative stereotyping, Arab Americans were encountering even greater hostilities. Many of them faced loss of employment, detention, and harassments by both law enforcement agencies as well as the public. Even the CEO of ACCESS, Ismael Ahmed, a great grandchild of Lebanese immigrants who homesteaded in North Dakota, born in Brooklyn NY and a well known and respected leader in Michigan was attacked as he stopped at a red light in Dearborn. These kind of outrageous hostilities made many, including those who questioned the need for such a museum, realize the importance of creating the Arab American National Museum.

The Arab American National Museum comes as a natural step in the development of ACCESS and its Cultural Arts Program. It allows ACCESS to expand the scope of its cultural, artistic, and educational activities, and to have a greater local, regional, and national impact. It also enables ACCESS to institutionalize its work and lend the Arab American community the visibility it deserves. The 38,500 square foot facility meets the Smithsonian Institute's S.I.T.E.S. standards and is 100% handicap accessible. Both permanent and temporary exhibits explore the diversity and commonality of Arab American experiences. The AANM houses a Library & Resource Center, an auditorium, gallery spaces, classrooms, conference rooms, a community courtyard, and a Museum store.

Since it opened to the public, the AANM has become a proven cultural and educational destination for both Arabs Americans and non-Arabs. In its first two years, the Museum attracted more than 75,000⁵ people have visited the Museum; 75% have come from Michigan, and the remaining 25% have come from a variety of places, including Europe, China, England, and the Arab world. The Museum's permanent and rotating exhibits, coupled with expansive educational and artistic programs have offered the community intellectual, artistic, and educational stimuli, and prompted an unprecedented outpouring of local, national, and international support. These programs include lecture series, conferences, film screenings, book signings, concerts, school and senior citizen tours, art classes, and cultural competency workshops. The Museum also held two national arts conferences entitled *DIWAN: A Forum for the Arts*.

In its efforts to build, expand, and diversify its audiences, the AANM have sponsored educational and cultural programs that appeal to the diverse local, regional, and national audiences. Additionally, the Museum continues to build and strengthen its collaborations with other ethnically specific and mainstream institutions.

In its short history, the AANM has proven to be an important cultural institution that enriches the cultural landscape of Michigan and the nation. In has received numerous awards. Dr. Anan Ameri, Director of the Museum, was awarded *Michiganian of the Year* in 2005 for her work in establishing the AANM. The Museum received the very prestigious status of "Smithsonian

⁵ This does not include 375,000 people who attend our off site events such as concerts and festivals including the East Dearborn Arab International Festival and the Concert of Colors.

Affiliation,” and was the cover story of the 100th anniversary edition of the American Association of Museums’ publication, “Museum News.”

Challenges of Building the Museum

Once the decision was made to build an Arab American National Museum, ACCESS and the Cultural Arts leadership were faced with certain challenges. What kind of museum would they build, what would it include, and exclude, and whom would it serve? These were topics of long and passionate debate. A museum that focuses on Arab Americans and tells their story from their own perspective could reinforce the view that Arab Americans are the “others,” not part of the larger American story. There was also the concern that the presence of ethnic museums might unintentionally “ghettoize” minorities, and provide a further justification for their exclusion from mainstream institutions.

Ultimately the founders of the AANM decided to draw the similarities between Arab Americans and other immigrant groups, and have Arab American stories presented within the larger American story. This would help the audience realize that the Arab American story actually is the American story. It is the story of immigrants coming to this country to build a better life for themselves and their families.

A further complication was the question of representation. Claiming that Arab Americans need to tell their story in their own voice assumed that Arab Americans had one voice and one story. But the Arab world is vast and diverse. The challenge was to create a museum that reflects the complexity of the Arab American experience and represents its full religious, national, professional and lifestyle diversity; an institution that would make both a fourth-generation Christian whose great-grandparents came from Syria and a newly arrived Muslim immigrant from Iraq, feel that the museum tells their stories. There was also the challenge of documenting Arab American contributions. While it was important to include the contributions of scientists, artists and the rich and famous, the founders of the AANM felt that the contributions of ordinary people such as automobile, railroad and mine workers needed to be included.

An additional challenge was the issue of constructing Arab American identity and deciding who is and who is not an Arab American. For example, while some Lebanese Christians and Iraqi Chaldeans⁶ do not identify as Arab Americans, others do. This is also the case for children from mixed marriages. The decision was to simply include those who define themselves as Arab Americans.

To address the issue of representation, the Museum turned to personal stories. Staff traveled to many cities and towns, met with new immigrants and third- and fourth-generation Arab Americans. They collected stories, artifacts and historical documents from every state. They heard hundreds of stories told by Arab Americans, their children and grandchildren. These stories form most of the Museum’s exhibits. The museum also has many recorded oral histories collected from families, libraries and historical societies, including Ellis Island National Monument, which accompany the exhibits

What complicated all this even further is the fact that one year after the planning process started, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, took place. Overnight the task of dealing with identity

⁶ Chaldeans are a Christian Catholic minority from Iraq. While most speak Arabic, they have their own language, Aramaic, the language believed to have been spoken by Jesus Christ. The majority of them live in Michigan and California.

and representation became vastly more challenging. After September 11th, many Arab Americans felt under attack and fear dominated the community. Many did not want to share their experiences, and expressed fear at having their stories in an “Arab” public museum. Some, especially new immigrants, questioned the legitimacy of building an Arab American museum in the existing climate.

