

Confronting Stigma: The Museum's Role in Suicide Prevention

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Abstract

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The purpose of this case study was to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits in order to understand the ways in which museums could aid in suicide prevention and awareness. Research was guided by two questions: how can museums use programming and exhibits to aid in suicide awareness and prevention; and are museums appropriate places to address topics such as suicide? The research focused on the suicide epidemic, bereavement and the arts, and museums as healing spaces. With a growing body of literature supporting the positive outcomes of museum programs and exhibits on mental health, there seemed a lack of literature on the effects of museum programs and exhibits aimed at suicide prevention and awareness. Data was collected on two suicide awareness-programs and two suicide-related exhibits through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with professionals most closely involved with the program or exhibit at three museum sites. The results of the study suggested that museums were well positioned to aid in suicide prevention and

awareness through programming and exhibitions. The primary limitation of this study was the small sample size.

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And for my dad, I miss you, and I hope that this work can lead to positive change.

Preface

I am a survivor of suicide loss. I lost my dad to suicide at the beginning of my senior year of high school, and it turned my world completely upside down. I was suddenly without a parent, and in turn filled with grief, anger, and endless questions that I will never have answers for. In the weeks and months that followed his death, I became more withdrawn from those around me, feeling that no one would understand what I had been through. I became afraid of judgement, and hyper-aware of the stigma around suicide. As I became more reclusive, I found solace in art-making, first through designing and painting sets for the school plays, then in my own painting and photography in art classes. Art-making, though a solitary activity, allowed me to slow down my mind and shift focus from unanswerable and judgmental thoughts to something productive and beautiful.

As I moved into my undergraduate studies, my drawing and painting courses provided a new avenue for me to explore my emotions, thoughts, and memories through narrative works. I found that these works gave new opportunity for me to talk about my experiences with suicide loss, where I had otherwise stayed silent; they became the catalyst for conversation. While studying art history both in San Francisco and abroad, I learned the importance of storytelling in museums and their ability to connect communities in conversation. More taboo subjects were being discussed and normalized through exhibitions and programming. Mental health and well-being started emerging in some museums. Conversations were being had. However, I never felt fully represented or that I could talk openly about my experiences with suicide due to the surrounding stigma. If other topics were being addressed and conversations had, why not also suicide? In pursuing a Master of Arts in Museology, I hoped to use the opportunities this degree

presented to explore how to utilize museums to meet the needs of a community touched by suicide.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2013, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) released a report titled “Museums on Call: How Museums are Addressing Health Issues.”¹ In this report, AAM made note of the increasing ways that museums are making contributions to the healthcare field. They name ten aspects in particular: Alzheimer’s, autism, disease prevention, health literacy, hospital outreach, medical training, mental health, military and veterans health, nutrition and wellness, and visual impairment. “This report is not designed to be all-encompassing. It is a snapshot of the many ways museums are serving their communities.”² The report broke down each of the ten aspects into a general explanation followed by several examples of exhibits and programming around the country. Each section was a page long on average. Mental health only got 3 small paragraphs, with very generalized information:

Mental health and mental illness have long been difficult topics of discussion. Museums offer exhibits and other programs that help to break down these barriers. Museums are also partnering with mental health agencies to host clients as volunteers, exhibiting their art and holding public programs on art and mental wellness.³

This brief, generalized explanation was followed by only two examples.

Since this report in 2013, there has been an increasing amount of programs and exhibits on various aspects of mental health offered by museums. Many museums have launched meditative practices, such as the San Diego Museum of Man in its “Yoga in the Rotunda,”⁴ and

¹ American Alliance of Museums, *Museums On Call: How Museums Are Addressing Health Issues*, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/museums-on-call.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ San Diego Museum of Man, “Yoga in the Rotunda,” February 11, 2017, <https://www.museumofman.org/yoga-in-the-rotunda/>.

the Rubin Museum of Art features both yoga and meditation programming.⁵ Several others regularly feature mindfulness and breathing exercise programming. Museums such as The Science Museum in Minnesota⁶ and the Tate Modern⁷ in London participate in Mental Health Awareness Week with special exhibitions and programs, often in partnership with local mental health organizations. Further exhibits and programming have been created for sexual abuse victims, addiction, and other mental health issues.⁸

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States.⁹ Suicide is highly stigmatized, resulting in an isolated bereavement for suicide survivors and survivors of suicide loss.¹⁰ These survivors are estimated to make up at least one sixth of the U.S. population, with suicide affecting as much as 85% of the U.S. within their lifetime.¹¹

While many museums are offering more exhibits and programming on various topics related to mental health, there has not been much interaction with the subject of suicide and suicide prevention. This thesis is presented as an opportunity to inform on the suicide epidemic,

⁵ “Yoga | Rubin Museum of Art,” accessed March 6, 2020, <https://rubinmuseum.org/page/yoga>.

⁶ “It’s Mental Health Awareness Week! Here’s How You Can Speak up.,” Science Museum of Minnesota, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.smm.org/pluggedin/mental-health-awareness-week>.

⁷ Tate, “World Mental Health Day – Course at Tate Modern,” Tate, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/course/world-mental-health-day>.

⁸ “Homepage | What Were You Wearing?,” accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.forestry.oregonstate.edu/wwww/homepage>.

Carter Barrett, “Museum Launches Exhibit Exploring Opioid Crisis,” accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.wvxu.org/post/museum-launches-exhibit-exploring-opioid-crisis>.

⁹ “Suicide Statistics,” American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, November 15, 2019, <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics>.

¹⁰ William Feigelman et al., “Suicide Exposures and Bereavement among American Adults: Evidence from the 2016 General Social Survey,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 227 (February 2018): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.09.056>.

¹¹ Kučukalić, Sabina, and Kučukalić, Abdulah. “Stigma and Suicide.” *Psychiatria Danubina* 29, no. Suppl 5 (2017): 895-899

and how museums are at an advantage to help those bereaved by suicide. Only a few museums have used their space to speak about suicide and suicide prevention, and not yet as a widespread topic of engagement in the field. The purpose of this study is to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits in order to understand the ways in which museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness.

Three main areas of literature helped to inform this topic: the suicide epidemic, bereavement and the arts, and museums as healing places. There seemed to be a lack of representation in the literature that identified suicide and suicide prevention in museums. As such, research was guided by two main questions:

1. How can museums use programming and exhibits to aid in suicide awareness and prevention?
2. Are museums appropriate places to address topics such as suicide?

By conducting semi-structured interviews with museums who have exhibits and programming related to suicide and suicide prevention, this study offered insight into how museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits in order to understand the ways in which museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness. Three main sections of literature were examined: 1) the suicide epidemic, 2) bereavement and the arts, and 3) museums as healing spaces. The first section detailed the statistics on suicide in the United States and the issues surrounding stigmatization. The second section explored the ways in which the arts are used by the bereaved. The final section discussed the growing body of literature on museums as healers.

The Suicide Epidemic

In order to understand the importance of suicide and suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits, it is first important to know the statistics and needs surrounding suicide. Suicide has become a national and world-wide epidemic. World-wide, suicide is the second leading cause of death for young adults¹² and has been called a global imperative by the World Health Organisation.¹³ Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States¹⁴ and the second leading cause of death for 15 to 35 year olds.¹⁵ The most current national statistics on suicide were from 2018, as reported by the American Association of Suicidology.

¹² Drapeau, C. W., & McIntosh, J. L. (for the American Association of Suicidology). (2018). U.S.A. suicide 2017: Official final data. Washington, DC: American Association of Suicidology, December 10, 2018.

¹³ Kevin M. Malone et al., "Lived Lives: A Pavee Pers[Ectove. An Arts-Science Community Intervention around Suicide in an Indigenous Ethnic Minority," *Wellcome Open Research* 2 (April 2017).

¹⁴ "Suicide Statistics," American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, November 15, 2019, <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics>.

¹⁵ "Facts and Statistics," *American Association of Suicidology* (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

In 2018, 48,344 Americans died by suicide¹⁶; this averages to 132 deaths per day. Someone dies by suicide every 10.9 minutes; males every 13.9 minutes and females every 49.7 minutes.¹⁷ The age adjusted rate was 14.2 per every 100,000. Men died by suicide an average of 3.54 times more often than women,¹⁸ with men accounting for 77.97% of all suicide deaths.¹⁹ White males in particular account for 69.67% of deaths,²⁰ or a rate of 26.6 per 100,000.²¹ When broken down by age, children 5 to 14 account for 1.25% of deaths; ages 15 to 24, 12.84%; ages 25 to 44, 32.14%; ages 45 to 64, 34.92%; and those 65 and older, 18.82%.²²

Suicide continues to be growing problem. “In 2010, suicide was the only leading cause of death to show a significant increase.”²³ Eight years later, suicides rates continued to climb, with a 2% increase from 2017, making it the highest rate in 50 years.²⁴

Similar to 2017, the [2018] crude suicide rate of 14.8 is the second highest crude rate observed in the United States since 1938 (15.25; 1939 was 14.14). The age-adjusted suicide rate of 14.2 is the highest age-adjusted rate since 1941 (15; 1942 was 14.0).²⁵

These historically increased levels of suicide are likely in response to national and world events, including World War II. While there are a wide variety of national, state, and local programs,

¹⁶ “Facts and Statistics,” *American Association of Suicidology* (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Suicide Statistics,” American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, November 15, 2019, <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics>.

¹⁹ “Facts and Statistics,” *American Association of Suicidology* (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

²⁰ “Suicide Statistics,” American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, November 15, 2019, <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics>.

