Considerations: Planning a Meaningful Community Memorial

Design/Groundwork

- Take as much time as necessary at the outset to engage community members and listen to them. Pay special attention to those closest to the concepts (e.g. descendent community) and physically close to the site (e.g., abutters)
- Assess your community’s capacity for community engagement; seek advice and support from leaders of past community efforts
- Understand the objections of those who are likely to oppose the project
- Shape inclusive messages that touch heart and mind
- Engage a core local media partner to provide public education related to your messages
- Inspire artists from all domains to help communicate messages—writers, poets, photographers, dancers, musicians, theater artists, crafts persons
- Engage students in meaningful ways in creation

Fundraising for a public/municipal project

- Recognize that fundraising for a public project may not follow the pattern of typical nonprofit fundraising, e.g., there likely is not a “quiet phase”
- Ensure that members of a core fundraising group are a diverse representation of the community
- Include in the core group a combination of “usual” participants and others who are new to fundraising and passionate about the mission
- Find ways for everyone to participate—no matter how small the contribution
- Match opportunities to learn about the mission with fundraising activities; plan fundraising activities that touch heart and mind
- Anchor the fundraising with a substantial municipal contribution
- Determine a “proof of concept” goal that will convince others that achieving the total fundraising goal is possible, e.g., 10 contributors who will pledge $10,000 each toward a million-dollar goal. Publicize and celebrate those milestones.
African Burying Ground Memorial Park, City of Portsmouth, NH

After the unexpected revealing of a more than 300-year old burying ground for African and African-descended people underneath a City street, the City of Portsmouth, NH closed and transformed the street into an evocative public gathering space to acknowledge its past and to return the site to sacred ground. With original works of outdoor public art at its core the site has become a focal point for telling a more complete story of Portsmouth’s history and reflecting on the site’s lessons for our current age. The site has stimulated national attention to Portsmouth as a site for African American tourism, calling attention to and uniting other important historic sites.

October 2003
Rediscovery of remains of 13 individuals during construction; burials exhumed and determined to be of African ancestry.

August 2004
City Council appoints committee to determine way to honor those buried.

Sept. 2004-May 2005
Meetings with abutters on conceptual design

April 2005
City Council approves site configuration, street closure

April 2007
City selects project landscape designer

April/May 2007
Public forums to solicit design ideas

June 2008
City completes national search for artist specializing in public art

October 2008
City Council approves design

November 2008
Additional archaeological work, requiring some redesign of site plans

January 2009
Fundraising committee initiated

Sept. 2010
City establishes Trust fund for African Burying Ground memorial

December 2010
City appropriates foundational funding—initial $100,000

February 2012
First large fundraising-education-arts event (Soweto gospel choir)

April 2013
NH Legislature posthumously frees 14 slaves (234 years after petition)

October 2013
Fundraising reaches half way mark toward $1.2 million

August 2014
Construction begins; consecration ceremony held onsite

January 2015
Fundraising goal exceeded

May 2015
Completion and opening weekend of African Burying Ground memorial