While some of the fear faded away with time, some people continued to be apprehensive about being included in the museum. However, the overall response of the Arab American community has been very encouraging. The hundreds of valuable artifacts, historical documents, photos and oral histories that are included in the three permanent exhibits have all been donated by members of the community. The Museum did not have to purchase a single item.

Engaging the Community

Keeping with ACCESS’ guiding principle of involving the community in its work, and to help address the many challenges already mentioned, ACCESS turned to the local and national Arab American community. In early 2001 ACCESS created the Museum Task Force, a local advisory board that included members of the Arab American community, scholars and museum experts. The Task Force members met regularly for almost four years, and its members were instrumental in guiding planning, research and fundraising. The group was dissolved after opening the museum, yet many of its members still serve on museum committees dealing with fundraising, exhibits, collections, and library resources. One year before opening the Museum ACCESS established a National Advisory Board comprised of 65 of the country’s most prominent Arab Americans. The first meeting of the Board was held in conjunction with opening of the museum.

Throughout the planning years, the Cultural Arts staff visited museums and arts organizations across the U.S. to brainstorm ideas, explore possibilities and assess potential difficulties. As part of the planning strategy ACCESS held two national meetings in December 2001 and October 2002. These meetings brought together more than 50 scholars, museum professionals and community members to discuss the content of the museum’s permanent exhibits, educational and public programming, museum administration, collection’s policy and audience development. This was instrumental in establishing relationships with Arab American communities around the country.

For more than eight months in 2002, the museum team, and ACCESS executive staff traveled around the country. They held meetings and focus groups in most cities that have large Arab American populations. They assessed the community’s vision and expectations of an Arab American National Museum. They posed questions about what the community would like to see in an Arab American museum, what would make it reflect the community’s own experiences.

From these meetings it was clear that people wanted the museum to reflect the beauty and richness of Arab architecture and to be modern at the same time, to have a section about the contributions of the Arab world to world civilization, to address the issue of stereotyping and the exclusion of Arab Americans from history books and cultural institutions. They wanted the Museum’s exhibits to reflect the long presence of Arabs in this country, their diversity, their work and contributions. Many mentioned the fact that Arab Americans have been part of the fabric of the U.S.A. since its inception and have fought and died for this country since the War of Independence. These messages were critical in shaping the building, the exhibits and the public programming of the Museum.

Community involvement and outside scholarly input has been implicit in the development of the Arab American National Museum and its programs. In planning for the Museum ACCESS has succeeded in engaging hundreds of local and national community members, scholars, artists and other ethnic museum's professionals. Through its National Advisory Board and the many local committees, the AANM engages and draws on the community resources. All these efforts helped the Museum staff to conceptualize and develop the exhibit themes and public programming. It allowed for informed decisions on how to best represent the diversity that exists within Arab American communities, and allowed it to draw on similar experiences of other ethnic and immigrant communities.

The extent to which the Museum managed to address some of these challenges and to engage the community is reflected in the reaction of the Museum visitors. Non-Arab visitors often comment about how similar the Arab American experience is to their own families' experience. On the other hand, many Arab Americans, especially older people, cry as they go through the Museum's permanent exhibits.

The Challenges Continue

As the Arab American National Museum moves from a relatively small Cultural Arts Program housed at ACCESS' main office to a full blown Museum with 30 staff and a \$2.4 million annual budget, new challenges arise. Among those challenges is the desire to create the balance of being a "professional" organization, and to continue to be rooted in the community and committed to ACCESS' grass roots progressive history. Also, as the Museum expands its staff and programs and increases and diversifies its audiences, the AANM needs to continue to respond to the community's artistic needs as well as that of all its audiences. As an ethnically specific museum, ACCESS and the AANM want to be sure they continue to be inclusive of others, and responsive and respectful of the changing demographics of our nation.

Another challenge is determining what kind of leadership the Arab American National Museum will play as a leading national cultural institution. It is clear that ethnically specific museums, including the AANM, have a role to play in enriching the cultural landscape of our nation. They are destined to reshape our understanding and widen our horizons. They may redefine the role of museums as educational institutions while reshaping what defines the arts, aesthetics and culture.

Building the Arab American National Museum has been a challenging yet very rewarding experience. Now that the museum has been open for two years, at the time of writing this article, some of the concerns are gradually fading away. The reaction of the audiences--museum professionals, Arab Americans and non-Arabs, young and old--has been extremely positive.

Conclusion

The most valuable aspect of ACCESS' Cultural Arts Program and the Museum is that it occurs in the context of a broader organization that has worked for the empowerment of the Arab American community and *all* communities of color for over thirty years. This ethic of empowerment, exclusivity, and respect for diversity has fueled a collaborative and democratic organizational structure; one that incorporates a progressive vision into ACCESS and Museum programs and the way they both function. ACCESS leadership allows the creative latitude for program directors as well as staff members to develop their visions, while maintaining a collective and comprehensive approach to meet the organizational challenges and a unified progressive approach to serving the agency's diverse constituency.

The Museum's vision, organizational structure, and decision-making processes, stem from a long history of ACCESS grassroots activism, exclusivity and advocacy. The principles by which ACCESS and the Museum conduct their work are grounded in the democratic ideals set up by its founders in 1971.

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June 5, 2007