²¹ “Facts and Statistics,” *American Association of Suicidology* (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Kochanek et al. 2011

²⁴ “Facts and Statistics,” *American Association of Suicidology* (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

organizations, and initiatives aimed at lowering the suicide rate, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has stated concern over the continual rise.²⁶

For every one death by suicide, there are 25 attempts, with an estimated 1.2 million attempts in 2018.²⁷ It is estimated that there is one attempt every 26 seconds.²⁸ While males die by suicide 3.54 times more than women, there are three female attempts for every one male.²⁹ The American Association of Suicidology also framed those statistics numerically by noting that there were between 100 and 200 attempts for every death of a younger person, and 4 attempts for every death of older adults.³⁰

These statistics are key to understanding the suicide epidemic in the United States. They also vary by state and region. It is also important to know that these numbers are likely much higher, as many attempts and even completed suicides are not reported.³¹

Survivorship

When speaking about suicide there are two distinct groups of survivors: suicide survivors, and survivors of suicide loss. The following definitions of the two were adapted from Robert Olson at the Centre for Suicide Prevention:

²⁶ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, “AFSP: Suicide Rate Is Up 1.8 Percent According to Most Recent CDC Data (Year 2016),” January 2, 2018, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/afsp-suicide-rate-is-up-18-percent-according-to-most-recent-cdc-data-year-2016-300576496.html>.

²⁷ “Facts and Statistics,” American Association of Suicidology (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ “Suicide Statistics,” American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, November 15, 2019, <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics>.

Suicide survivors: These are those who have attempted suicide and survived.

Survivors of suicide loss: These are those who personally know someone who has died by suicide, and experience high levels of bereavement for a considerable length of time after.³²

These two groups, while not inseparable from each other, experience the effects of stigmatization differently.³³ This is discussed further in the following section.

A conservative study estimates that for every death by suicide, at least six others are severely affected.³⁴ “These people might be family members, lovers, friends, or anyone else who is impacted by the death of a loved one.”³⁵ The 2018 report from the American Association of Suicidology on the national statistics of suicide noted that

A recent (Cerel, 2019) research-based estimate suggests that for each death by suicide – 135 people are exposed (6.9 billion annually). As many as 40 – 50% of the population have been exposed to suicide in their lifetime (Feigelman et al., 2017). The number of survivors of suicide loss in the U.S. is more than 5.4 million (1 of every 6 Americans in 2018).³⁶

It is also estimated that 85 percent of American society will have contact with someone who attempts or died by suicide within their life time.³⁷

³² Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ S. Clark, “Bereavement after Suicide -- How Far Have We Come and Where Do We Go from Here?,” *Crisis* 22, no. 3 (2001): 102–8.

³⁵ Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

³⁶ “Facts and Statistics,” *American Association of Suicidology* (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

³⁷ Kučukalić, Sabina, and Kučukalić, Abdulah. "Stigma and Suicide." *Psychiatria Danubina* 29, no. Suppl 5 (2017): 895-899

A Stigmatization Problem

There is a long standing stigmatization around suicide.

Suffice it to say that the very act of killing oneself used to be a crime in some countries, and that the criminal language associated with the suicidal act endures in the lexicon. Specifically, using the phrase “to ‘commit’ suicide” equates the act with homicide or fratricide, and suggests that it is akin to “self-murder”. The non-critical and non-thinking use of this phrase preserves the implied criminality of the act.³⁸

Those who die by suicide are seen as selfish, cowardly, or having given up.³⁹ Because of the societal stigma surrounding suicide, it affects the lasting perception of the one who has died.

Suicide survivors and survivors of suicide loss face different forms of stigma as well.⁴⁰

Suicide survivors are often viewed as attention seekers or not taken seriously.⁴¹ In Robert Olson’s blog post “Suicide and Stigma”, he noted that:

Suicide attempt survivors often face extreme stigmatization and not taken seriously because they are viewed as simply “crying wolf”. Further, the fact that they survived the attempt suggests to many that they are not really sincere in their intent to die. In actuality, the attempter is trying to stop the physiological pain brought on by depression or other mental health issues. If their distress is not addressed after their first attempt, then there is a very strong chance that they will attempt again.⁴²

Though there is adequate attention paid to the physical needs of an attempt, there is little in place to help their emotional and psychological needs.⁴³ Suicide survivors can develop self-stigmatization, and feeling as though they are a burden to those around them.⁴⁴ They also suffer

³⁸ Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

from public stigmatization, in which surrounding people develop and impose negative stereotypes and prejudices against the survivor.⁴⁵ Suicide survivors may also face stigmatization within the larger survivor community. For survivors of suicide loss, suicide survivors may serve as a living reminder of a lost loved one, or seem like a “constant, potential death just around the corner.”⁴⁶ These internal and external sources of stigma often lead to feelings of isolation, and limit the desire of the survivor to reach out for help.⁴⁷

Survivors of suicide loss also face internal and external stigmas. There is a constant quest to answer “why did he/she do it?”⁴⁸

These survivors are often dumbfounded by the suicide and, in an unclear state of bereavement, might ask themselves if they could have done something about the death. They may wonder if they may have contributed in some way to the actions of their deceased loved one, so deep are their feelings of guilt and self-blame.⁴⁹

Survivors of suicide loss may also have feelings of abandonment by their lost loved one.⁵⁰ Along with a continual search for explanation, survivors of suicide loss experience feelings of rejection, shame, blaming, guilt, suicidal ideation, anger, and relief.⁵¹ All of these can lead to social withdrawal, demoralization, damaged social skills, and rejection and avoidance by others.⁵²

⁴⁵ Kučukalić, Sabina, and Kučukalić, Abdulah. "Stigma and Suicide." *Psychiatria Danubina* 29, no. Suppl 5 (2017): 895-899

⁴⁶ Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ S. Clark, “Bereavement after Suicide -- How Far Have We Come and Where Do We Go from Here?,” *Crisis* 22, no. 3 (2001): 102–8.

⁴⁹ Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

⁵⁰ William Feigelman et al., “Suicide Exposures and Bereavement among American Adults: Evidence from the 2016 General Social Survey,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 227 (February 2018): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.09.056>.

⁵¹ Karl Andriessen et al., “Bereavement After Suicide,” *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 36, no. 5 (2015): 299–303.

⁵² Kučukalić, Sabina, and Kučukalić, Abdulah. "Stigma and Suicide." *Psychiatria Danubina* 29, no. Suppl 5 (2017): 895-899

“Then, they feel further isolated by suicide stigma and the greatly disturbing emotions it stirs up... leading the bereaved to have strong inhibitions to talk publicly about these deaths.”⁵³ It is estimated that as many as 35 percent of survivors of suicide loss will try to hide or not talk about their loss at all.⁵⁴

As Sabina and Abdulah Kucukalic note in “Stigma and Suicide”, “suicide can cause stigma but stigma can facilitate suicidal tendencies as well.”⁵⁵ One major way to break down stigmatization surrounding suicide is the spread of information, understanding, and awareness. Widespread communication of accurate information leads to a normalizing effect, as well as lessening the stigma for survivors.⁵⁶ Raising awareness of mental illness and mental health overall may also lead to a destigmatizing effect on suicide and those affected.⁵⁷ Ultimately, as the American Association of Suicidology notes, “it is through the personal stories of the suicide bereaved and suicide attempters that public awareness about suicide moves forward.”⁵⁸

Suicide Prevention

There are a number of national, state, and local organizations working for suicide prevention. These include The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the American

⁵³ William Feigelman et al., “Suicide Exposures and Bereavement among American Adults: Evidence from the 2016 General Social Survey,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 227 (February 2018): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.09.056>.

⁵⁴ Kučukalić, Sabina, and Kučukalić, Abdulah. "Stigma and Suicide." *Psychiatria Danubina* 29, no. Suppl 5 (2017): 895-899

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” Centre for Suicide Prevention (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

⁵⁷ Shrivastava, Amresh., Kimbrell, Megan, and Lester, David. *Suicide from a Global Perspective : Public Health Approaches*. Psychology of Emotions, Motivations, and Actions Series. Hauppauge, N.Y.: Nova Science Publisher's, 2012.

⁵⁸ “Facts and Statistics,” American Association of Suicidology (blog), February 26, 2020, <https://suicidology.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

Association of Suicidology, the National Institute of Mental Health, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, the Jed Foundation, Indian Health Service, and the Trevor Project, just to name a few. While all of these organizations are excellent and needed resources, “most suicide prevention programs focus on individual-level change”⁵⁹ and not on community-based strategies.

Whereas individual recovery focuses on the reconstruction of citizenship for individuals struggling with mental health problems and addictions, a community recovery framework recognizes that entire communities may be in need of healing and that the individuals who have traditionally been branded as having harmed the community can themselves become healing forces within their community.⁶⁰

As noted above, the best way to overcome stigmatization of suicide is through the personal stories of survivors. Community-based programs provide more opportunity for these stories to come forward.

One such community-based project was *Finding the Light Within*.⁶¹ This Philadelphia mural project emerged as a response to the high suicide rates among the city’s public high school students – nearly twice the national average.⁶² “This effort sought to address the issue of suicide by initiating a public narrative focused on the shared experiences of [suicide survivors and survivors of suicide loss] as well as stories of individual and community healing and resilience in the aftermath of suicide.”⁶³ The mural arts project allowed for all members of the community to

⁵⁹ Nathaniel Mohatt et al., “A Community’s Response to Suicide Through Public Art: Stakeholder Perspectives from the Finding the Light Within Project,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 52 (2013): 197–209.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Finding the Light Within,” Mural Arts Philadelphia, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.muralarts.org/artworks/finding-the-light-within/>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Nathaniel Mohatt et al., “A Community’s Response to Suicide Through Public Art: Stakeholder Perspectives from the Finding the Light Within Project,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 52 (2013): 197–209.

come together and share stories, learn and educate others, and build connections and awareness of their shared experiences, while creating a work of art that can continue the conversation.⁶⁴ This project “adds a dimension to suicide prevention efforts that encourages connection to the community and publicly owning a possibly shameful or stigmatizing experience.”⁶⁵ These types of experiences can enable a “stigmatized community, who rarely speak of suicide or mental illness, to open up, discuss and acknowledge the problem among their people.”⁶⁶ Doing so brings suicide to the forefront of conversation, raising public awareness, and lowering the stigma.⁶⁷

Bereavement and the Arts

The arts have been an effective form of processing and healing for those bereaved by suicide. Arts are effective devices for coping with grief. In her paper “‘Art as a Way to Life’: Bereavement and the Healing Power of Arts and Writing”, author Tuija Saresma explored her experiences of bereavement through the story of a woman named Sirpa. She stated that “art can be an effective device in coping with grief as meanings are not fixed or pre-given, but people give art their own meanings depending on their personal needs and desires.”⁶⁸ Arts allow for an exploration of emotions and thoughts that may otherwise be difficult to process.

