



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Local Art and Storytelling Collaboration Wins National Award

"Return to Normal? COVID Diaries from Local Youth," a partnership between Springboard for the Arts, the Otter Tail County Historical Society, and Otter Tail County Public Health, earns the National Association of County and City Health Officials' Promising Practices Award.

August 9, 2023 – Otter Tail County, MN– Otter Tail County Public Health was recently honored with a national award for its creative work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) presented the Promising Practices Award for the "Return to Normal? COVID Diaries from Local Youth" collaborative art exhibit. The project was a partnership between, Springboard for the Arts, the Otter Tail County Historical Society, and Otter Tail County Public Health. It was funded by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Foundation.

According to the NACCHO, the Model Practices Program recognizes outstanding local public health practices. The Promising Practices Award is given to local health departments nationwide for implementing programs "that demonstrate exemplary and replicable outcomes in response to an identified public health need." A committee of peers reviewed each awarded practice and selected from a competitive collection of applications. Other 2023 winners included Florida and Los Angeles County Departments of Health, Houston Health Department, and Metro Denver Partnership for Health.

"Partnerships are at the core of Public Health," shared Otter Tail County Public Health Director Jody Lien. "This unique partnership opportunity and the learnings along the way from the artists and youth are a highlight of my career to date. The project was a true opportunity to see and hear a variety of perspectives on the impacts of COVID-19."

Local interdisciplinary artist Naomi Schliesman and multimedia artist Wesley Fawcett Creigh worked with local youth to explore the emotional toll of the pandemic on frontline workers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The exhibit featured the diaristic multimedia artworks each youth created. Five area high school students, Holly Gutzmer, Aurora Lindahl, Maria Myrhe, Sylvia Pesch, and Alex Ramirez, and Minneapolis College of Art and Design student, Nori Donais presented their art and storytelling from July through September 2022 at the Otter Tail County Historical Society exhibit hall.

"Working with the youth in Otter Tail County was a highlight for me during the peak of the pandemic. Both Wesley and I helped the youth learn different ways to connect with local leaders, healthcare workers, their neighbors, and local community members through the arts and storytelling," said Schliesman. "The exhibition that showcased all the youth's art in one location from across Otter Tail County was so crucial for the youth to have a voice and to share their stories of COVID and the "new normal" they were living. The art pieces and videos that they created are a part of history and they all learned a new skill of storytelling through Art."

Otter Tail County Public Health professionals attended the exhibit and explored the topic through exploratory storytelling facilitated by Schliesman. Staff were asked to share the stories and feelings they experienced during the pandemic. Schliesman collected the phrases and created a cumulative

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story that was shared with each group. Lien posted the narrative in the Public Health Department office to remind staff that individual stories matter and that experiences are unique.

Jody Lien and Kristi Wentworth, Assistant Public Health Director, attended the NACCHO's national conference and were presented the Promising Practices Award by the NACCHO CEO and NACCHO President.

Spring Board for the Arts

Springboard for the Arts has worked at the intersection of art and health for over a decade to ensure artists have access to health care and health insurance and in creative partnerships with health organizations. At Springboard, we believe that artists are essential in helping us understand and share stories of complexity and our shared humanity. –Michele Anderson, Rural Program Director at Springboard for the Arts.

Otter Tail County Historical Society

The Otter Tail County Historical Society conducted COVID-19 Self Interviews by asking county residents to provide their experiences, thoughts, and photos in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020. The interviews were deposited in the Otter Tail County Historical Society archives for the use of future scholars.

Otter Tail County Public Health

During the pandemic, Public Health was specifically charged with distributing resources to harder-to-reach populations, supporting the community and stakeholders such as schools and long-term care facilities, and coordinating and conducting vaccination and testing efforts county-wide.

Pictured left to right: NACCHO CEO Lori Freeman, Otter Tail County Public Health Director Jody Lien, Otter Tail County Public Health Assistant Director Kristi Goos, NACCHO President-Elect Pramod Dwivedi