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# RAFALA GREEN FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The mission of the Rafala Green Fellowship Program is to promote equity and inclusion among cultural communities often underrepresented in the real estate development field. The program supports four emerging leaders over the course of four years (two fellows each serving for two years). Amanda Cortés and Jeremy Staab joined Artspace in October; here they reflect on their fellowship experience thus far.

## ***Jeremy Staab***

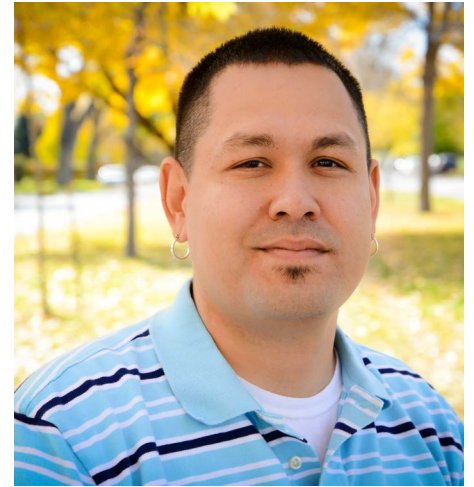
Starting my Rafala Green Fellowship at Artspace has been exciting and disorienting all at once. It has been an amazing whirlwind of new concepts and terminology, and full of challenges and opportunities. Everyone at Artspace has been very welcoming to me and Amanda. We were immediately swept off to visit all of the local Artspace properties to engage with the artists, and it has truly been heartwarming to meet and connect with those who live and work in Artspace buildings. I feel very blessed to be building affordable and accessible homes and workspaces for culture bearers and creatives, moving their work forward in revitalizing, sustaining, and advancing the culture of our communities.

The Rafala Green Fellowship has immersed us in Artspace's culture of comradery and perseverance, driven by vision and values. I respect and appreciate the hard work ethic of the entire Artspace staff. I have heard the phrase spoken in the office: "Development is solving problems, and we love problems." To me, this mantra reflects the dedication and commitment of the Property Development Department to partner with community-based organizations to tackle complex social economic issues, specifically around providing underserved communities access to affordable housing, services, and spaces.

The experience of being able to step into some of the unique communities Artspace works within has been a highlight of my fellowship. I was

able to attend both the South Main Artspace Lofts (Memphis, Tennessee) and Mesa Artspace Lofts (Mesa, Arizona) Grand Openings. One of the best intentions of Artspace leadership has been deliberately expanding the Rafala Green Fellows networks and access to key stakeholders, philanthropists, and foundational leadership. Having the opportunity to help the Builders Circle Host Committee at the Memphis Grand Opening was a fantastic way to meet board members and some of our funders. Gaining access to certain circles of influence are not always accessible to people of color, and this intentionality has been by far one of the biggest benefits of the Rafala Green Fellowship.

I was also impressed by the property designs at the Grand Openings. The architects paid special attention to the creation of community and programmatic spaces for resident artists to connect and collaborate. I was able to meet and chat with some of the service providers of these community spaces. I heard stories of artist residents along with other local artists about gaining access to very helpful social services and technical training via programs provided by A New Leaf (Mesa) and Art-Up (Memphis). I was moved by every artist I met. Each had a story to share about the experiences of connecting, befriending, and, in some cases, making a family with their fellow artists in their newly established Artspace community. I cannot say enough about all of the talent and cohesion I witnessed during our tours.



As a part of my fellowship I have been able to elevate my technical skills in the affordable housing development arena. Within the first month, we enrolled in the National Development Council's HD420 Rental Housing Development Finance training. This challenged and schooled me on the financing side of developing an affordable housing project utilizing Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC). The training was valuable and insightful, and led to further conversations about how Artspace finances projects.

Another opportunity afforded to the Rafala Green Fellows was the chance to attend the Urban Land Institute's (ULI) Real Estate Diversity Institute (REDi). ULI has been great about bringing in local industry influencers as guest speakers—including architects, general contractors, and interior designers—to expand our knowledge base and network in the field. The newly elected, Latina mayor of Richfield, Minnesota, Mayor Maria Regan Gonzalez, was one of the first speakers. She was very encouraging and set the tone for women and people of color taking on new roles in real estate development. As a class, we were assigned a case study to rede-

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velop three acres in a mini-mall area in Richfield called the Hub. The case study work and curriculum have been extremely valuable in putting developer skills into practice. Course work focused on topics like market analysis, site control and acquisition, site planning and design, project feasibility and financing, and construction management.

Studying in class has been great, but the hands-on experience provided by Artspace leadership and my Property Development colleagues have been invaluable: kicking off with supporting team leads on a LIHTC application in the state of Arkansas. This was a great

opportunity to work with key stakeholders and local partners to strategically create a master plan to develop mixed-use space with affordable housing units for artists and artists in residency, as well as commercial space for arts organizations. I was able to pair focus areas of study from my REDi course with skills I brought with me into the fellowship and newly learned project management techniques provided by Artspace, executing a strong LIHTC application alongside team leads. The fellowship workload has also rolled into other project areas including community engagement, financing projects, construction management, and lease-up of property.

When I entered into this fellowship, I intended to bring what I learned back to Indian country to lead community economic work, ultimately resulting in the development of homes and creative spaces for tribal members and their families. In honoring those that come before me, I'd like to share some parting words of wisdom from Alyssa Kelley, a Project Manager at Artspace: "As difficult as these housing development projects get, we keep moving them forward because there is no greater gift we could give someone. We create homes for families. We create homes."