The introduction to the handbook *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art* by Barry M. Cohen, Mary-Michola Barnes and Anita B. Rankin stated that

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Kevin M. Malone et al., “Lived Lives: A Pavee Pers[ect]ive. An Arts-Science Community Intervention around Suicide in an Indigenous Ethnic Minority,” *Wellcome Open Research* 2 (April 2017).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Tuija Saresma, “‘Art as a Way to Life’: Bereavement and the Healing Power of Arts and Writing,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (2003): 612

Recovery is an active, creative, transformational process that plumbs the depth and breath [sic] of human potential. Words alone are not enough to make it happen. Recovery requires creative expression in symbol and metaphor.⁶⁹

Creative processes in the arts are a part of recovery, especially from trauma and bereavement.

Art therapy and other creative processes allow the bereaved to slow down, focus, and process difficult emotions.⁷⁰

Creating visual art in particular is helpful for the bereaved. Art is preverbal, allowing images from the mind to come through in a healing process.⁷¹ Words are not necessary to communicate emotion, meaning, or identity. Visual art is able to make use of colors, lines, and shapes to represent complicated feelings and emotions.⁷² “The experience of creating visual artwork could allow a person to make meaning and create a tangible representation of an event or emotion.”⁷³ In the *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art* workbook, authors Barry M. Cohen, Mary-Michola Barnes and Anita B. Rankin stressed that

Art externalizes experiences, hopes, and conflicts. Art can enable you to safely test a variety of options. Art does not have to be perfect. Art can help you to heal and live. Thus, inner responses to trauma can be expressed in visual metaphors, which can then be modified or transformed⁷⁴.

⁶⁹ Barry M. Cohen, Mary-Michola Barnes, and Anita B. Rankin, *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art: Drawing from the Center* (Lutherville, MD: The Sidran Press, 1995).

⁷⁰ Lisa Ceglia and Cynthia Pfeffer, “Artists’ Representations of the Impact of Family Suicide during Childhood and Adolescence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 625.

⁷¹ Wallace, Edith. *Approaches to Art Therapy : Theory and Technique* /. Third Editon. ed. New York, NY :: Routledge, 2001, 95.

⁷² Lisa Ceglia and Cynthia Pfeffer, “Artists’ Representations of the Impact of Family Suicide during Childhood and Adolescence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 625.

⁷³ McCreary, Amanda L. "The Experience of using Creativity to Process Emotional Distress Via the Visual Arts." Order No. 3635404, Michigan School of Professional Psychology, 2014. P 36. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1615085727?accountid=14784>.

⁷⁴ Barry M. Cohen, Mary-Michola Barnes, and Anita B. Rankin, *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art: Drawing from the Center* (Lutherville, MD: The Sidran Press, 1995).

Art-making does not have to be perfect, or meant for display, but rather serves as a medium to explore emotions and thoughts in a non-verbal form. This can help those who do not have access to other mental health services as well as those who are non-verbal or otherwise cannot communicate.⁷⁵ Using the visual arts also “leads to processing grief, distress, anxiety and depression, and results in an emotional release, a sense of calm, and a feeling of relief afterwards.”⁷⁶

Art, both making and observing, is an effective tool for communication and community building. In her reflective paper, Saresma went on to note that “what is striking about Sirpa’s encounters with various artworks is that she wants to reflect and relate her bereavement in other people’s experiences.”⁷⁷ In the *Lived Lives* exhibit and program with the Irish Traveler community it was observed that “participants also described the exhibition as encouraging conversations about suicide that perhaps might otherwise not have taken place.”⁷⁸ Similar thoughts came out of the *Finding the Light Within* mural project in Philadelphia, with participants describing the project as “an extraordinary healing process” and a chance to engage in larger conversations.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ McCreary, Amanda L. "The Experience of using Creativity to Process Emotional Distress Via the Visual Arts." Order No. 3635404, Michigan School of Professional Psychology, 2014. P 151. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1615085727?accountid=14784>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Tuija Saresma, “‘Art as a Way to Life’: Bereavement and the Healing Power of Arts and Writing,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (2003): 613

⁷⁸ Kevin M. Malone et al., “Lived Lives: A Pavee Pers[ect]ove. An Arts-Science Community Intervention around Suicide in an Indigenous Ethnic Minority,” *Wellcome Open Research* 2 (April 2017).

⁷⁹ Nathaniel Mohatt et al., “A Community’s Response to Suicide Through Public Art: Stakeholder Perspectives from the Finding the Light Within Project,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 52 (2013): 197–209.

The arts serve as a catalyst for conversations that otherwise may not occur, by breaking down barriers and allowing for free-form expression. As suggested by the *Finding the Light Within* mural project and *Lived Lives*, communities are able to connect in art-making projects together, having conversations about difficult subjects including suicide, bringing it forward into conversation and creating the normalizing effect that helps reduce the stigma.

Museums as Healer

While not exhaustive, this final section of literature served to inform on the benefits of museum visits, how museums serve as healing places for their community, and how museums have been addressing various stigmatized subjects.

Benefits of Museum Visits

Museums have a great ability to be places of healing. In discussing the ability of Canadian doctors to prescribe museum visits to patients, Medecins Francophones du Canada's president Helen Boyer noted that museums "are very well placed to address issues such as social isolation, physical and mental ill-health and evidence... suggests that museums can help build social capital and resilience, and improve health and well-being."⁸⁰ She also stated that museums have been shown to increase serotonin levels in visitors.⁸¹

Recent studies in the United Kingdom (UK) have illustrated the role museums can play in health and wellbeing. *Museums for Health and Wellbeing* by Helen J. Chatterjee and G. Noble

⁸⁰ Meilan Solly, "Canadian Doctors Will Soon Be Able to Prescribe Museum Visits as Treatment," *Smithsonian*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/canadian-doctors-will-soon-be-able-prescribe-museum-visits-180970599/>.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

documented a study of 603 programs from 261 museums in the UK that address health and wellbeing.⁸² The report showed that,

In recent years there has been a considerable increase in programs not only to improve health and wellbeing, but also to provide accessible education, boost vocational skills, support people with special educational needs (SEN) and work with some of the most marginalized people in society such as offenders, people living in poverty and refugees.⁸³

The study further went on to list nine health and wellbeing benefits of museums:

- Positive social experiences, leading to reduced social isolation
- Opportunities for learning and acquiring new skills
- Calming experiences, leading to decreased anxiety
- Increased positive emotions, such as optimism, hope, and enjoyment
- Increased self-esteem and a sense of identity and community
- Increased opportunities for meaning making
- Positive distraction from clinical environments
- New experiences which may be novel, inspirational and meaningful
- Increased communication between families, carers and health professionals⁸⁴

According to Chatterjee and Noble, addressing mental health in museums provides positive experiences, especially for those dealing with mental health problems. These outcomes of museum visits lend to the ability of museums to be places of individual and community healing.

Healing the community

Museums are at an advantage to respond to traumatic events in their communities. When a traumatic event affects an entire community, healing is able to begin when the community is supported in addressing the impact and consequences of the tragedy. Lois Silverman, a social worker, wrote in *The Social Work of Museums* that there is “a growing belief among [museum]

⁸² H. Chatterjee and G. Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

⁸³ H. Chatterjee and G. Noble, *Museums, Health and Well-Being* (Taylor & Francis, 2016): 7

⁸⁴ Helen J. Chatterjee, “New Findings Show Museums Can Make You Healthy and Happy,” October 17, 2013, <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2013/10/17/museums-can-make-you-healthy-and-happy/>.

practitioners, policymakers, and the public alike in the power of museums to inspire hope and healing, improve lives, and better the world.”⁸⁵ When a museum is able to react to the traumatic events in their community, they become a place for healing to occur.⁸⁶

Museums have been able to respond to large cultural traumas. These reactions range from museums serving as sites of spontaneous memorials,⁸⁷ to reopening shortly after traumatic events, to arranging programs and exhibits centered on the trauma. A conference of public historians after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 determined that it is critical for museums to respond to “challenges thoughtfully and positively, embracing the opportunity to help our visitors understand these tragic events and [contribute] to the nation’s healing.”⁸⁸

Anne Melton studied museum’s responses to traumas in their communities in her 2012 thesis “Comfort and Connectivity: The Museum as a Healer”.⁸⁹ Through her study on four different museums’ responses to events in their communities, Melton found that

Museums can be effective places for the resolution of grief and transcendence of suffering because they provide spaces for social support and personal connections. Museums can also utilize unique individual resources through a variety of community responses which help contribute to the resolution of grief. Museum spaces provide areas for people to come together and be a forum for personal connections that are vital to the healing process.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ L. H. Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (Routledge, 2010): 2 – 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ T. R. Reid, “‘DIANALAND’ -- SHRINE, MEMORIAL, MONEY MACHINE,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/07/11/dianaland-shrine-memorial-money-machine/3db8e718-61b0-49c4-bf64-cb5c63546ae1/>.

⁸⁸ James B. Gardner and Sarah M. Henry, “September 11 and the Mourning After: Reflections on Collecting and Interpreting the History of Tragedy,” *The Public Historian* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 38.

⁸⁹ Anne Elizabeth Melton, “Comfort and Connectivity: The Museum as a Healer” (University of Washington, 2012).

⁹⁰ Anne Elizabeth Melton, “Comfort and Connectivity: The Museum as a Healer” (University of Washington, 2012): 47.

This study provided insight into how museums are able to respond to traumatic events in their communities. This study was focused on one-time events and the response of museums to aid their communities in healing.⁹¹

Tackling Controversy and Addressing Stigma

In “Museums Alaska – Conference – Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy” Rachelle Bonnet observed that “since museums are a reflection of the community, the question we must always ask ourselves is: how can we take community issues and be a place to help and inform, to better the people we serve?”⁹² A model for this type of inclusivity comes from the Eastern State Penitentiary and their views on neutrality. The museum realized that staying neutral was actually harmful to their visitors who had experienced mass incarceration, and was no longer something they could do.⁹³

We have tried to shift our focus to effectiveness and inclusion. We have found that many leisure travelers really will engage with these difficult subjects, but core elements of museum craft become more important than ever. Experiences need to be social, multi-generational, interactive and accessible to visitors who don’t typically learn by reading alone. They need to genuinely value the wide perspectives and personal experiences of the visitors themselves.⁹⁴

Their new model of exhibits not only presents the facts of the current state of the criminal system, but now also provides a space for empathy.⁹⁵ Adding to their already existing

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Rachell Bonnett, “Museums Alaska - Conference - Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy: Rachelle Bonnett,” January 19, 2018, <https://museumsalaska.org/news/6346453/Reply?replyTo=6346453#6346453>.

⁹³ Elizabeth Merritt, “Leading Forward: Engaging with Complex and Controversial Topics,” *American Alliance of Museums* (blog), March 15, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/03/15/leading-forward-engaging-with-complex-and-controversial-topics/>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

programming and exhibits did not detract from the visitor experience, but rather the museum saw a 20 percent increase in visitors since beginning to address “these complex and troubling aspects of American life.”⁹⁶

While presenting at a conference, Sean Kelley of Eastern State Penitentiary encouraged other museum professionals to avoid being neutral and to not be afraid of taking risks with programming and exhibits.⁹⁷ In his presentation, he provided seven insights he has learned when it comes to advocacy versus neutrality in museum spaces:

1. It’s not about you, it’s about the visitors – meet them where they are
2. Decide if you are trying to:
 - a. deepen conversation among existing advocates or
 - b. connect with visitors who aren’t currently concerned about the issued (choose this one)
3. Don’t tell visitors you’re advocating
4. Don’t focus on language
5. Data can help sway internal stakeholders
6. Front line staff have good reason to worry
7. The sky isn’t going to fall ⁹⁸

Bonney noted that later in the conference another attendee pointed out that a good way to work around road-blocks is by having monthly rotating exhibits. Bonnet further elaborated:

While not all artists make work about difficult subjects related to issues affecting the local community or community at large, some of them do. [The conference attendee] referenced a small exhibit at the Anchorage Museum, curated by artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs, as an example of how artists can be the catalyst for bringing these issues to light in a way that isn’t coming directly from the host institution. In this exhibit, Sonya took

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Merritt, “Leading Forward: Engaging with Complex and Controversial Topics,” *American Alliance of Museums* (blog), March 15, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/03/15/leading-forward-engaging-with-complex-and-controversial-topics/>.

⁹⁷ Rachell Bonnett, “Museums Alaska - Conference - Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy: Rachelle Bonnett,” January 19, 2018, <https://museumsalaska.org/news/6346453/Reply?replyTo=6346453#6346453>.

⁹⁸ Rachell Bonnett, “Museums Alaska - Conference - Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy: Rachelle Bonnett,” January 19, 2018, <https://museumsalaska.org/news/6346453/Reply?replyTo=6346453#6346453>.

traditional objects from a handful of Alaska Native culture groups and used them to confront contemporary issues of alcoholism, suicide, and abuse. By offering a space for artists to exhibit, we can better allow those in our community to engage in controversial subject matter in a safe space.⁹⁹

These notes are important, as they lend to the ability for museums to confront controversial issues in order to reach, impact, and represent more of their communities.¹⁰⁰ Bonnet closed her reflection by stating that “we should work collectively (as individuals and organizations) to achieve goals, offer space for artists to exhibit their work, encourage discussion and engagement in locally relevant issues, and don’t be afraid to advocate.”¹⁰¹

A few museums have already begun addressing stigma on various subjects, including homelessness, drug addiction, and survival for sexual abuse victims. The Museum of Homelessness in the UK opened in 2015 and addresses the lived experience of homelessness by aiming to “make the invisible, visible.”¹⁰² This museum brings to light many of the issues surround homelessness, and explores the ways in which homeless are often dehumanized and pushed to the fringes of society. The Museum of Street Culture in Dallas, Texas makes their exhibits available outside, to allow for all to come and experience.¹⁰³

A 2019 exhibit at the Michigan State University Museum addressed the issues of sexual assault. *Finding Our Voice: Sister Survivors Speak* was developed in collaboration with sexual

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Rachell Bonnett, “Museums Alaska - Conference - Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy: Rachelle Bonnett,” January 19, 2018, <https://museumsalaska.org/news/6346453/Reply?replyTo=6346453#6346453>.

¹⁰³ “Home,” The Museum of Street Culture, accessed April 4, 2020, <http://www.museumofstreetculture.org/>.

assault survivors chronicling the struggling to call attention to sexual violence.¹⁰⁴ It was ultimately done with the goal to “promote dignity, healing and positive transformation.”¹⁰⁵ It was a community co-curated exhibit with the museum. On the exhibit, museum director Mark Auslander noted:

Museums have become agents of change as we mirror and chronicle events in society through our exhibits... By calling attention to these events, promoting ideals of democracy and demanding transparency from our institutions, museums give voice to the community, create avenues for dialogue and form a convergence where events of today can be exhibited and discussed for the collective good.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites addressed the stigma around drug addiction in their community.¹⁰⁷ In collaboration with the Addictions Crisis Grand Challenge, the museum hosted a panel discussion on drug addiction in the community. The panel discussed ways that the community could come together to shift the focus and conversation around substance abuse to a more productive manner.¹⁰⁸

These museums were able to provide resources and avenues for discussion around controversial and stigmatized subjects. By providing spaces for community reflection, connection, and discussion, these issues can be brought to the forefront of conversation, aiding in the lowering of stigma.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Michigan State University, “Museum Exhibit Chronicles Campus Sexual Abuse Crisis; Promotes Healing, Transformation,” MSUToday, April 15, 2019, <http://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2019/museum-exhibit-chronicles-campus-sexual-abuse-crisis-promotes-healing-transformation/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “IU and the Indian State Museum Are Teaming up to Address Stigma,” Addictions, January 14, 2020, <https://addictions.iu.edu/news/stigma-panel-discussion.html>.

¹⁰⁸ “IU and the Indian State Museum Are Teaming up to Address Stigma,” Addictions, January 14, 2020, <https://addictions.iu.edu/news/stigma-panel-discussion.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Kevin M. Malone et al., “Lived Lives: A Pavee Pers[Ectove. An Arts-Science Community Intervention around Suicide in an Indigenous Ethnic Minority,” *Wellcome Open Research* 2 (April 2017).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this case study was to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits in order to understand the ways in which museums could aid in suicide prevention and awareness. Research was conducted through document analysis and semi-structured interviews in order to understand how museums approach this work and what impact it has. This research was guided by two questions:

1. How can museums use programming and exhibitions to aid in suicide awareness and prevention?
2. Are museums appropriate places to address topics such as suicide?

Research was conducted through semi-structured interviews which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview questions were focused on four main themes: motivations, development, reaction, and impact. These themes were chosen based on explanations of community projects as described in the literature review. This method of interview allowed for a more open-ended and in-depth conversation.

Participants in the study were identified through a multi-step process. First, museums were identified by a search for suicide or suicide prevention-related exhibits and programs. Exhibits and programs did not need to be current or ongoing to be included. The only criterion was that they occurred in a museum.

Next, potential interviewees were identified for each museum; these were staff members who planned or facilitated the exhibit or program. This was done through a review of institutional websites, press releases, and blog posts. Potential interviewees were then contacted

via email to determine their interest in participating in the study¹¹⁰; where an individuals' email could not be found, recruitment emails were sent to the general museum email. Included in the recruitment email to each potential participant was a consent script and interview guide.¹¹¹ On several occasions, the original recruit responded with a recommendation for another contact who worked more closely with the exhibit or program. Once they were identified, a new email was sent.

Through this process, 14 museum programs and exhibits were identified. These programs ranged from one time to on-going, while exhibits ranged from single-day to multi-week. In total, 19 recruitment emails were sent.

Three interviews were held in April 2020. Interviews were conducted through online video conferencing on Zoom. Each interview was recorded on Zoom with the consent of the interviewee to allow for later transcription and reflection. Audio files were uploaded to and transcribed through Trint, an online transcription service. After the transcriptions were finished, they were manually reviewed and edited for accuracy.

Exhibits and Programs

One exhibit and one program at the Holter Museum of Art in Helena, Montana were examined. *Art for Survival* is a teen visual arts and writing program. The program was started in 2017 and is on-going. *Aftermath* was an exhibit of photography from Nicole Stroman and Jamie Eastwood hosted by the museum in 2019.

¹¹⁰ Appendix A

¹¹¹ Appendix B

Messages of Hope was a week-long exhibit at the WaterWorks Art Museum in Miles City, Montana in May 2019.