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## **Amanda Cortés**

I moved to Minneapolis in October 2018 to begin a new chapter: The Rafala Green Fellowship. I left Chicago and my Mexican, working class, immigrant, artist community – lifted by their love and support – to learn the tools of real estate development which would, in turn, inform community development. The first few months of the fellowship were a flurry. Adjusting to a new city; getting to know my colleagues; learning a new field and informing the work with my values and approach was the mountain that sat before me, so I set out on the journey.

Early in the fellowship it became clear that Artspace develops affordable housing in its own unique way. It is no coincidence that the Traffic Zone Center for Visual Art (the limestone, brick and timber building in which Artspace is headquartered) is cooperatively owned by our nonprofit and the Traffic Zone Artists whose working studios fill our building with vibrancy.

While art and inspiration fuel our work, we cannot accomplish our goals without figuring out how to pay for what we build. Thus, it proved essential to begin this fellowship with classroom-style training with the National Development Council to learn how Low-Income Housing Tax Credits work to fund affordable housing. This complex funding system is the cornerstone of our development model at Artspace. I learned that while tax credits fund a significant part of each development, they are not enough to cover all of our development costs. Like a many-tiered cake, we layer sources of funding from federal, state and local government programs to meet our funding needs. Philanthropic funding is the icing on the cake and helps close any funding gap we may have. Each funding source comes with complicated rules and restrictions that can collide with each other. I grew a deep respect and admiration for the creative and resourceful experts in our Property Development Department who balance



fiscal needs with community needs to bring our developments to life. They are like orchestra conductors leading an ensemble made up of architects, contractors, banks, philanthropists, attorneys, elected officials, government agencies, artists, organizers, creatives, and community members who collaborate to create a score of music (which happens to be a place where people live and create). This style of development requires patience, diligence, and persistence.

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Amanda Cortés

Staff power is one of Artspace's greatest resources. We have an interdependent ecosystem and each department plays a role in the success of our mission. Our staff takes on an incredible amount of work. Not only do we manage and develop live/work properties in communities across the country, we also share our wealth of knowledge with arts organizations through training and skill building. We study and report on housing and creative space needs in urban, suburban, and rural communities while cultivating new relationships for new developments. On top of this, we raise and manage funds to accomplish our work. The interdisciplinary nature of this fellowship creates opportunities for learning across all departments and in the coming months I look forward to exploring the intersections between our work even more. Little by little, I gained a much deeper and fundamental understanding of what it takes to create and sustain spaces for art, creativity, and culture.

On days when the learning curve was steep and new materials came fast and furious, walking through our building's yellow doors and into the first-floor gallery has felt like a self-referential moment. In our gallery, just a few weeks ago at the ten-month mark of this fellowship, I came face to face with a photograph of Marsha P. Johnson, a fierce Black, trans activist celebrated in death but not in life. In this large, black and white photograph, Marsha leans against a building casually and smiles slightly while holding a protest sign proclaiming, "Power to the People." Her expression seems to say, "I know this. Now you get with the

program." Even in death, Marsha was still doing the work. Her literal and figurative manifestation pulled me out of the haze of tax credit applications, budgets, zoning ordinances, contracts, endless emails, phone conferences and fears that I wasn't learning fast enough. I landed back on the journey but now able to see the forest behind me and the road level out in front of me. I had clarity about what this fellowship is meant to teach me. It's a lesson that I already knew, and one that is being affirmed more and more each day: We are developers of space for housing and art, but our impact reaches beyond our buildings' footprint and is deeper than the foundations we pour.

At this mid-point, I contemplate what Rafala Green, an African American artist and the fellowship's namesake, would want for me and for Artspace on this journey. Her friends, like St. Paul artist Seitu Jones, speak of her as a woman who held her colleagues to account and pushed them beyond preconceived limitations toward justice. I imagine Rafala walking beside me on this fellowship and also pushing me to examine the fissures in our field. Time and again, the needs of groups and organizations in our field doing the heavy lifting of creating physical space for marginalized communities, for Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx and Queer communities, bubble to the surface. Groups in Minneapolis and St. Paul like Public Functionary; Indigenous Roots; CoMotion Center for Movement; Electric Machete; The Collective in Memphis, Tennessee; the Pilsen Housing Cooperative, which I am a part of in Chicago; and hundreds more across the

country struggle to access capital, not for lack of preparation or capacity, but because the guardians of capital and funding do not understand our operating models, our stories, our philosophy, and our resistance to monetizing our cultural and artistic production for the benefit of others. These groups, organizations, and collectives are bravely testing new models and pursuing funding from institutions in what seems like a never ending, uphill battle. What we, and I include myself in this group, need most is a change in the economic system currently holding on to access, power and money. We need partners in real estate, community development, finance, the arts, nonprofit, the public sector, and government, to consider how their policies and practices stifle economic development for working class communities like mine. On the next leg of this fellowship journey, I will keep preparing and learning the skills my colleagues at Artspace have generously shared with me so far, but I will challenge myself to keep my eye on the long road and push everyone to do the same, in Rafala's honor.

**Portraits in this article provided by the fellows.**

WRITTEN BY JEREMY STAAB & AMANDA CORTÉS