Flags of Forgotten Soldiers is a display of 140 United States flags at the National World War I Museum and Memorial. *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers* is a week-long program that happens in May around Memorial Day.

Data Analysis

Completed transcriptions from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using emergent coding. Codes were organized by emergent themes. Themes were then organized in an excel spreadsheet first by interview then by overlapping themes across all interviews. These themes were then organized into the four topics discussed in the interviews. Relevant quotes were included with each theme.¹¹²

Document analyzed included press releases, a video, and pages on museum websites with information about the programs and exhibits. These were analyzed by relevant themes in order to support findings from the interviews.

Limitations

This study had two limitations of note. The first was the researcher's change from a thesis project to a research project. This change happened late in the thesis process, which led directly to the second limitation.

¹¹² Appendix C

The second limitation was the unfortunate timing of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 forced the closure of museums in March 2020, at the same time that initial research and recruitment emails were being sent. This made contacting museums by phone an impossibility; recruitment emails sent to general museum email addresses likely went unseen. Due to museums being closed, many potential participants did not have the resources to participate in interviews. Because of the above circumstances, only three interviews on four programs and exhibits were held. Due to this small sample size, broad generalizations cannot be drawn from the data collected. The research conducted may provide some insight into the field, but more in-depth analysis is needed.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits in order to understand the ways in which museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness. This chapter presents the findings from document analysis and three semi-structured interviews about four museum exhibits and programs. The initial research questions were used as broad organizers for the data collected, using the four themes from the interview guide¹¹³ as a structure. Results were further organized by relevant emergent themes.

Research Question 1: How can museums use programming and exhibits to aid in suicide awareness and prevention?

To best understand the ways that museums can use programming and exhibits to aid in suicide awareness and prevention, it was first important to establish an understanding of current and past exhibits and programs in museum spaces. This was done primarily through questions about the nature of the program or exhibit, as well as the motivations to begin and the development and implementation processes.

Motivations

When launching a program or exhibit related to suicide and suicide prevention, the largest consideration by museums was the need in the community. For one of the exhibits and one of the programs, the suicide epidemic in their communities was the largest indicator of need

¹¹³ Appendix B

of museum response. Both *Art for Survival* at the Holter Museum of Art and *Messages of Hope* at Waterworks Art Museum were started as a reaction to recent suicides in their communities.

Art for Survival was launched in response to two suicides of high school students, and the desire to provide another avenue of expression for those affected. Museum educator Sondra Hines created *Art for Survival* in conjunction with another group of high school students at the museum. After the first suicide, Hines started speaking with the group of teens about how the high schools were reacting to the suicides. This continued again after the second. The teens felt that the high schools were not doing anything to address the concern of the community; Hines noted, after speaking with counselors and teachers she was connected to, that the high school had “implemented sort of canned programs for suicide awareness” that focused on telling the youth to reach out when they need help. The schools felt that this was a community problem, but as Hines pointed out, for the teens “school is 80% of their community”. Because the needs of the teens were not being met at school, Hines took it upon herself to find a way for the museum to help.

Messages of Hope at Waterworks Art Museum was developed from a community storytelling project. Sarah Keller described the process:

We started out the project wanting to hear the voices of young people in the community in which we were working, which was Miles City, Montana, to find out how they had helped each other withstand the suicide epidemic in their community. And so we were soliciting their poetry, songs, narratives, dreams and memories around both surviving suicide risk from their own experiences or as friends and family members of victims and how they would help their peers.

Having worked with the Waterworks Art Museum on other projects, Keller felt that it was an appropriate venue for this exhibit on suicide awareness and prevention. Keller wanted to “get

[the artwork] exhibited [at the museum] and then solicit reactions from the community members about how they had experienced any changes in the suicide epidemic or the community's work towards prevention over the last previous five years.”

Both *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers* at the National World War I Museum and Memorial and *Aftermath* at the Holter Museum of Art were developed outside of direct reactions to their community. *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers* was developed from Project 22, a program that raises awareness of veteran suicide. Project 22 was started by Howard Berry in memory of his veteran son who died by suicide. *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers* was first initiated by a curator at the museum and memorial who was inspired by Project 22, and then implemented by Chris Wyche.

Aftermath was an exhibit of photographs from photographer Nicole Stroman and executive director of “Breath (let's start a conversation)” Jamie Eastwood. Stroman and Eastwood collected stories and photos of people from Helena who had been affected by suicide. While the project and resulting photographs was a reaction to the community, the exhibit at the museum did not have a direct correlation to any one event. The on-going project was hosted as a temporary exhibit at the museum.

Development and Implementation

Similarly to the motivations above, one of the programs and one of the exhibits were developed in connection with the community. *Art for Survival* started as a grant-funded 12 week program at the Holter Museum of Art. Hines was able to use part of the grant money to hire an artist – a writer – to work with her on the program. Together, rather than plan a specific curricula, they decided to “offer whatever the kids are interested in”. Hines reached out to

teachers and counselors at the local schools to spread awareness of the program and gauge interest. The program did much better than she expected. The end of the 12 week program coincided with the end of the school year, and the kids participating decided that they wanted to continue. Hines did not expect for the program to continue: “It’s summer and summer in Montana. Nobody wants to be inside”. To her surprise, the majority of the kids kept showing up.

Years after the initial start, *Art for Survival* is still going strong. Both Hines and the partner writer volunteer their time, since the grant only funded the first 12 weeks. Hines has noticed an evolution in the group since its beginning:

Every year it’s a little different because the dynamics of the group are a little different. It’s also interesting that as we get farther away from those two suicides that happened in the school, the emotional dynamic is different, too. That’s very much more focused on social anxiety, social media, how we stay connected. A lot of identity issues... that’s been interesting to see that sort of shift from this emotional reaction to actual suicide to struggling with identity and to social anxiety and general anxiety and depression and being at risk for self-harm or suicide.

Art for Survival does not have any direct partnerships with other organizations in the community. “I don’t bring people in because... the group is built around trust and relationships. And I have found that when I bring people in, whether it’s an artist or some kind of resource, generally it shuts down the communication.” Though Hines and the museum do not have direct partnerships with other community organizations, they do maintain connections with school counselors so that they can be notified if anything potentially dangerous comes up in the group. The teens in the group are also made aware of resources, including suicide prevention groups and hotlines.

Messages of Hope was originally intended to be a presentation of all the suicide prevention work done in the community over the previous five years using various art forms,

including theater and photography. Keller hoped that at the end they would be able to do a mini theater project and presentation. Unfortunately, Keller was not able to get the funding for such an event, so the nature of it had to change. Keller then helped “coordinate the exhibit for the purposes of soliciting community member and participants’ reactions through in-depth interviewing and observation.” The final exhibit included photography from a 2012 project, video documentaries from the earlier theater project, and river rocks displaying messages of hope from the Let’s Talk afterschool club. All of these changes involved working closely with the community, both present day and those whom Keller had worked with in the past, to be sure that all were represented.

Research Question 2: Are museums appropriate places to address topics such as suicide?

When determining whether or not museums are appropriate places to address topics such as suicide, it is important to gain an understanding of museum and community perceptions and reactions. This was done through questions about the museums’ and communities’ reactions to the exhibits and programs, as well as any perceived impact.

Community reactions

In all of the exhibits and programs analyzed, community response was overwhelmingly positive. *Art for Survival* was able to continue beyond its initial 12 week program because of the positive reactions from the teens involved. The program continues today, though Hines has observed a change in the program over time:

We thought maybe it would be more of an open studio and hangout time. But what it turns out to be is more of a check in. Let’s sit down, we check in. How’s everybody doing? We call them Happies and Crappies, where we talk about great things that have

happened and crappy things that have happened and things they're worried about. And sometimes it's personal and sometimes it's community. Sometimes it's political. And basically nothing's off the table.

This change from art-making and hangout time to talking about real issues reflects the needs of the community in response to access to the program, as well as the adaptability of Hines, the museum, and the teens involved. Without the positive reaction from all involved, this program would not continue.

Aftermath at the Holter Museum of Art received positive reactions from the community as well. The museum offered tours for the exhibit, and when asked about their thoughts, students said the exhibit was "amazing". Aspects of the exhibit were interactive, allowing the opportunity for visitors to interact with the subject matter or suicide, while also staying as anonymous as they wanted to be. The museum found the community responded really well to this, and that the community felt more connected.

Flags of Forgotten Soldiers also received positive feedback from the community. Chris Wyche noted that people were surprised when they found out what the large display of flags represented, but that they were happy the museum was drawing notice to the subject. The display was intended to only be up once. However, the community's reaction was so positive that the May 2020 display is the third year for the flag display, and the museum plans to continue. Wyche also noted that the majority of the museums' volunteers were veterans, and that "it's amazing [when] you can find something that volunteers will all agree is a good idea."

Wyche made note of some hesitation from the museum that visitors would misinterpret the meaning of the display of flags. As the museum does not typically display a lot of American flags, there was hesitation around the display of 140 flags in front of the museum. *Flags of*

Forgotten Soldiers also coincides with other Memorial Day celebrations that take place on the grounds of the museum, so staff had to be sure there was a distinction between other events and the meaning of the flag display.

Waterworks Art Museum received positive feedback for the exhibit *Messages of Hope*. Keller, however, made note of some issues with the timing of speakers arranged in conjunction with the exhibit:

It turned out that we combined [the speakers] with the community brunch, which was like an open brunch that they do once a year around the rodeo. So there is the Miles City rodeo going on. There is hundreds of people coming to the museum because of the brunch. And then there's our suicide exhibit. It actually turned out to be a little bit too much at once because they were there to celebrate and we were there to talk about this very heavy topic.

Keller continued to discuss how the rodeo brunch crowd also made it challenging to complete video interviews about the exhibit and suicide prevention work in the community. More positively, the brunch allowed the opportunity to interview Miss Rodeo Montana – “basically like a pageant queen for the state” – as well as the president of Stockman Bank. Others in attendance were able to speak about suicide prevention work and initiatives they were doing in their communities as well.

Impact

When asked specifically if museums should address issues such as suicide and suicide prevention, both Sondra Hines and Sarah Keller responded with an enthusiastic “yes”. Hines noted that *Aftermath* served as a catalyst for conversations:

Our museum believes that it is art and experiences with art that can create opportunities for conversation and discussion in ways that other interactions can't. If you're looking at

a photograph or a painting or a sculptural piece and you can start talking about these difficult topics because art... it's the catalyst kind of for creating a safe way to discuss it.

Keller shared a similar sentiment, stating:

Museums are oftentimes very community-based and the only venues for community based artwork to get seen or exhibited or recognized, shared. And suicide specifically and the stigma that surrounds mental health problems more broadly tend to be very, very community based and how people develop their barriers or their attitudes around the issue or factors around suicide. We found in our other studies that these things are very local, that the values that we have and what's okay to talk about or who is okay to talk with are so local that if you don't start at the community level, you're not really going to address people's barriers that are relevant to them. And so therefore, museums as community-based organizations can play a key role in using artwork to open up that conversation. And artwork in general...provides a great venue for people to talk about difficult issues and emotions in a way that's not confrontational to people.

Wyche stated that it is important that any work a museum does relates back to its mission.

Because of this, suicide and suicide prevention related programming and exhibits may not be suitable for all museums.

Document Analysis

Press releases, a video, and museum pages related to the programs and exhibits were analyzed for content relating to the four overarching themes of motivation, development and implementation, reactions, and impact. Overall, *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers* had the most amount of surrounding press. This was perhaps because it is a recurring event at a national museum and memorial site, whereas the other exhibits and programs occurred at smaller, local museums.

Motivations were only mentioned in news articles on *Aftermath* and the museums' website for *Art for Survival*. Articles on *Aftermath* focused on the artists' motivations for starting the photography project as a reaction to suicides in the community. The Holter Museum of Art mentions teen suicides in the community as the motivation for starting *Art for Survival*.

The development process for the exhibitions and programs was not mentioned in news or museum websites. Implementation was only mentioned in a limited sense, as information about the dates and times of the programs or exhibits. This was most prevalent in regards to *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers*, as the majority of press around the program was as a part of a list of events happening at the National World War I Museum and Memorial over Memorial Day Weekend each of the years it has taken place.

The reactions and impacts of these exhibits and programs were only highlighted in regards to *Art for Survival*. “Art for Survival: Our Story” was a documentary short film made about the program, which highlighted teen voices of those who participated in the program. This film focused on the benefits the teens get from participating in the program, and what art making has taught them about processing difficult emotions and thoughts.

Of all the documents analyzed, only one press release had any mention of suicide prevention organizations that the public reading the article could reach out to if needed.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum exhibits and programs in order to understand the ways in which museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness. This was done by exploring the ways in which facilitators and organizers have experienced suicide and suicide prevention-related programs and exhibits. In looking at two museum exhibits and two programs, some generalizations can be formed about the nature and impact of such work. The findings of this research ultimately lends understanding to the positive outcome of this type of work in museum spaces.

Two of the three sites studied created their exhibits and programming in conjunction with their communities. The literature review points to the importance of community building in suicide prevention and awareness work. “Museums are a reflection of the community”¹¹⁴ and should search out ways to be better representatives of the issues their community faces. When a museum is able to respond to community trauma, such as suicide, then they are better able to be a reflection of that community.

With suicide being a highly stigmatized subject, strongly affecting suicide survivors and survivors of suicide loss, it is important to open avenues for discussion, as speaking about suicide will lead to a normalizing effect in society, aiding the lessening of stigma¹¹⁵. Making and viewing art can act as a catalyst for difficult conversations about issues that affect the larger community¹¹⁶. As seen in the work at the Holter Museum of Art and the Waterworks Art Museum, art was able to serve as a catalyst for a variety of people to come together and engage with the topic of suicide.

When working on difficult and stigmatized subjects, it is important for museums also to gain insight from their communities. Positive reactions to exhibits and programs lend to a more open conversation, as well as the ability for the museum to continue work on this area. In some

¹¹⁴ Rachell Bonnett, “Museums Alaska - Conference - Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy: Rachelle Bonnett,” January 19, 2018, <https://museumsalaska.org/news/6346453/Reply?replyTo=6346453#6346453>.

¹¹⁵ Robert Olson, “Suicide and Stigma,” *Centre for Suicide Prevention* (blog), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/suicideandstigma/>.

¹¹⁶ Nathaniel Mohatt et al., “A Community’s Response to Suicide Through Public Art: Stakeholder Perspectives from the Finding the Light Within Project,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 52 (2013): 197–209.

cases, this may mean broadening the scope or length of a program or exhibit to be sure the needs and wants of the affected community are met.

Museums tackling difficult issues must keep in mind their mission, and whether or not these initiatives will work in their space. However, it is important for museums to consider what neutrality looks like in their space¹¹⁷ and if by tackling more difficult issues they can reach more of their community. Suicide in one degree or another affects the majority of the U.S. population, yet few museums have addressed this issue. As museums continue work in mental health initiatives, suicide and suicide prevention and awareness should also be brought to light.

¹¹⁷ Rachell Bonnett, "Museums Alaska - Conference - Using Partnerships, Advocacy, and Art to Tackle Controversy: Rachelle Bonnett," January 19, 2018, <https://museumsalaska.org/news/6346453/Reply?replyTo=6346453#6346453>.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine suicide and suicide prevention-related museum exhibits and programs in order to understand the ways in which museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness. The guiding questions focused on the degree to which museum exhibits and programming can be used to aid, as well as whether or not museums are appropriate places to have these discussions. Through a literature review on the suicide epidemic, bereavement and the arts, and museums as healing spaces as well as document analysis and interviews about museum exhibits and programming, two conclusions may be drawn. First, museums are positioned to aid in suicide prevention and awareness for their communities. This research highlights that museums are a reflection of their communities, and that when a museum is able to respond to community trauma, such as suicide, then they are able to better reflect said communities. Second, addressing topics such as suicide in museums can lead to a normalizing effect, aiding in the lowering of the stigma surrounding suicide. Suicide is highly stigmatized, and one of the best ways to lower the stigma is through conversation. Museums can offer up space through programs and exhibits to have difficult conversations about stigmatized subjects such as suicide.

When working with subjects such as suicide, it is important for museums to work with their communities. Building partnerships with other community organizations, including suicide prevention and awareness programs can aid in providing accurate information. This should be part of the development process for programs and exhibits, as was the case with both *Lived Lives* and *Finding the Light Within*. Including partnerships in all aspects of programs and exhibits would help to lower the risks involved with introducing someone or something new to the

program or exhibit. Partnerships with community organizations may also provide opportunity for staff trainings that go beyond the program or exhibit, as well as provide prevention and outreach resources for general museum visitors.

It is important that museums consider their mission when embarking on work related to suicide. The program or exhibit must make sense in their space and mission. For example, a program such as *Flags of Forgotten Soldiers* would not be appropriate at a contemporary art museum as it is about honoring and raising awareness of veterans who die by suicide. However, this display could work at any other war-related museum. Art-making programs or exhibits would better suit an art museum. As much of this research points to the idea of art as catalyst for difficult conversations, suicide-related programs and exhibits may be better suited for and more effective at art museums.

Recommendations

Limitations of this research due primarily to the effects of COVID-19 made it difficult to definitely conclude to what degree museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness. Though it was possible to gain a small understanding through the three interviews conducted, more research on the following areas is highly recommended. First, more research should be done of the breadth and scope of museum programming and exhibits on the topic on suicide in the United States. Second, further research should be conducted on staff and museum perceptions of the work and how it affects their institutional identity in their community. Lastly, more research and evaluation is needed in how museum programs and exhibits on suicide affect and aid their community.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [Candidate's name here],

My name is Elizabeth Sailors and I am a Museology Master of the Arts Candidate at the University of Washington. Currently, I am conducting a research study for the purpose of understanding ways in which museums affect suicide prevention and awareness. It is my hope that, through this phenomenological study, a further understanding of the ways in which museums can aid in suicide prevention and awareness can be established.

The parameters of this study includes museums with programs or exhibits related to suicide prevention and awareness. Through your museum's website, **you have been identified as a potential candidate for this study**. Upon researching further about your career, I have been delighted to find the many successes you have achieved. I would be grateful for the opportunity to interview you about your experiences with [name of program/exhibit].

Attached to this email is an interview guide containing a consent script and interview questions for an over the phone or video interview. I expect that this semi-structured interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. **If you would be interested in participating in this study and agree to the attached consent script, please let me know by responding to this email.**

Your experiences are of great value and I hope that you will consider participating in this study.

Warm regards,
Elizabeth Sailors

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Researchers Statement:

I am asking you to participate in an interview that is part of my Master's Thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to examine suicide prevention-related museum programs and exhibits to understand ways in which museums affect suicide prevention and awareness. Your participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time. This interview will be audio taped for my note taking only. I may use your title and name of your institution in my final paper, though you may also choose to remain anonymous. If I directly quote you, I will send the quote to you before publication. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me through the information on this document. Do you agree to participate in this interview?

Interview Procedures:

This interview will be semi-structured and last about 30 to 45 minutes. The goal of this interview is to establish an understanding of [insert program or exhibition title] at [insert museum name]. My questions are broken down into four categories: motivations, development, reactions, and impact. If there are any questions you wish to skip or if you would like a break at any point, let me know. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Interview Instrument

Motivations

1. What were your motivations for launching this program/exhibit?
 - a. Did you see a need in the community?
 - b. Was this a reaction to any thing or event?
 - c. Was this a community or museum lead project?

Development and Implementation

1. Can you describe the development process for this exhibit/program?
 - a. How long was the process?
2. Did you partner with any community organizations?
 - a. If so, how did you find them and what was the partnership process like?
 - b. How much did the partners influence or participate in the development process for this program/exhibit?
3. What obstacles, if any, did you face through the development process?
 - a. How did these obstacles change or influence the project?
4. Did staff/volunteers undergo any training prior to the start of the program/exhibit?
 - a. If so, was the training done in conjunction with any community partners?
 - b. Who participated in the training?
 - c. What was the reaction to training?
5. What was considered when designing the program/exhibit and any marketing materials? (e.g. use of language, colors, triggers, best practices of suicide prevention)

Reactions

1. What was the reaction from the museum/staff/volunteers during and after the program/exhibit?
2. What was the community reaction?

3. Did you notice any impact on the community during or after the program/exhibit?
4. What, if any, learning opportunities did this program/exhibit present, in terms of future programming/exhibits on sensitive subjects?
5. Are there any long-term impacts or goals?
 - a. Were these developed from the beginning, or something that was evaluated after?

Impact

1. How, if at all, has this program/exhibit changed the way the museum addresses difficult topics?
2. Do you believe that museums are appropriate and/or safe spaces to be addressing topics such as suicide? Why or why not?
3. Do programs/exhibits such as these make the museum a better stakeholder in its community?

Completion Information:

I want to thank you for taking the time to have this conversation with me. Do you have any final questions? If you have any questions later, please contact me through the information on this document. Thank you very much for your time.

Confronting Stigma: The Museum's Role in Suicide Prevention

University of Washington

Researcher's Name: Elizabeth Sailors // Phone: (209) 879-1177 // Email: esailors@uw.edu

Thesis Advisor: Wilson O'Donnell // Associate Director of the Museology Graduate Program //
Phone: (206) 543-4642 // Email: wilsonod@uw.edu

Appendix C: Data Analysis

Interview Theme	Emergent Themes	Codes	Quotes	Program / Exhibit
Motivations	Community Need	Suicide in Community	I think it was three years ago there were two suicides in one of our high schools, we have two high schools.	Art for Survival
			I said, so what are you guys what is the school doing for you guys? And they were adamant that the school wasn't doing anything. I know that wasn't quite true because I connect with a lot of teachers and other administrators in the school district and they have implemented sort of canned programs for suicide awareness. And and you would see a lot of posts on Facebook and Instagram about from teens saying, you know, don't don't bottle things up, reach out to friends. And as a teacher, former teacher in the schools, I knew that kids won't do that for you to reach out to them. They're not going to reach out to you if they're certainly for the most part. And I. So I contacted one of the administrators from the high school and I said, so you know What what is going on? What are you guys trying to do? And she informed me that the district considered this to be a community problem, which I agree with. But at the same time, kids spend, what, 80 percent of their time, that's school is 80 percent of their community. And I talked with my director at the Holter and said, you know, we have space. I have this <u>group of teens that I'm already connected to.</u>	Art for Survival
			We started out the project wanting to hear the voices of young people in the community in which we were working, which was Miles City, Montana to find out how they had helped each other withstand the suicide epidemic in their community.	Messages of Hope
		We chose Waterworks because it said a very community based art museum in Miles City. And since that was the original location where we conducted the theater project and the photography project, we had artwork from young people from that community and we wanted to get it exhibited there and then solicit reactions from other community members about how they had experienced any changes in the suicide epidemic or the community's work towards prevention over the last previous five years.	Messages of Hope	
		Not a Reaction to Community	Both of them had experience with suicide themselves or with family members, and Nicole was a photographer or is a photographer and they had started this project called Aftermath that where people who were survivors or who were family members of people who had completed, wanted to be part of this photography slash storytelling kind of thing. So we launched that exhibition which allowed us to do a lot of public programming around as well, inviting people in to speak. We had a panel discussion that a wide variety of people came to from some of the kids who attended ATAC. <u>Some of the kids who were part of A for S, community members.</u>	Aftermath
			But basically our curator more vote our education curator, they came to us with the idea ... There was a man in Cincinnati. Apparently, his son was a veteran and died from suicide, to do this display he was the number that they use, they use six hundred and sixty. We made the decision that we weren't going to have it up for a month. And in fact, we only had enough for a week or so, a little less than a week at the time. But we felt like that concentrating on a week made sense. So that's how we came up with it.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
			The original Flags of the Forgotten Soldiers was a project that we would up about basically five hundred and sixty American flags, about almost 600, because it was more than four weeks. And the idea was to represent the number of suicides by veterans in a month. And so we were aware of that and we were also aware of another project called Project Twenty Two, if you want to do research on. It was military suicide prevention related suicide.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers

Interview Theme	Emergent Themes	Codes	Quotes	Program / Exhibit	
Development & Implementation	Connect to Community	Partnerships within Community	I hired an artist to work with me. And the artist happened to be a writer.	Art for Survival	
			I have some local therapists who I'm in close contact with and I will call and school counselors.	Art for Survival	
			And so I use local therapists. I use school counselors. We have an organization here in town that does suicide prevention training.	Art for Survival	
			So we don't really partner. I don't bring people in because the group is... I think it's really important to know that the group is built around trust and relationships. And I have found that when I bring people in, whether it's an artist or some kind of resource, generally it shuts down the communication. Kids are skeptical. They don't trust that other, this new person, they're not themselves. I mean, I have brought in one person who, like connected with the group immediately.	Art for Survival	
			At first, a year earlier or more, we had come up with the idea of doing a recap let's talk community based art exhibit sort of commemorating and finalizing five years of prevention work we had done in that one community using various art forms, including theater and photography.	Messages of Hope	
			To launch the art exhibit we thought first we would showcase the photography that was done by young adults in 2012 with a professional, a photography graduate student who workshopped with them to capture images of their experiences of growing up in Miles City around the issue of suicide and alienation and stigma. We did. We exhibited those photographs from the original teenagers and then we also put on like renting real videos of documentaries from the theater project. And then we also exhibited we contacted them Let's Talk Afterschool Club to get their river rocks positioned there on display.	Messages of Hope	
		Suicide Prevention Work	. And we kind of thought maybe it would be more of an open studio and hangout time. But what it turns out to be is more of a check in. Lets you know we sit down, we check in. How's everybody doing? We call them happies and crappies where we talk about great things that have happened and crappy things that have happened and things they're worried about. And sometimes it's personal and sometimes it's community. Sometimes it's political, sometimes. And basically nothing's off the table.	Art for Survival	
			So the staff has some of the staff has taken the suicide prevention, basic training. You know what to look for...	Art for Survival	
			At first, a year earlier or more, we had come up with the idea of doing a recap let's talk community based art exhibit sort of commemorating and finalizing five years of prevention work we had done in that one community using various art forms, including theater and photography.	Messages of Hope	
			So we have two teen programs at the Holter. One is called the After School Teen Arts Council. Those kids would identify as the artsy kids in high school. There they meet at the museum. They're there to advocate for the arts and the community. And with their peers they take on leadership, projects and volunteer and our very involved in the museum and what we do.	Art for Survival	
		Work with Students	I just reached out to a bunch of teachers that I knew and said, we're gonna we're starting this program, we can take fifteen kids and put the word out. And we had twenty five kids show up, which we didn't turn anyone away.	Art for Survival	
			Art for Survival serves 14 to 19 year olds, and but what we're learning is that twelve to 14 year olds know that middle school age group is really in need, too. So we're working on developing a program just for them. They're very different. Right now we have a combined group of middle school and high school.	Art for Survival	
		Funding	Funding	Can I write a grant and start this program simply to offer a space for teens to hang out and we use art to help to learn ways to navigate life, basically. And he was like, sure, let's do it. So I wrote a grant. We got a small amount of money and developed this what was going to be a twelve week program.	Art for Survival
				I have to source the flags. Yes. And and source them without spending a lot of money. Which we were able to work through with a local group.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
Well, like I said, we didn't receive the funding we wanted initially.	Messages of Hope				

Interview Theme	Emergent Themes	Codes	Quotes	Program / Exhibit
Reactions	Positive Community Reaction	Continuation of Program	All of them were like, no, let's keep going. Let's go over the summer. And I was like, okay. Thinking it's summer and summer in Montana. Nobody wants to be inside.	Art for Survival
			So we ended up going into the summer and we did we went all summer every week. And most of the kids kept showing up. And then the school year started. We put out the invitation for new invites and some kids graduated, went off to college and new kids came in. And so it's been evolving. Every year it's a little different because the dynamics of the group are a little different. It's also interesting that as we get farther away from those two suicides that happened in the school, the emotional dynamic is different, too. That's very much more focused on social anxiety. Social media. How you know, how we stay connected. A lot of identity issues	Art for Survival
		Continuation of Exhibit	This will be our third year doing it. It was never intended to be something ... that we would do for a long time or do multiple years... It was always intended to be something that we would do that one year, but the response to it was so strong that we felt like we had to do it again.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
			I would say to you that in the first two years it was more about awareness and it's not going to be any less about awareness than it has been going forward. I think for all of us there is a little bit more, because for the first time in about 20 years, we had somebody jump off the top of the tower in a suicide in August. And so there's a little bit - I think I'm not sure everybody would agree with me on what I said - but I think there's a little bit of thought of that as we think about doing it again and having the awareness because that way that it still weighs heavily on everybody.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
		Informing Future Work	The art educator was like thrilled and she was ready to go forward and support us.	Messages of Hope
		Engagement with Exhibit	We offered ways for people to interact with the exhibition. We put up a big whiteboard. We used idea paint and painted a part of the wall and separated it into survivor, family member... People could draw a picture or sign their name or put a sticker in the area that they kind of fell into the the category that they fell into. We had another area where people could write messages to their lost loved one, and be anonymous about it. So people were able to feel connected to other people in the community without saying, "hey, I'm a suicide survivor" or "hey, my son completed suicide". And so it was cathartic and still as public or as anonymous as they wanted to be.	Aftermath
			.People were stunned. I mean, the emotion. It was emotional for people because at the flags... Sixty five percent of the people who come here are from out of town, so repeat visitors from inside the city. Some are not a huge amount, but the ones that do, they know we don't put flags up. And so to see the flags is pretty amazing. And then we had interpretive panels set up out there, very simple interpretive panels explaining what it was. And so it was a combination of at first the reaction was wanting to take pictures of it because it was so photogenic. But then there was realizing what it was and just kind of, a silence and a - at times for some people it was an opportunity to just sit and reflect for a few minutes. It was pretty amazing. Add it called to attention, I think the the the sadness of it.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
	So in a macro sense, I don't think I'm equipped answer that. In a micro sense a lot of our volunteers are older and they're veterans. And I think you can understand why that had an impact. It has an impact on it, certainly it has an impact. So volunteers are very inquisitive to begin with and they really want to know about this. And then when you tell them what it is and what you are doing, they get so excited. And they say, you know, it's amazing. It's rare that you can find something that volunteers will all agree is a good idea. You're not a naysayer. Very good litmus test.		Flags of Forgotten Soldiers	
	Negative Community Reaction	Coincided with Other Event	And it turned out that we combined it with the community brunch, which was like an open brunch that they do once a year around the rodeo. So there is Mile City rodeo going on.	Messages of Hope
			And then there's our suicide exhibit. It actually turned out to be a little bit too much at once because they were there to celebrate and we were there to talk about this very heavy topic. And the two things didn't quite go hand-in-hand so well together. In addition to the exhibit, I had engaged some survivors to speak during the brunch to the community that was there as like a captive audience about their experiences. And so they were talking. People were milling the exhibit. Other people were eating. And then even more complicated, we had two film teams interviewing individuals in the courtyard. One was a German public television station that had found out about our project and wanted to showcase that they did end up producing a television show about our work that aired last fall. And then meanwhile, my film crew with Global Health Equity Foundation was interviewing.	Messages of Hope
			So I would say logistics, also the sort of the clash, the culture clash between a celebration versus a heavy topic. Trying to integrate those on the same day was a challenge. You know, I'd say that was the biggest challenge because the brunch party did not want to be quiet and we were trying to conduct news and public speaking and they just didn't want anyone to tell them how to experience rodeo days. We should have had more insight. I think if we had more knowledge of the community, we probably would have	Messages of Hope
		Possible Misinterpretation	The director was a bit like more hands off than we expected. So it's kind of like, well, you know, here's the room you set up the exhibit. You're on your own. And there was no facilitator, no effort done by the director to try to communicate to the rodeo days crowd that this was going to be happening. We did feel a little abandoned by the director in terms of that. We thought maybe they could have set it up differently and introduced it, advertised it different ways so that people in the community went into the experience knowing that this is going to be a special day.	Messages of Hope
			So this is an event that takes place on Sunday, Memorial Day Weeknd called Celebration at the Station, which is the concert for about fifty thousand people, most of whom are up on the north hill side of our property. So we cooperate with them. Well, here's an interesting thing that the people lose track of. What's the name of the event? Celebration at the Tiation. But what is Memorial Day? Memorial Dat is not a celebration, is it? It's supposed to be somber. And so that was an interesting juxtaposition because people were concerned that there would be a feeling, a similar celebratory feeling to having that many flags on on the on the grounds and in a more organized manner, especially given the way that that was reflected by Celebration at the Station. And so that was a part of the discussion. We had to make sure it made sense for us in that way and that we could justify it.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
			I think there really was a concern, I know you keep hearing this, but I really was a concern about that many American flags and making sure that it's understood what it was for because we weren't trying to be super patriotic.	Flags of Forgotten Soldiers
So this is an event that takes place on Sunday, Memorial Day Weeknd called Celebration at the Station, which is the concert for about fifty thousand people, most of whom are up on the north hill side of our property. So we cooperate with them. Well, here's an interesting thing that the people lose track of. What's the name of the event? Celebration at the Tiation. But what is Memorial Day? Memorial Dat is not a celebration, is it? It's supposed to be somber. And so that was an interesting juxtaposition because people were concerned that there would be a feeling, a similar celebratory feeling to having that many flags on on the on the grounds and in a more organized manner, especially given the way that that was reflected by Celebration at the Station. And so that was a part of the discussion. We had to make sure it made sense for us in that way and that we could justify it.			Flags of Forgotten Soldiers	

Interview Theme	Emergent Themes	Codes	Quotes	Program / Exhibit
Impact	Engaging Community	New Engagement	So another inspiring thing was we had Miss Rodeo Montana got interviewed. She was super excited to get on a pedestal and talk about suicide prevention and how important it was. And that was really great because someone like that is basically like a pageant queen for the state. You know, with a radio twist and people listen to Miss Montana or Miss Rodeo Montana. And then we had that president of Sakam Bank, which was great.	Messages of Hope
		Adaptability over Time	So that's been interesting to see that sort of shift from this emotional reaction to actual suicide, to struggling with identity and to social anxiety and general anxiety and depression and being at risk for self-harm or suicide.	Art for Survival
			So we ended up going into the summer and we did we went all summer every week. And most of the kids kept showing up. And then the school year started. We put out the invitation for new invites and some kids graduated, went off to college and new kids came in. And so it's been evolving. Every year it's a little different because the dynamics of the group are a little different. It's also interesting that as we get farther away from those two suicides that happened in the school, the emotional dynamic is different, too. That's very much more focused on social anxiety. Social media. How you know, how we stay connected. A lot of identity issues.	Art for Survival
	Art as Catalyst	Conversation	Our museum believes that it is art and experiences with art that can create opportunities for conversation and discussion in ways that other interactions can't. I mean, if you're looking at a photograph or a painting or a sculptural piece and you can start talking about these difficult topics because you're because art is the sort of barrier, it's a catalyst kind of for creating a safe way to discuss it.	Aftermath
			And this is this is great because now we can have these conversations. And, you know, it's not taboo and it's not like, you know. It allowed for just enough distance that people can be honest and open and not feel like they're being too personal or us or as personal as they wanted to be.	Aftermath
			And so I realized that these aren't direct reactions to the exhibit itself, but it was sort of a touchstone to get people talking.	Messages of Hope
			And an exhibit, as you know, can be an opportunity to foster those conversations or to trigger them or to get people talking.	Messages of Hope
			And so therefore, museums as community based organizations can play a key role in using artwork and to open up that conversation. And artwork in general, as you know, probably, and I'm not an expert on this, provides a great venue for people to talk about difficult issues and emotions in a way that's not confrontational to people, and in a way that can cross boundaries or get people to experience difficult emotions in a way that is maybe not so threatening to them as it would be if they were to hear about it through a lecture or a classroom. A correct top down curricula.	Messages of Hope
	Museums as Places to Talk About Suicide	Community Connections	One thing that was inspiring is that that art educator Bonnie Luman from the museum was very receptive and encouraging. And she wanted to engage with us to talk about future art education projects she could do to continue the exhibit. We didn't really get a chance to pursue that, but that was positive. Another really exciting thing was that one of the college students that I had brought up from Billings, which is two hours away, decided to dedicate some of her work to capturing stories of people struggling with suicide on film. And she launched when she got back to Billings, a student athlete suicide interviewing project, where she would talk to student athletes on film about depression, anxiety, alienation, suicidal struggles, all of that. And like with the goal of making a curriculum for suicide prevention among athletes	Messages of Hope
			And one of the reasons I say that is because museums are oftentimes very community based and the only venues for community based artwork to get seen or exhibited or recognized, shared. And suicide specifically and the stigma that surrounds mental health problems more broadly tend to be very, very community based and how people develop their barriers or their attitudes around the issue or factors around suicide. We found in our other studies that these things are very local, that the values that we have about what's okay to talk about or who is okay to talk with are so local that if you don't start at the community level, you're not really going to address people's barriers that are relevant to them. And so therefore, museums as community based organizations can play a key role in using artwork and to open up that conversation.	Messages of Hope
			And we have an opportunity to share the work of artists who are dealing with these difficult topics and we can manage that by our public relations.	Art for Survival/ Aftermath
		Relation to Mission	There's a lot of evidence that community based organizations are where empowerment starts. So problems are local, social mental health problems are cultural and they're not just individual. And so I think we need communities to look at these problems and the barriers and not just stick to individual based psycho analysis or rely on top down programs at a national level because they end up being too top-down too static too formal and not interactive enough.	Messages of Hope
			Because these can be risky topics. You know, and if you prepare your staff and if you prepare your community and let them know that we're neutral, not neutral. So we're not neutral in the sense that we are choosing to exhibit this work. We're neutral in the sense that our stance is education. Let's talk about this. Let's put together panels. Let's house speakers and let's, you know, let's have a conversation.	Art for Survival/ Aftermath
			It's interesting how that little this little program, Art for Survival, has kind of let us down this path of tackling these social issues and environmental issues and. Which I think it's our responsibility as a museum as a place of education and culture to ask those questions. Get people talking about it.	Art for Survival/ Aftermath
And I think the honest answer is who knows. I would say to you that not every museum may, it not make sense for every museum, obviously. I would say to you that there are museums out there that it probably makes a lot of sense for. But it's also a matter of figuring out how it works with their mission and also what their messaging is, what they're trying to accomplish.			Flags of Forgotten Soldiers	